Women Making Meanings: Practising Ethics of Care of the Self in Sex Work

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Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

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All research procedures reported in this thesis were approved by the Faculty of Health Science Ethics Committee at La Trobe University.

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Date: 22 January, 2013

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARCSHS</td>
<td>Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBV</td>
<td>Blood Borne Virus</td>
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<tr>
<td>BDSM</td>
<td>Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>Prostitution Control Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RhED</td>
<td>Researching Health and Education in the Sex Industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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CARE OF THE SELF IN SEX WORK

Abstract

Sex workers have been long subjected to images and meanings which claim to speak the truth of who they are and who they should be. These meanings are often stigmatising, which can lead to feelings of alienation or shame for sex workers who have taken these meanings on as their self-understandings. Some women are able to resist appropriating these negative messages. This thesis explores the narratives of nine women in sex work in Victoria, Australia, who sustain positive understandings of themselves and their work. Foucault’s work on power/knowledge/discourse was used to explore how stigmatising discourses come to be appropriated by individuals, while his later work on the ethics of care of the self was used to look at how these women challenged these understandings as well as chose alternative meanings to apply to their work and themselves. The women attended a qualitative interview using a vignette that was designed to explore how the women thought about common meanings of sex work, clients and gender. Six of these women also attended a follow-up interview. Using photos that the women had taken, these interviews elicited narratives about caring for the self in relation to sex work, family, love and life in general. The narratives were analysed for their discursive content as well as the reflective practices that the women used to give meaning to their lives. All of the women sustained at least some positive understandings of themselves and their work in the face of the stigma that surrounded them. The research findings suggest that the women responded to and managed negative understandings of sex work by engaging with and reflecting on these understandings and their place in each individual’s life and self-understanding.

Key words: Sex work, prostitution, Foucault, ethics of care of the self, photo elicitation, vignettes.
1. Introduction

An early episode of the American situation comedy, *How I Met Your Mother* (Thomas & Bays, 2005), focused on sex work and mistaken identity. In this episode, Barney tricked Ted into believing that Mary was a sex worker. Mary, however, was unaware of this and thought that she was on a date with Ted. As the night, and storyline, progressed, Mary became acquainted with Ted’s friends—some of whom were told that Mary was a sex worker, and some who were not. Ted’s friend, Lily, had been interested in Ted’s love life for some time and tried to get to know Mary while out at dinner. During the evening, Lily and Mary shared laughter and lipstick in a bathroom girl-bonding scene. However, back at the table with her friends—with Mary and Ted making their way to a hotel room upstairs—Lily discovered that Mary was a ‘sex worker’. At this discovery, Lily scrubbed at her lips in an attempt to remove the lipstick that she had borrowed from Mary and expressed her disgust at having done so. Canned laughter followed. The audience, however, is not told why this is funny; rather, it is taken for granted that they understand what is funny about sex workers’ bodies, including that they are dirty and potentially diseased.

It is this lack of explanation that is pertinent for the arguments presented in this thesis. The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault argued that the ways that individuals understand themselves, each other, and the world around them becomes common knowledge and is given the status of truth (Foucault, 1982). In part, this thesis is written in response to such stigmatising understandings as the one in the scenario detailed above, with the specific aim of exploring how women in sex work take on or resist taking on these discourses as their own self-understandings.

There are a multitude of stigmatising discourses about sex work and sex workers including understandings emanating from disciplines such as psychology,
psychiatry and medicine. Religious understandings about moral and sinful behaviour also affect the understandings that are given to sex work and sex workers. Medical and religious focus on prostitution has positioned sex workers (particularly women) as immoral, dangerous, vectors of disease, victims and psychologically damaged human beings. This thesis argues that these understandings are stigmatising and can be taken on by individual sex workers resulting in negative and ambivalent understandings of self. Many of the discourses that were present in the narratives of the nine women who participated in the research for this thesis are explored in Chapter 3 to give readers a snapshot of how these stigmatising understandings are elevated to the status of ‘truth’ and become common knowledge.

There has been notable academic work that has also explored the ways that knowledges about sex work are taken on by sex workers (Bell, 1994; Scoular, 2004b; Brewis & Linstead, 2000a). The work presented in this thesis adds to this literature (detailed in Chapter 2) while also exploring the ways that the women in this research resisted taking on these understandings by accessing and appropriating other knowledges about sex work, including sex work discourses. Foucault’s later work on ethics provides a theoretical lens for exploring this and is detailed in Chapter 3.

The stigmatisation of sex workers—which largely does not extend to men who purchase sexual labour—can have real effects on women, including their sense of self, feelings of shame, and keeping their work secret from their loved ones (Sanders, 2005; Sanders, 2007a; Scambler, 2007). Stigma can also result in ‘a frequently disruptive and sometimes disabling fear of being discriminated against’ (Scambler & Paoli, 2008, p. 1850). Chapter 5, ‘Delicates of Disclosure’ looks at the complexity involved in speaking about, or maintaining silence about, sex work through the
women’s narratives and positions silence about sex work as a way that sex workers may care for their loved ones.

Sex workers are also stigmatised because their work transgresses notions of acceptable feminine behaviour (Pheterson, 1993; Scambler, 2007). In particular, Chapter 6 ‘Disrupting Gender’, explores these transgressions in the women’s narratives and how they negotiated social norms about ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ both at work and in other contexts.

This thesis aims to add to the recent plethora of academic research that has helped to address understandings of sex work as crime and sin; moving the conversation away from considering sex workers as ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ towards complexity and agency (O’Neill, 2001). Research during the previous three decades has explored the sex industry in its multiplicity, including that which is considered mundane such as money management and labour organisation (Willman & Levy, 2010). Academic research into sex work has, therefore, helped to move the debate forward from the ‘sex’ in sex work to include broader understandings of the sex industry and its place as a large industry providing employment to many women, men and trans-people around the globe (Brents & Sanders, 2010). As such, the so-called feminist ‘sex wars’—which posit sex workers on the one side as always victims, and on the other as always agents—are no longer as relevant in academic research, except where they impact on the ideologies behind the laws that regulate and/or criminalise sex work in particular countries.

Organised sex worker rights movements have been instrumental in advancing the rights of sex workers (Bell, 1994; West, 2000; O’Neill, 2001; Mathieu, 2003; Cornish, 2006). They have provided a loud and visible presence in the struggle against certain research, public policy and public perception as they have challenged
such ideas as trafficking and radical feminist understanding of sex work as being inherently damaging to women, as well as trying to advance working conditions and human rights for sex workers (Weitzer, 2010a, 2010b).

Where academics and sex work activists sometimes clash is in the arena of what research into the sex industry is valid and warranted (Jeffreys, 2010). At a sex worker conference in 2006 that sought to bring sex workers, activists and academics together the tensions between activists and academics was reported to be tangible (Willman & Levy, 2010). Despite these tensions, the conference succeeded in identifying particular research agendas and foci still relevant to the field. It was noted that research that does not demarcate sex workers from their multiple subject positions such as mothers, lovers, friends, students and so on, was needed. This thesis attempts to heed this call by drawing on multiple aspects of the women’s lives including their relationships with other people and the various subject positions they maintain. It was also noted at this conference that research into how sex workers relate to, and manage, their money was needed (Weldon, 2010). This is also explored in this thesis, namely in Chapter 7, ‘A Myriad of Meanings’.

Much of the research undertaken in the last three decades has positioned sex work as work; exploring aspects such as labour organisation and regulations (Boris, Gilmore, & Parreñas, 2010). Despite this, many scholars still position sex work as different from many other occupations due to the continuation of universal stigmatisation that sex workers are subjected to (Scoular, 2004b; Sanders, 2006a). Sex work is, therefore, still considered by some as different from most other jobs, not because it involves the selling of sex, but because of the ways that sex workers are positioned as ‘deviant’, ‘immoral’, ‘vectors of disease’, ‘dirty’ and ‘psychologically damaged’. The arguments presented in this thesis draw on this understanding of sex
work, and argue that negative discourses about sex workers may function in negative ways on women’s sense of self.

While the term ‘sex work’ is used to denote many different ways of working in the sex industry, from erotic dancers to phone-sex operators, this thesis only engages with women who work in the part of the industry also known as prostitution. The term ‘sex work’ is used throughout this thesis to denote the work that the women are engaged in. The terms ‘prostitution’ and ‘prostitute’ are used at times to be consistent with their common usage at the time, and as a reference to radical feminism.

All of the women in this research are cis-gendered\(^1\), that is, their gender identity matches their gender assigned at birth (Obradors-Campos, 2011). While recruitment also included trans-women, only cis-gendered women responded. Furthermore, men who sell sex are absent from this thesis. Whenever the term sex work or sex workers are used it is in reference to cis-gendered women. The reasons and consequences of these omissions are explored below in Chapter 4.

**Sex work in Victoria, Australia**

Victoria was the first state to legalise some forms of sex work in Australia in 1994, with the introduction of the Prostitution Control Act (PCA) (Prostitution Control Act, 1994). Other aspects of sex work such as unlicensed brothels and street sex work remain criminal offences. The main purpose of the PCA 1994 was to ‘seek to control prostitution in Victoria’ (Prostitution Control Act, 1994, p. 1), through regulation of the legal sector and criminalisation of the illegal sector—such as child prostitution, trafficking, street solicitation and unlicensed brothels. The PCA contains

\(^1\) This term was coined by Schilt and Westbrook (2009) as a replacement to the term gender normative which privileges people whose gender matches their gender assigned at birth.
nine objectives, including protection of children (from engagement in prostitution and proximity to brothels), protection of workers (from violence, coercion and sexual health risks), and the protection of the community from prostitution-related activities (Prostitution Control Act, 1994, p. 12). This is congruent with West’s (2000, p. 106) definition of legalised prostitution:

   Legalisation is state regulation, typically through licensing or registration and compulsory health checks, with outlets or workers not granted licences still subject to criminal penalties.

   The onset of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s saw sex workers identified as a risk population for its potential spread. This is reminiscent of the location of prostitutes’ bodies as vectors of venereal disease in the 19th and 20th centuries. Identifying sex workers as an HIV risk group led to mandatory sexually transmitted infection (STI) and blood born virus (BBV) testing (Frances, 2007) in Victoria. Despite that there has been no known case of a female sex worker passing on HIV/AIDS to a male client in Australia, BBV testing is required of sex workers every three months in Victoria (in addition to monthly testing for STIs) (Frances, 2007).

   At the commencement of this research in 2008, the Victorian organisation, Researching Health and Education in the Sex Industry (RhED) listed 80 legal brothels in Melbourne, five in rural Victoria, 26 legal metropolitan escort agencies and another nine in rural Victoria (RhED, 2003). In 2006, research into illegal brothels in Victoria found that there were between 13 and 70—a figure much lower than previous estimates of around 400 (Chen et al., 2009). It is difficult to estimate how many sex workers are working privately or through escort agencies, as not all sex workers register with the state.
Legalisation of sex work, however, is not as clear-cut as the binary legal/illegal may suggest. Sex workers in Victoria may engage in various aspects of sex work that move them from being positioned as legal workers to illegal workers. For example, a woman who is working in a legal brothel, but who is not registered as a sex worker, would be working in a legal context. However, if the same woman received payment to have sex with a client outside of the brothel she would be working illegally (Prostitution Control Act, 1994). The women in this research were recruited through legal brothels, escort agencies and support groups for sex workers. While the women spoke about working in legal sex work at some time, such as in Victorian brothels, some of them were working privately and were not asked if they had a PCA number. None of the women were currently working in street work. The ambiguity with which legal and illegal sex work can be viewed should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this research.

The Researcher’s Personal Journey

When I was 18 I chose to work as a sex worker in a legal brothel in Melbourne. I continued to work in sex work for four and a half years. Given my history in sex work, including the stigmatisation and silence that accompanied it, I felt that I would have something to offer this field of study. While my desire to undertake social research was separate from my desire to research sex work specifically, I believed that researching sex work was one way that I could contribute meaningfully as a novice researcher. Having personal experience of sex work meant that I needed to be highly reflexive during this research (my reflexive practice is explored in Chapter 4). Whilst difficult, I believe that I have become a better researcher than I was at the beginning of my candidature, as I have challenged my previous knowledge of myself.
and my sex work and allowed the multiple experiences and voices of women in sex work to be heard and engaged with. Agustín recently wrote:

we need a lot of research undertaken by people who are very close to sex workers’ lives, or who are sex workers themselves, but who will above all commit themselves to recording honestly all the different and conflicting points of view and stories they run into during their research (Agustín, 2010, p. 26).

**Overview of thesis**

This thesis contains eight chapters, including this Introduction and the Conclusion. It draws on qualitative research conducted with nine women sex workers who volunteered their time. Six of the same women attended follow-up interviews. The first interview used a vignette technique that presented a scenario about a sex worker and the different decisions and situations she was faced with. This technique sought to explore both individual and societal understandings of sex work—as the women understood them. The follow-up interviews were participant-driven photo elicitation interviews. These interviews elicited rich narratives covering a wide range of meanings and understandings that the women gave to their work and lives. The use of qualitative methodology and the specific research tools are detailed in Chapter 4. Ethical considerations arose at different points throughout the research design and implementation and are covered in the relevant sections of this chapter. Chapter 4 ends with capsule biographies (Dowsett, 1996) of the nine women who participated in this research. The purpose of which is to briefly introduce each woman as the individual that she is.

The research for this thesis was theoretically underpinned by the work of the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault, namely, his work on the
productive power of knowledge to produce ‘truth’ and his later work on the ethics of care of the self which is concerned with how and why individuals may take on certain discourses while resisting others. An important aspect of Foucault’s care of the self is the care of other people through the knowledges that are appropriated by some of the women in this research. Chapter 3 explains how Foucault’s works theoretically underpin the motivation, design and analysis. Positioning theory supplements Foucault’s work and provides a theory for unpacking how individuals may be positioned by broader society, the people around them, and themselves. Further, due to Foucault’s lack of specific gender theory, Judith Butler’s theory of overplay is used to furnish Foucault’s work in this regard and for the analysis in this thesis.

Sex work has attracted attention from feminists since the 1st wave of feminism and then again with the second wave in the 1960s. This attention has continued to grow resulting in a large canon of research and theory into the individual lives of sex workers as well as the regulatory and structural aspects of sexual labour. The following chapter explores some of this canon, with particular attention paid to the ‘sex wars’ that emerged out of the broad church of feminisms in the 1970 and the resulting restrictive binary between understanding sex work as exploitation or empowerment. As mentioned above in this introduction, sex work and sex workers have been defined and understood in multiple ways and by various disciplines such as medicine and psychiatry. Chapter 2 also explores these understandings of sex work using a method of historical enquiry called genealogy. Genealogy—a term borrowed from Nietzsche (Foucault, 1977b)—seeks to follow threads of discourses in order to conduct a history of ideas into the ways that knowledges become taken-for-granted ‘truths’ (Foucault, 1980b). The threads of discourses that are explored in Chapter 2 emerged in the women’s narratives. These include: essentialist understandings of sex,
gender and sexuality (ies); psychological understandings of the motivations and effects of sex work; the split between sex workers’ minds and bodies and the ways that sex workers’ bodies have been discursively produced in negative and stigmatising ways. This chapter provides an interrogation of the ways that sex workers have been historically constructed and reflects the disruptions to the truth of sex work that were present in the women’s narratives.

The knowledges and understandings of sex work held by other people may influence decisions around disclosure. This is explored in the first of the three discussion chapters: Chapter 5. It explores how the women negotiated issues around speaking or maintaining silence about their sex work to friends, family and loved ones. Drawing on Foucault’s theory of the imperative to confess—particularly thoughts, desires and acts pertaining to sex and sexuality—this chapter argues that the women in this research delicately negotiated this imperative while maintaining silence, or speaking about sex work within particular safe contexts.

Essentialist and postmodern understandings of gender and relations between men and women may impact on the ways that sex workers think about the value of their work and their sense of self as women. Chapter 6 explores this in relation to how the women were made subject to discursive power networks about gender and how ‘common-sense knowledge’ of gender was disrupted and challenged by them. Butler’s (2004a, 2004b) work on the reiteration of gender norms is used in this chapter in order to complement Foucault’s work on how resistance always, cyclically, cites that which is being resisted (Diamond & Quinby, 1988).

Continuing to draw on Foucault’s work on power/knowledge/discourse and ethics of care of the self, Chapter 7 explores the knowledges that the women gained access to when giving meaning to their work. It looks at tensions created for some of
the women between previous understandings and sex worker discourses that became available to them as they began working in the sex industry. As mentioned above, the role of money in sex work has been under-researched. This chapter addresses this by exploring the meanings that some of the women gave to the money that they made from their sex work and the tensions that may be caused by conflicting discourses about ‘good’ economic citizenship and working in such a stigmatised industry.

The conclusion of this thesis reflects on the research, including the use of Foucault’s power/knowledge/discourse and ethics of care of the self as useful theoretical lens for exploring how the women in this research negotiated dominant community understandings of their work and themselves. As with all research, this project had certain limitations, and these are explored in this chapter along with suggestions for future research. Furthermore, it highlights the contribution of this research to the growing field of sex work research.

**Research Questions**

This research was guided by two questions. Given that sex workers are subjected to continued and universal stigmatisation, the researcher was interested in exploring how the nine women negotiated this to sustain positive understandings of their work and themselves. The use of the term ‘positive’ here relates to the ‘positives’ of sex work as the women in the research explained them, rather than as a judgement made by the researcher.

Because the research questions are interdependent they are explored throughout the three data chapters. The two research questions are:

- How do women negotiate community understandings of their work, including negative and stigmatising meanings?
• How do women think about their sex work in positive ways, including how they gain access to other ways of giving meaning to sex work?
2. Review of sex work literature and understandings

Sex work/prostitution has been the focus of intense moral, religious, medical and academic intrigue over the last two centuries. The area of sex work with which this research engages involves the use of the body, the potential sharing of bodily fluid, and physical sexual acts. This physicality sets it apart. More than any other type of sex work, prostitution has long been subject to avid curiosity as scholars, medical professionals, feminists, and religion have wondered about its meanings and the effects that it has on women and gender relations.

In Western societies sex has been conflated with notions of self, identity, worth, purity, character and relationship with God. Commercial sex has been even further complicated as questions about what, exactly, is sold, and the effects that this may have on women, men, children and the broader community. This chapter explores how these questions have been analysed through various academic, feminisms, medical and religious lenses.

This chapter has three purposes. First it highlights many of the different meanings that have been attributed to sex work and sex workers over the previous two centuries in sexologist, medical and psychological discourses. Second it explores the relevant literature, with special attention paid to radical feminist discourses. This focused attention on radical feminist discourses is because notions of sex workers as victimised and exploited women have captured the imagination of much of the general population and has been relegated to the level of ‘truth’. The third purpose of this chapter is to situate this current research within this canon.
In part, this chapter uses a method of historical inquiry called genealogy (detailed below). It explores Judeo-Christian understandings of prostitution, the prostitute and her body. Following this, biological and evolutionary explanations of sex work are explored.

Different feminist understandings of sex work are introduced, including the binary that has emerged from two opposing and incompatible feminist understandings of sex work. Meshed within these discourses are psychological confluences between sex and self and these are detailed to illustrate the complexity of meanings attributed to sex work and in particular the women who engage in commercial sex.

This chapter continues with an exploration of research that has attempted to transcend the binary created by the sex wars. This body of research has developed over the previous three decades and attempts to show sex work to be more ambiguous than either the two sides of the sex wars would allow. Growing out of this desire to present a more complex and nuanced picture of sex work, some feminists and academics have drawn on postmodernism to look at the ways that sex workers give meaning to their work and their lives that are not only determined by structural or institutional factors. Postmodern, and particularly Foucauldian, sex work research influenced the development of this current research. This chapter concludes with a brief introduction to the usefulness Foucault’s later work on ethics of care of the self in exploring why individual sex workers may take on some understandings of sex work while resisting others.

**Using genealogy to explore productions of ‘truth’**

As explored in the Introduction, understandings of sex work/prostitution are communicated to sex workers and the general public in multiple ways, including through popular culture and often stigmatise sex work and sex workers. However, due
to the insidious ways that they are communicated, many people in the general community do not know that these discourses are not absolute truth but are rather influenced by what has been valued as truth in the past. This is what produces common-sense knowledges.

Foucault argued that discourses produce subjectivities and that discourse is related to both power and knowledge (explained in greater detail in Chapter 3). Power, for Foucault, was productive in that it produced subjectivities, rather than only being a form of domination enacted by one, or a group of, individuals over another. Knowledges are how ideas about truth function to produce individuals’ understandings of themselves and others. Knowledges can emanate from a variety of places, including experts in the field, public policy and popular culture. The productive power of knowledges is what Foucault referred to as ‘discourse’ (Foucault, 1980b). Discourses about sex work emanate from various places and points in history, as well as contemporarily, through expert knowledges, popular culture, self-help manuals (Potts, 2002) and magazines (Farvid & Braun, 2006). They do not originate from one particular place, nor are they espoused in a deliberate attempt to trick or deceive individuals into knowing themselves in certain ways.

Discourses that are given ‘truth-value’ in the past are sometimes echoed in the present (Levy, 1998; Prado, 2000). Genealogical inquiries seek to excavate history to explore how certain discourses are given ‘truth-status’ and to question their taken-for-granted truth in the present. In this sense, they are not linear explorations of history; neither do they focus on one particular time or event in history, but jump between historical and contemporary moments to look at threads of discourses—where they have been taken up, resisted, challenged and taken for granted. Genealogy is therefore:
a history which could be described as ‘kaleidoscopic’. The pattern that exists at any given time is largely the outcome of temporary, contingent, fragile alliances and oppositions, and the next pattern is, by definition, totally unpredictable (O’Leary, 2002, p. 115).

Foucault’s genealogy ‘does not judge as it rudely fleshes out assumptions, [therefore] claims about what is right and what is wrong have no place here’ (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p. 30). Knowledges that were, or are, given truth-status at any given time are best explored without judgment on their value as truth. It is more productive to look at the subjectivities and subject-positions that dominant discourses may produce; the way that they function to produce certain understandings; how they have gained dominant truth-status; and competing knowledges and discourses that have been deemed lower down on the hierarchy of knowledge (such as localised and subjugated knowledges that did not fit within the dominant discourses at the given time). Exploring the multiple truths of sex work and gender highlight how discourses can be produced accidently and haphazardly, rather than through a natural evolution of thought and ‘preordained developments’ (Prado, 2000, p. 38).

Sex, gender, and sexuality have all been constructed within discourses that claim to speak the ‘truth’ of these categories, including sexological, medical, scientific and religious discourses. While discourses may emanate from experts they are also repeated and taken for granted in various forms such as popular culture:

The importance of sexology as a particularly influential ‘technology of sexuality’ derives from its connection with the dominant discourses of science and medicine; the privileging of these disciplinary modes within Western culture in general enhances the likelihood that the majority of people will be constructed as ‘sexual’ subjects within sexological and sexologically related
discourses. In addition, the assumptions of sexology—that sex is a ‘natural’
act, for example—permeate other media such as magazines, novels and
movies, ensuring that the majority of women and men come to understand
‘their’ sexuality according to this discursive paradigm (Potts, 2002, p. 18).

Sex work discourses are influenced by various other discourses pertaining to
sex, gender, sexualities, bodies, deviance, psychology, biology and religion. The rest
of this chapter details some of these discourses to provide background to the women’s
narratives including how categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, are discursively
enmeshed. Also how essentialist gender discourses function to provide stable
understandings of masculinity and femininity, and how sex work is understood, and
given value, in these terms. It looks at how sex workers’ bodies have been produced
through sexologist discourses of the 1800s. This genealogical inquiry also explores
radical feminist discourses from the 1970s to the current day to examine how sex
work is given meaning through this lens. It also unpacks religious, biological,
evolutionary and economic discourses in order to interrogate how they contribute to
the ways that sex work is given meaning.

**Judeo-Christian Discourses**

Drawing on the story of Adam and Eve, Judeo-Christian discourse has
traditionally positioned women as to blame for the need for sex for procreation. Saint
John Chrysostom believed that ‘if Eve had not sinned ... humanity would have been
propagated non-sexually like the angels; but because of a woman all humanity was
forever corrupted by sexual contact’ (Riley, 1990, p. 38). Because of Eve’s sin,
women were constructed as being constituted of tempting flesh as well as being weak
willed and led easily into lust and promiscuity. While many of the seven deadly sins
were depicted as female, lust was especially considered a female sin because of the
story of Adam and Eve. The historian Riley (1990) argued that the sin ‘lust’ was overlooked by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1976) and that while the sin of pride was considered the most evil in France in the 1600s, lust was instrumental in the construction of women.

In seventeenth century France, the prominent engraver, Jacques Callot, depicted six of the deadly sins as women in his etchings (Riley, 1990). His etching of lust (Callot, 1612–1621) featured a small hovering devil whispering into the ear of a near-naked woman. At her feet a goat gazes up at her and in her hand left hand a small bird perches. Further, Callot’s widely known *The Temptation of Saint Antony* ‘explicitly personified the sin of lust with two nude females ... to show ... the corruptive effects of this feminine sin’ (Riley, 1990, p. 37). These personifications of lust indicate the symbiotic relationship between the construction of women and the sin of lust in the 1600s.

Adultery and promiscuity carried far harsher punishment for women than men in France during the reign of Louis XIV because of discourses which positioned them as ‘prime occasions of sin’ (Riley, 1990, p. 40). For women, notions of ‘crime’ and ‘sin’ were interchangeable. This impacted on the regulation of prostitution during this time. Louis XIV banned prostitution, ordering prostitutes to leave the city within 24 hours. However, this only led to prostitutes working closer to the city as zones where prostitution was tolerated, and bordellos were forcibly closed (Riley, 1990). Louis XIV’s conflation of women’s sin with crime led to changes in the ways that France’s penal system operated. No longer only for temporary incarceration, it was now used to house women long-term who had been found ‘guilty of prostitution, fornication, or adultery [who] faced the prospect of perpetual penance for their sins if they did not display the proper signs of contrition and spiritual renewal’ (Riley, 1990, p. 40).
In the 1700s in the USA, women were also unfairly persecuted for their sexual sins. For example, in Plymouth, ‘an adulteress received thirty lashes on her naked back and was condemned to wear the fatal letter A’ (Henriques, 1963, p. 238). The letter A was to signal that she had engaged in sexual relations either with a married man, or while being married herself. Her male counterpart, however, was acquitted.

During the same time, in Boston, women found guilty of adultery were ordered to wear a sign around their necks while standing in the marketplace where they would be highly visible. The sign read, ‘Thus I stand for my adulterous and whorish carriage’ (Henriques, 1963, p. 238). The legacy of Adam and Eve continued to position women as to blame for sexual encounters that transgressed Judeo-Christian notions of propriety and godliness.

The Church, however, has had an ambiguous relationship with prostitution; on the one hand considering it as the outcome of Eve’s sin and the weak nature of women to maintain propriety and, on the other, as a necessary evil (Otis, 1985). Prostitution was seen as necessary in order to contain men’s temptations to prostitutes, saving ‘good’ and ‘pious’ women for marriage. As well as the continued blame and stigmatisation of sex workers—as compared to the men who purchase sexual services—sex work is still considered to be beneficial for heterosexual men. Scientific and medical discourses now position men as having greater sexual desires rather than being tempted by sinful women and prostitution is still considered to be a necessary outlet for men’s heterosexual desires and needs (Jones, 1999). The following section explores these discourses.

**Evolution, Biology, and Vitalism**

Many experts, including scientists, sexologists, health professionals, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists and often self-help personalities and writers
have contributed to dominant discourses about sex workers and sex work (Taylor, 2001). Many of these discourses have come about from a pathologising of sex, gender and sexuality, providing stable categories of self. Foucault termed this *scientia sexualis* and argued that it has contributed to how we know ourselves by basing our understandings in science, including biology and evolution (Foucault, 1976).

Sexuality, sex, and gender, are dominantly understood as derived from natural instincts, hormones and evolution (Weeks, 1986). Biological discourses demarcate men from women. The former is constructed as having ‘natural’ sexual instincts born from an evolutionary imperative to procreate, while the latter is constructed as not only being responsive to this need, but also emotionally connected to their sexual partners (Bazzul & Sykes, 2010). Monogamy is consequently seen to be a trait desirable in women, whereas men are positioned as less likely to be monogamous and also less expected to be.

Discourses that claim that men and women’s sexual desires are derived from evolution and biology provide a framework for making sense of not only heterosexual relations but also of rape and sex work. Evolutionary theory about why men rape was argued in 2000. This included the publication and public relations around one particular book, *A Natural History of Rape* (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). While this book has been widely criticised by other scientists it garnered much public airtime on talk shows and news programs (Koss, 2000; Vandermassen, 2011). The book’s authors argued that the parental investment theory explained why some men rape women. The parental investment theory states that men are compelled to mate with as many women as possible to pass on their genes. Following this logic, when individual men cannot gain access to sex with women they turn to rape in order to play out the
evolutionary cycle. Rape is consequently seen as ‘better than leaving no offspring’ for men (Koss, 2000, p. 184).

Postmodern understandings of sex, sexuality and gender have failed to capture the imaginations of the populace, who prefer to understand social behaviour as determined by genes and evolution (Weeks, 2005). While the arguments in *A Natural History of Rape* were challenged at the time by other academics and advocates against violence against women (Koss, 2000), the discourse which positions men’s natural sexual needs as so powerful and overwhelming that they are compelled to rape provides discursive understandings of rape that are congruent with dominant ways of understanding masculinity, for example, primal, difficult to restrain, physically powerful and forceful.

Other evolutionary psychologists have also drawn on this discourse in order to understand rape (Jones, 1999). This has led advocates of it to argue that sex work provides a necessary outlet for men who cannot obtain sex elsewhere and without which they would be compelled to rape women in order to try to pass on their genes (Jones, 1999).

This discourse has been taken for granted by some social psychologists who have attempted to understand heterosexual relations. For example, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) started from the premise that men think, desire, act, want and need sex more than women to argue that sex is a commodity that heterosexual women can use for their own gains. Through this lens, women are understood as gaining access to other resources that they may otherwise be excluded from due to cultural and structural barriers.

Using social exchange theory, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) argued that the price that a woman may ask in exchange for sex differs according to various factors
that determine her ‘worth’, such as cultural norms, sexual desirability by other men (increasing her worth), and multiple sexual partners (decreasing her worth). They argued that the price that a woman can demand for sex differs according to the woman’s access to education and well-paying jobs, without which she may choose to lower her ‘price’ for sexual services.

Women who need money would probably be more willing to become mistresses, kept women, call girls, and the like, and by the same token they might be more willing to have sex to retain the interest of a man who is generous with gifts and meals (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 343).

Viewing sex as an economic resource places a different value on fidelity for men and women. Women’s sexuality is seen as valuable while men’s sexuality is constructed as having no innate value. This positions men as more likely to object to their partner having sex with other men, whereas women are positioned as more likely to object if the infidelity includes an emotional element (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 349).

These discourses locate women as having less sexual desire than men, more emotional investment in sexual relationships, and as having sex with their male partners for reasons other than sexual desire or enjoyment, such as emotional and financial security. Men, in contrast, are located as being overwhelmed by their sexual urges, which biologically drive them to desire multiple sexual partners. These biological and economic discourses position sex work in certain ways. They provide an understanding of sex work as beneficial to heterosexual relationships, where it provides men access to sex that does not lead to procreation and emotional connection, and is therefore less threatening to existing monogamous relationships. As a result, sex work is seen to simultaneously meet men’s natural needs while
maintaining the emotional commitment between partners in heterosexual relationships.

Predating evolutionary discourses was the notion of vitalism. Vitalism (dominant in medical discourse from the early to mid-1800s) claimed that there is a flow of life within animals, including humans, which provides the ‘essence’ of life. A key factor of this discourse was that of harmony—of temperature, exertion and bodily functions, including the production and expulsion of semen. Foucault wrote that vitalism has left a discursive legacy in biology:

if the ‘scientificisation’ process is done by bringing to light physical and chemical mechanisms ... it has on the other hand, been able to develop only insofar as the problem of the specificity of life and of the threshold it marks among all natural beings was continually thrown back as a challenge. This does not mean that ‘vitalism’ ... is true ... it simply means that it has had and undoubtedly still has an essential role as an ‘indicator’ in the history of biology (Foucault, 1989, p. 18).

Drawing on the notion of vitalism, J. J. Virey, a prominent pharmacist and medical publicist in early nineteenth century France, argued that health problems could result if men and women did not abide by the ‘harmony’ as dictated by ‘nature’ (Corbin, 1986). Virey was concerned that any disruption to the balance of this ‘fertile nature’ could result in impotence, vice, or other ‘monstrosities’ (such as masturbation) (Nye, 1989, p. 56). While Virey, and many other medical scholars of the time (for an overview see Nye, 1989), used medicine and science to support the argument that the excess spill of semen was harmful, even suicidal, for men, the roots of this discourse can be seen in religious doctrine.
The term ‘onanism’ was widely used during this time to describe the act of withdrawing the penis before orgasm as well as indulging in masturbation. This term relates to Onan who, as detailed in the book of Genesis, was killed by God, either because of his infidelity or for the act of spilling his seed upon the ground (McLaren, 1974). The Swiss physician Auguste Tissot was instrumental in medicalising this metaphysical discourse by detailing diseases which affected men who engaged in non-reproductive copulation through coitus interruptus or masturbation (McLaren, 1974). At the time, this discourse enjoyed medical and religious dominance in France, despite contraception being used on a wider scale than in any other part of Western Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (McLaren, 1974).

Vitalism positioned prostitution as harmful to men because expelling semen for reasons other than procreation in matrimony was considered dangerous, even suicidal. However, the proliferation of Darwinism in the mid-1800s brought with it understandings of sexual gender differences that no longer positioned the expelling of semen as dangerous, while still maintaining men’s sexual desires as natural and overwhelming, and women’s as responsive (Miller, 2000).

The mid-nineteenth century English sexologist and urinary diseases specialist William Acton argued that prostitution was the consequence of supply and demand resulting from ‘natural inclination’ while also interacting with social and legal structures at the time, leading to the proliferation and sustainment of prostitution (Acton, 1967). For example, legal and social disapproval of early marriages conflicted with men’s sexual needs awakening at puberty. Understanding sex work through notions of supply and demand has also been espoused in recent history, with the proliferation of pornography and prostitution being seen as emerging from a lack of available women.
[A] common result of shortages of desired goods [heterosexual women in this instance] is that low-cost substitutes become available. Prostitution and pornography may be regarded as low-cost substitutes for the preferred alternative of having sexual relations with a special, desired partner (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 348).

Since men’s natural sexual needs (and the insufficient laws that forbade marriage at puberty) provided the rationale for the demand for prostitution, then Acton also looked towards natural reasons for the supply. He argued that women’s ‘[v]icious inclinations\(^2\) strengthened and ingrained by early neglect, or evil training, bad associates, and an indecent mode of life’ pushed them towards prostitution (Acton, 1967, p. 118).

Acton constructed an elaborate theory about selfhood and sexual engagement. Arguably drawing on the Cartesian notion of the split between minds and bodies and also the notion of ‘the spirit’, Acton produced a theory that positioned prostitution as dangerous for both women and men. He argued that all three aspects of one’s self—mind, body, spirit—needed to be engaged during any sexual interaction otherwise ‘sexual desire degenerates into lust’ (Acton, 1967, p. 115). Monogamous married relationships were consequently seen as the only safe way of engaging in sexual intercourse for both men and women. Furthermore, the degradation of women towards sin created a vicious cycle, where prostitutes were seen as not only damaged through their work but also seeking to bring others down with them, as they became financially dependent on the immorality of others. He argued that a prostitute:

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\(^2\) ‘Vicious inclinations’ was a term used in religious and medical discourses at the time. Influenced by the notion of ‘original sin’, women were positioned as being inclined towards sin and depravity due to their gender and ‘weak will’.
is a woman half gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity; degraded and fallen she extracts from the sin of others the means of living, corrupt and dependent on corruption, and therefore interested directly in the increase of immorality—a social pest, carrying contamination and foulness to every quarter to which she has access (Acton, 1967, p. 119).

For Acton, any woman could become a prostitute as all women had the potential for depravity within their nature. That was why ‘evil training’ or ‘bad associates’ could lead a woman to prostitution. The belief that prostitute women were women who were only engaging one aspect of their mind, body, or spirit, either through inclination or evil training (Acton, 1967, p. 119) led him to argue that reformation could be attained by gradually ‘instilling ... sentiments of self-respect and self-restraint’ (Acton, 1967, p. 207).

The German sexologist, Krafft-Ebing, wrote about the relationship between mental function and sexual acts in the late 1800s (Krafft-Ebbing, 1965). While Krafft-Ebing was interested in the sexual perversions of some men, such as sex with corpses, children and animals, the mere existence of more than the ‘natural’ amount of sexual desire in women was seen as aberrant ‘since woman has less sexual need than man, a predominating sexual desire in her arouses suspicion of its pathological significance’ (Krafft-Ebing, 1965, p. 48). Krafft-Ebing was concerned about pathologies that he believed caused women to become prostitutes. For him, hypersexuality and nymphomania could lead women not only to ‘auto-masturbation’ but ‘eventually as a nymphomaniac to prostitution in which to find satisfaction and relief with one man after another’ (Krafft-Ebing, 1965, p. 134).
The early twentieth century sexologist, Havelock Ellis, was similarly concerned with sexual behaviours that deviated from the ‘natural’. Ellis wrote four volumes of his *Studies in the Psychologies of Sex* (1906), devoting one chapter to prostitution, which he began by exploring the ‘causes’ of prostitution. Ellis had difficulty deciphering the extent to which he believed economic imperative motivated prostitute women and how much could be attributed to other causes such as inclination, idleness, or biology. Further, Ellis was interested in the moral justification for prostitution insofar as it maintained a society built on the institution of heterosexual marriage.

Ellis drew on statistics compiled by sexologists from America, England, Japan, Germany, Italy and France who undertook studies with prostitutes (Ellis, 1906). Despite the fact that many of these commentators argued that prostitution was the result of poor female wages and high poverty levels, Ellis continued to claim that prostitution was due more to a woman’s biology:

Economic considerations, as we see, have a highly important modificatory influence on prostitution, although it is by no means correct to assert that they form its main causes. There is another question which has exercised many investigators: To what extent are prostitutes predestined to this career by organic constitution? (Ellis, 1906, p. 267).

This points to the continued influence of Judeo-Christian discourses on scientific and medical research into prostitution in the early twentieth century. Despite so many prostitutes in various countries indicating insufficient wages and poverty as the main reason for their entry into prostitution, Ellis continued to view women’s prostitution as resulting from something within their nature. However, he also argued that this inclination could be triggered by social influences such as bad associates.
Sexologists like Ellis were key players in the ways that gender continues to be understood as dichotomous. Sexologists drew on medical discourses and social factors in order to maintain a division between men and women. However, they were actors of their particular time and should not be judged by current discursive understandings of sex, sexuality and gender (Weeks, 2002). Medical advances and understanding—such as hormones, DNA, ovulation and chromosomes—‘have invariably been deployed to back up [the] assumption’ that men and women experience sexual desire in divergent ways (Weeks, 2002, p. 86).

Dominant discourses about gendered sexualities continue to privilege biological explanations and this sustains understandings of women as less easily aroused, receptive to men’s sexual desire of them, and more inclined to be sexually aroused by feelings of emotional intimacy (Allen, 2003). Men, on the other hand, are continually constructed as being visually aroused (Weeks, 2002), less interested in emotional connection with their sexual partners, and desiring variety (McLaughlin, 1991; Allen, 2003).

These essentialist discourses have enjoyed dominance in expert knowledges for many years. This has stayed the same, while other discourses have provided the foundations, or justifications, for this argument. For example, before the proliferation of Darwin’s evolutionary theory in the mid-1800s, the notion of vitalism provided discursive understandings of men and women’s sexualities where women were seen as receiving men’s vitality through their semen, positioning them as receptive to men’s sexuality. Biological and evolutionary theories brought with them new ways of understanding men and women’s sexual drives. Women were still constructed as receptive to men’s sexual desires, however this was seen more as resulting from distinct evolutionary roles. These discourses also provided ways of understanding
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prostitution, including its societal functions, effects on men and women and motivations. Various expert discourses have intersected, clashed and merged in the construction of prostitution over the last two centuries. Other discourses have been brought in as they have emerged and gained dominance, for example evolutionary theory over vitalism and biology together with environmental influences. One discourse has not replaced another, but rather, discourses shape shift slowly, with some discourses remaining the same while being informed by other knowledges. This can be seen in the way that religious discourses about women’s ‘original sin’ denoted them as temptresses are echoed in medical and scientific discourses which continue to position women as sites of desire and men as desiring.

**Regulating Sex Workers’ Bodies**

In France in the early 1800s, vitalism discourses (detailed above) contributed to knowledges of prostitutes as putrid and rotten. While coitus (within limits) was considered beneficial for a married woman who was only receiving the vitality of one man, the prostitute who was receiving the vitality of many men was believed to be receiving excess. Thus her body became a site of rotting internal flesh due to the amount of semen deposited there, and this, according to the discourse of the time, let off a putrid smell; ‘The putain [French word for whore] does not just symbolise moral rot; she is literally a putrid woman, as demonstrated by the odour she emits’ (Corbin, 1986, p. 210).

While prostitute women were considered to be literally internally rotten, they were also believed to be essential to the social fabric of the time as waste vessels for ‘excess’ semen (Corbin, 1986). The usefulness of the prostitute’s body, therefore, was not unlike city sewers which directed waste away from the civilised city. This discourse, however, was less concerned with the ‘rottenness’ of the prostitute body as
it was with the idea that it prevented ‘a fatal congestion and assure[d] the elimination of excess sperm’ (Corbin, 1986, p. 211). The metaphor of the prostitute as a sewer for semen was expanded upon by prostitution and sewer ‘expert’ Dr. Alexandre Jean Baptise Parent-Duchâtelet in 1830s France. Parent-Duchâtelet would later become highly influential on the trajectory of medical discourses about prostitute women for many years to come (Corbin, 1990; Bell, 1994). His work on the proximity of sewers and latrines, and the spread of venereal disease, led him to argue that the prostitute woman was ‘the woman-sewer, the putrid woman, the putain’ who incubated and passed on venereal disease to the male bourgeois (Corbin, 1986, p. 113). Drawing on this image, Parent-Duchâtelet argued for the regulation of prostitution.

Prostitutes formed a subterranean counter-society, an explicit moral, social, sanitary, and political threat. They symbolised disorder, excess, pleasure, and improvidence. Parent-Duchatelet thus ‘enclosed’ prostitution by constructing a carceral system organised around the legal and regulated brothel (maison de tolérance), the hospital, the prison, and the reformatory (Gilfoyle, 1999, p. 121).

By the 1850s, however, regulation in France was failing as regulated prostitution decreased and unregulated prostitution proliferated (Corbin, 1986, 1990; Gilfoyle, 1999). This gave rise to new anxieties and both abolitionist and neo-regulationist movements burgeoned. Abolitionists in France were motivated to see prostitution eradicated and drew on Josephine Butler’s campaign to rescind the Contagious Diseases Control Act in Britain, by promoting ‘a new sexual order based on individual responsibility, internalised sexual repression, and self-control’ (Gilfoyle, 1999, p. 122). While at the time in Britain and America, this new sexual order heavily influenced responses to prostitution (Scoular, 2010), in France, the neo-
regulationist movement was more persuasive with its concerns about white slavery, venereal disease, and ‘racial degeneracy’ (Gilfoyle, 1999, p. 122). This led to the surveillance of prostitute women’s bodies by medical doctors rather than police officers in France. Furthermore, madams became observers of hygiene, with brothel waiting rooms painted with enamel, having medical supplies on hand, new kitchens, and manicure facilities in-house (Gilfoyle, 1999).

Similarly, in Britain, fears relating to venereal disease, so-called white slavery and syphilis gave rise to the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s (Scoular, 2010). ‘Wider cultural anxieties over the overlapping processes of urbanisation, immigration and women’s shifting roles’ also fed into these moral panics and positioned prostitute women as simultaneously ‘morally and physically dangerous and vulnerable’ (Scoular, 2010, p. 15). In Queensland, Australia, in 1868 a Contagious Diseases Act modelled on the British equivalent was passed, requiring prostitute women to undergo medical examinations (Sullivan, 2010). Women infected with venereal disease were incarcerated in ‘lock hospitals’, sometimes indefinitely (Sullivan, 2010).

Since the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s there has been a reinvigorated focus on sex workers as potential vehicles of contamination. For example, content analysis of the media coverage of persons engaged in sex work in Canada between the years 1980–2005 identified three discursive shifts around the idea of criminal culpability, victimisation (termed risk) and moral culpability (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, & Benoit, 2006). While this media analysis was conducted in Canada there are notable similarities between Victoria and Canada in regards to legalisation of prostitution.

The researchers found that before 1990, sex work was constructed around criminality and between 1990 and 2004 criminal culpability was not mentioned at all.
Instead, emphasis was placed on clients, pimps, the global sex market and the discourse of risk (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). This discourse was missing from the years 1980–1990 in this particular newspaper, however by 2004 this theme constituted 35 per cent of the 128 articles published in four years. In terms of the theme of risk, throughout the 1990s until 2004 the researchers summarised that the ‘risk themes call into question the psychological capacity and, by extension, the agency of sex industry workers through constructing then as victims and often as vulnerable minors’ (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006, p. 273). Not surprisingly, when HIV/AIDS entered the public arena in the 1980s and 1990s, articles which positioned sex workers’ bodies as ‘vectors of contagion’ became dominant in the media coverage of sex work (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006, p. 270).

Much of this focus—and fear—has led to greater regulation of sex workers’ migration, sexual practices and geographical areas of sex work practice (for research on sex work and HIV/AIDS see Pyett, Haste, & Snow, 1996; van Veen, Götz, van Leeuwen, Prins, & van de Laar, 2009; Harcourt et al., 2010; Murray, Lippman, Donini, & Kerrigan, 2010; Goldenberg et al., 2011; Taylor, 2011).

While the potential spread of sexually transmitting infections (STIs) remain on policy agendas, there are increasing moral panics around the spread of sex work due to the mainstreaming of the sex industry (Brents & Sanders, 2010). The moral panics arising from this proliferation (and largely unregulated sexual content on the Internet) has led countries such as Britain and Sweden to introduce laws and regulations that privilege women’s transition out of sex work (Hubbard, Matthews, & Scoular, 2008). These moral panics are responses to increased globalisation and population movement around the globe:
increased fluidity in the movement of people, capital, and commodities brought about by globalisation and late-capitalist restructuring, alongside a burgeoning sex industry, have incited a similar broad coalition of the religious right, moral puritans, and radical feminists around an abolitionist mission (Scoular, 2010, p. 16).

Currently in Victoria, Australia, the regulation of sex workers’ bodies includes health checks, licensing and location; for example, away from schools, churches and residential areas (Prostitution Control Act, 1994). While the Victorian government has not been as influenced by the moral panics that have gripped other Western countries, sex workers’ bodies are still treated as potential vectors of disease (despite very low incidents of STIs among sex workers and high rates of condom usage) (Wilson et al., 2009; Jeffreys, 2010). This regulation reflects earlier moral and medical panics around women’s bodies as a site of potential contamination and disease. Sex worker clients are not required to undergo sexual health checks and considering that women make up the majority of sex workers and men represent the majority of sex worker client, this regulation echoes discourses around sin and disease, where women’s bodies are positioned as vehicles of disease and men as the potential victims.

**Sex work and feminisms**

Sex work/prostitution has attracted intense attention from feminists over the last one hundred years. Commercial sex has been of interest to feminists since Josephine Butler and others campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Act³,

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³ The Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, and 1869) legislated that women in naval towns in England and Ireland, who were identified as diseased by plain clothed policemen, were to undergo an internal physical examination. Women who were found to have a contagious disease, or who refused to be examined, were incarcerated in lock hospitals (Carpenter, 2000; Bartley, 2000).
particularly the extension of it throughout Britain in the mid 1800s (Carpenter, 2000). The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s was concerned with equality of the sexes—not only in the boardroom but also in the bedroom. In this regard, the personal was viewed as political and what women did with their bodies was up for debate and re-thinking.

While some liberal feminists during this time argued that decriminalisation of prostitution would help to advance women’s rights, radical understandings of women’s bodies and sexualities as sites of oppression dominated the feminist take on sex work. For example, in her first book, Female Sexual Slavery (1984), Barry argued that as long as individual woman in prostitution were not forced, controlled or prevented from leaving the sex industry then ‘neither individuals nor the state should interfere with her personally’ (Barry, 1995, p. 238). However, her position altered in the mid 1990s, to view sex workers as entwined in the social and political structures in which they worked and lived—‘individuals cannot be separated from the institutions’ (1995, p. 238).

There is a rich and complex history of feminist engagement with prostitution/sex work. For this reason, this section explores the literature that is most relevant to this current study. In doing so, it situates this research within this canon and argues that drawing on and extending a postmodern feminist exploration of sex work will contribute to the multiple meanings and understandings of sex work while resisting a reduction of women’s voices to a binary of exploitation or empowerment.

This section begins with a general overview of the feminist ‘sex wars’, which consisted of two feminists camps where on one side sex and sexuality were always seen as repressive and exploitative for heterosexual women, and on the other, as a site of potential empowerment and agency, is presented. This is followed by an
examination of sex work research that has attempted to transcend the binary created by the sex wars by exploring various aspects of the sex industry such as labour organisation, interpersonal relationships, the effects of stigma, and strategies employed by sex workers. Following this, sex work research that is underpinned by postmodernism is detailed to highlight its usefulness for challenging fixed notions of sex, gender and sexuality within sex work, as well as providing a sound theoretical lens for exploring how sex work, and gendered relations, can be transformed (Scoular, 2004b).

Sex work has been the focus of much academic feminist attention over the previous three decades, resulting in what has been termed ‘a sociology of sex work’ (Sanders, O’Neill, & Pitcher, 2009). Many theoretical approaches, research methods and disciplinary traditions have been used in order to garner a canon that details cultural, sexual, economic, gendered, classed, raced, migratory and discursive aspects of sex work. Furthermore, research has been conducted with individuals who are not sex workers but who are nevertheless a part of the sex industry, such as clients, brothel and escort managers (Sanders, 2005) and partners of people working in sex work (Bradley-Engen & Hobbs, 2010). It has been argued that more research with people who work and live with sex workers and who contribute to the sex industry in ways other than selling their sexual labour would help to increase sociological understanding of sex work (Agustín, 2010).

While there has been a plethora of research into sex work in non-Western countries which has added to the breadth and depth of the sociology of sex work (Sanders et al., 2009) much of this has been deliberately omitted from this literature review due to the variety of cultural norms which contrast with sex work in many Western countries. Some researchers, however, have explored sex work in non-
Western countries and have noted the various ways that the individuals in their research practise agency. Notable examples include Law’s (2000) research with sex workers in Southeast Asia and the ways that they have been positioned through HIV/AIDS discourses, and Sandy’s (2007) research with sex workers in Cambodia and how they practise their agency in the face of being positioned in negative ways.

As well as research into sex workers as a risk group there has been a disproportionate focus on street sex work (Hubbard & Sanders, 2003; Kingston & Sanders, 2010).

there has still been a tendency for research and writing to focus on the more obvious parts of the sex industry [including] female street prostitution and those topics which attract media attention such as the criminalised aspects of prostitution, drugs, and health issues (Kingston & Sanders, 2010).

This has resulted in a conflation between indoor sex work and street sex work, where indoor sex work is viewed as equally dangerous, violent and characterised by a culture of drug use. Research into street sex work has found that women working on the streets experience high levels of systematic violence in Canada (Lowman, 2000), the USA (Surratt et al., 2004) and Australia (Quadara, 2008). A study of 325 female street workers in Miami found that over 40 per cent had experienced violence from male clients during the year prior to the research (Surratt et al., 2004). The disproportionate focus on street sex work contrasts with the ways that the sex industry is possibly changing, including new, and more mainstream, ways of selling and buying sexual labour (Brents & Sanders, 2010).

The Sex Wars

The feminist ‘sex wars’ describes a broad debate amongst feminists in the 1970s about sex, sexuality and heterosexual relations as well as prostitution and
As noted above, prostitutes/sex workers were considered to be either exploited or empowered. Radical feminists such as Dworkin (1987; 1997), Barry (1995), Farley (Farley et al., 1998; Farley & Kelly, 2000; 2004), Jeffreys (1997; 2009) and Sullivan (2007) have argued that prostitution is inherently violence against women. So-called ‘pro-sex’ feminists, in contrast, have promoted sex work as a way that women can gain sexual, economic, and gendered, emancipation within patriarchal structures that privilege men economically, socially and sexually (Chapkis, 1997). However, neither side of the ‘sex wars’ enabled understandings of sex work that take into account highly complex and multiple experiences of the work (Weitzer, 2009).

Sanders et al. (2009, p. 5) summarised this as follows:

Both perspectives are overly simplistic and ignore the relevance of economic circumstances and inequalities between men and women, as well as the diversity of workers in the industry.

Public policy has been heavily influenced by radical feminist understandings of sex work as violence against women in some Western countries (Scoular & Sanders, 2010; Weitzer, 2010a). For example, the UK recently ‘sought to both criminalise and responsibilise ... sex workers and men who buy sex’ (Scoular & Sanders, 2010, p. 3) by focusing on, and promoting, exiting strategies. These strategies, however, continue to sustain binaries of good/bad sex workers; positioning women and men who exit sex work as ‘reformed’ and ‘good’, and those who choose to stay in sex work, as ‘bad’ and resistant (Scoular, Pitcher, Campbell, Hubbard, & O’Neill, 2007; Sanders et al., 2009). Radical feminism has also provided an ideological framework in Sweden where prostitution is understood as only ever violence against women and the purchase of sex is outlawed, whereas the selling of
sex is not (Ekberg, 2004; Raymond, 2004; Scoular, 2004a; Kulick, 2005; Hubbard et al., 2008).

While there are many reasons for how sex work has been regulated, legalised, decriminalised and criminalised in the various states and territories in Australia, one aspect of the failure of radical feminism to influence public policy to the same degree as in some other Western countries may be the result of highly organised and vocal sex worker rights movements and activism (Sullivan, 2010). It is not due, however, to a lack of vocal radical feminists working in Australia who argue against state regulation of prostitution. For example, Shelia Jeffreys (1997; 2009) argued in her provocatively titled book, *The Industrial Vagina*, that Australian state governments are essentially acting as pimps in their role in the mainstreaming of the sex industry (Jeffreys, 2009). Sullivan (2007, p. 2) shared this view, claiming that the legal framework of prostitution in Victoria constitutes a ‘failed experiment’ in that ‘the Victorian Government’s endorsement of the sex trade ... harms women and girls in prostitution and ultimately affects the civil status of all women’.

In this way, and for radical feminists, prostitution was an exemplifier women’s sexual and economic disadvantage and feminists such as Dworkin (1987; 1997) and Barry (1984; 1995) conflated heterosexual marriage with commercial sex:

Women have been chattels to men as wives, as prostitutes, as sexual and reproductive servants. Being owned and being fucked are or have been virtually synonymous experiences in the lives of women. He owns you; he fucks you (Dworkin, 1987, p. 82).

Barry viewed prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation born from a patriarchal political condition which favours men’s sexuality(ies) over women’s and which therefore ‘constructs’ women who are available to meet men’s sexual ‘needs’.
The view that all prostitution is exploitation disallows the distinction between ‘forced’ and ‘free’ sex work because ‘exploitation’ is not a ‘choice’ but a ‘condition’ (Barry, 1995). In her earlier book, Female Sexual Slavery (1984), Barry argued that as long as individual women in prostitution were not forced, controlled or prevented from leaving the sex industry, then ‘neither individuals nor the state should interfere with her personally’ (Barry, 1995, p. 238). However, Barry’s argument altered in the mid-1990s to position women in prostitution as entwined in the social and political structures in which they worked and lived—‘individuals cannot be separated from the institutions’ (Barry, 1995, p. 238). Overemphasising gendered power dynamics, and seeing sex work and women only through this lens, can oversimplify women’s multiple experiences and, therefore:

in one rhetorical swoop, all women are reduced to prostitutes and prostitutes to their sex acts. Not only does this reify an image of the prostitute as a sexual subordinate, it also sustains the myths and norms of the sex industry, of potent men and submissive women rather than transforming it (Scoular, 2004b, p. 345).

By situating sex work firmly within gendered power relations, women in sex work are positioned not only as victims but as also colluding with essentialist understandings of men’s sexual needs and women’s role in servicing these needs. As Scoular argued, this position foreclosures the potential for individuals to transform gendered power dynamics through the ways that they understand sexualities; gendered, commercial, and otherwise (2004a). Current research into the sex industry no longer engages with these opposing positions to the same degree as late last century, as researchers have attempted to explore sex work in ways that do not simply sustain the binary of exploitation and empowerment but rather acknowledge that there
will always be some degree of exploitation and empowerment in labour organisation, no matter the industry (Willman & Levy, 2010). It is the vast grey area between these polar opposites that many researchers have been interested in exploring since the 1990s.

**The Social Conditioning of Women**

As mentioned above, feminism is not a unified political, activist and theoretical entity; rather it is a diverse definition used to define the arguments of many scholars, activists and individuals in their explorations of gender and gendered relations in various aspects of social life. This section focuses on some of the discourses emanating from the school of feminist thought known as radical feminism. Radical feminism views power as unidirectional and is usually Marxist in its desire for an equal society. Radical feminists share common understandings about gender and often attribute women’s struggle to social, economic and sexual structures which favour men over women. Radical feminism grew out of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Striving for gender equality, they questioned gender roles that women participated in, in particular, sexual and caring roles that also impacted on women’s access to economic and sexual self-determination.

Radical feminists continue to focus on women’s roles and the structures that restrict their economic and sexual freedom. Continuing to understand the concept of power as unidirectional, radical feminists argue that prostitution is fundamentally an issue of male sexual and economic privilege and female exploitation. This section explores the discourses that radical feminists have drawn on, and continue to draw on in their construction of sex work, as well as to note how some of these constructions are similar to the essentialist discourses detailed above.
In the 1970s, the second wave of feminism actively resisted many of the discourses which positioned women as inferior to men, while simultaneously drawing on essential gender and the social construction of gender roles. Women were thus considered to have specific sexual needs and desires that were bound in Eros, or romantic love (Chapkis, 1997), while also being socially conditioned to give men unemotional sex.

By choice and desire, male sexuality configures around disengaged sex, sex for the sake of itself, separate from the human experience and interaction that it actually is, thereby destroying sexual interaction in favour of sex that is objectifying, the origins of the prostitution of sexuality (Barry, 1995, p. 61).

Radical feminists understood prostitution to be linked to supply and demand. Rather than understanding the supply and demand of prostitution as a result of natural instincts interacting with social structures, radical feminists drew more on social construction theory to argue that prostitution was the result of patriarchal societies which favoured men economically and sexually (Dworkin, 1987; Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997). While Acton and others argued that women entered prostitution because they lost all that was ‘moral’ and ‘good’ through sexual intercourse that was outside of matrimony, some radical feminists argued that women were drawn to prostitution by past experiences of childhood sexual abuse; which was considered a way that women were socially conditioned into providing men access to their bodies:

The men as a body politic have power over women and decide how women will suffer: which sadistic acts against the bodies of women will be construed to be normal. In the United States, incest is increasingly the sadism of choice, the intercourse itself wounding the female child and socialising her to her female status (Dworkin, 1987, p. 194).
Women were seen as victims of social conditioning, where, due to how men’s sexuality was constructed, women were positioned as providing the means through which heterosexual men could exert their sexual power. Drawing on psychological discourses, women were seen to be drawn to prostitution through a compulsion to repeat feelings, emotions and situations similar to their sexualisation and childhood sexual abuse (Koken, 2010). This discursive understanding of the behaviours and thoughts of individuals who have experienced childhood sexual abuse is not only espoused about prostitution, but is dominant in much sexual abuse survivor discourse where the victim enters a destructive cycle trying to regain the control that they feel was taken from them through the abuse (Alcoff & Gray, 1993).

While drawing on psychological discourses rather than vitalism or biology, there are echoes in radical feminist arguments of previous discourses espoused by sexologists in the 1800s (Acton, 1967). Acton’s theory that all women are potential prostitutes—through possible ‘bad associates’ and ‘evil training’—is similar in how it positions women as damaged by men’s use of their bodies without engaging the spirit. Acton positioned prostitutes as women whose spirit had been damaged and who then sought to live off the immorality of others; radical feminists argued that prostitutes were psychologically damaged by men’s use of their bodies and then became colluders with their sexual exploitation. In both discourses, women sex workers are constructed as damaged by men’s sexuality, whether that sexuality is innate or socially constructed. Furthermore, they both draw on the Cartesian notion of the split between one’s mind and one’s body. The following section explores how various feminisms explain notions of self in sex work.

**Sexuality and Notions of ‘Self’**
Sex work discourses have long been concerned with the location of ‘self’ in the sexual transaction. As argued above, pre-Cartesian discourses intimately tied the body with self as bodily rhythms, temperature and exertion were thought to denote one’s personhood. Cartesian discourses then split the mind from the body. The body was deemed inferior to the ‘mind’ or the ‘spirit’: ‘that which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is ... the heavy drag on self-realisation’ (Bordo, 1992, p. 5). This Cartesian mind/body split privileged the rational mind over the irrational body (Turner, 1996).

This dualism privileges an abstract, pre-discursive subject at the centre of thought and, accordingly, derogates the body as the site of all that is understood to be opposed to the spirit and rational thought such as the emotions, passions, needs (McNay, 1992, p. 12).

In radical feminist discourse this split was meshed with psychological discourses pertaining to the effects of using one’s body for actions other than the individual’s desires. Radical feminists simultaneously located the self as connected to, and separate from, the body. ‘A prostituted woman sells her womanhood, she sells something that is integral to her identity and self’ (Sullivan, 2007, p. 33).

In modern patriarchy, sale of women’s bodies in the capitalist market involves sale of a self in a different manner, and in a more profound sense, than sale of the body of a male baseball player (Pateman, 1999, p. 60).

Viewing sex work through the lens of property rights led radical feminists to understand sex work as the selling of self—not only through prostitution but also through the marriage contract (Barry, 1984, 1995) (For a critique of this debate see O’Connell Davidson, 2002). Understanding sex work in this manner functioned in a particular way. It perpetuated the discourse that something integral to the sex worker
is sold to the buyer and that this has damaging effects for the sex worker’s sense of self and identity (Pateman, 1988). The act of penetration in sex work contexts was then discursively constructed as a violation of the sex worker herself:

The liberal concept of property in the person ... leaves open certain questions about what can, and cannot, properly be commodified and contractually exchanged across a market ... Do the body’s sexual capacities constitute property in the person or is it impossible to detach sex from personhood without moral harm (O’Connell Davidson, 2002, p. 85)?

Locating the self as both within the body—and particularly in one’s sexuality—as well as in the mind, has led some radical feminists to argue that women in sex work dissociate their selves from their bodies because of the ‘abhorrence’ and ‘trauma’ experienced from selling such an intimate and integral part of themselves.

Drawing a link between the sexual abuse of children (which fits with the social construction argument) and coping mechanisms reported by rape victims, led many radical feminists to argue that sex work is paid rape (Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998; Farley & Kelly, 2000; Farley, 2004). The conflation of rape with the sex acts performed in sex work is a powerful ‘discursive manoeuvre’ as it positions sex workers as akin to victims (albeit women who have been socially conditioned to collude with their victim status), and clients as rapists (albeit who are socially conditioned to believe that they have a right to access women’s bodies at will). While there can be rape in sex work contexts, for radical feminists, all sexual engagement between clients and sex workers was considered rape. This functioned to erase the

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4 The term ‘discursive manoeuvre’ was coined by Hilary Allen (1987) who, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, argued that a ‘discursive manoeuvre’ was a way that ‘expert’ knowledges could discredit knowledges espoused by women who had experienced sexual violence thus subjugating them. I have used this term to denote the way that discourses that position sex work as ‘paid rape’ function to close off other understandings of sex work.
line between consensual and non-consensual sex acts in sex work contexts; reducing experiences of rape in sex work to ‘normal’ commercial sex. This subjugated knowledge espoused by individual women who had experienced rape in sex work and who nevertheless chose to continue working, and women who had not experienced rape in sex work contexts.

Radical feminists drew on psychological discourses in order to give meaning to sex work experiences as well as to explain why some women spoke about positive experiences of their work. Women who spoke of dissociating from their work through splitting their mind from their body were positioned as ‘good’ women while women who claimed that they did not dissociate or feel traumatised by their work were positioned as ‘bad’, or at the very least, psychologically damaged and suffering from ‘false consciousness’. The notion of ‘false consciousness’ positioned women who spoke of either enjoying their work or not experiencing ‘trauma’, as colluding with, not only their own oppression and exploitation, but that of women in general—positioning them as both victims and perpetrators—albeit without being conscious of this (Farley et al., 1998; Farley & Kelly, 2000; Farley, 2004).

The ‘good’ woman who ‘dissociated’ during sex with her clients was understood in radical feminist discourse as ‘naturally’ splitting her mind from her body. This should not be confused with practice of allowing one’s mind to wander when work tasks become mundane, but rather, is considered to be a damaging, psychological, response that has the potential to lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or dissociative identity disorder (Farley et al., 1998; Farley & Kelly, 2000; Farley, 2004; Choi, Klein, Shin, & Lee, 2009). Sex workers were consequently positioned only as victims, as their collusion with a sexual order that ‘represses’ them was due to childhood sexualisation or abuse.
Some radical feminists still espouse these discourses (see for example Sullivan, 2007; Jeffreys, 2009). Furthermore, the understanding that sex work is inherently violence against women has been appropriated by some governments in Western countries, most strikingly in Sweden (Ekberg, 2004; McDonald, 2004; Scoular, 2004a; Kulick, 2005; Hubbard et al., 2008) and also in Britain (Scoular & O’Neill, 2007). Further to this, radical feminist discourses, with their grounding in ‘expert’ psychological discourses are dominant in much media coverage of prostitution and trafficking issues (Doezema, 2000, 2001; Jeffreys, 2010).

**Transcending the Binaries**

Many researchers have explored various aspects of the sex industry in ways that do not comply with either side of the sex wars. This has included research that transcends these binaries by engaging closely with women, men and trans-people in sex work in order to hear their understandings, stories and sex work practices (Pyett & Warr, 1999; O’Neill, 2001; Sanders, 2004; Lantz, 2005; Barton, 2006; 2006b; 2006a; Kontula, 2008; Quadara, 2008; 2008 among others). For example, Zatz argued that research should;

take into account what sex workers say of their own lives, understandings and experiences as sex workers’ own understandings of their lives, and the ways of living embedded in those forms of understanding, are themselves part of the phenomenon (Zatz, 1997, p. 285).

It is not useful to simply explain away divergences between how individual sex workers understand their work and the gendered, economic and sexual theories through which academics view their work. Rather, the understandings which sex workers give to their work are also valuable as ‘sex workers have a great deal at stake
As detailed in the introduction to this thesis, sex workers have called for research into the ways that money functions as a motivator for sex work (Weldon, 2010; Willman, 2010). Some researchers have looked at how labour is organised in sex work markets and thus have moved from looking at the ‘sex’ of sex work in favour of other parts of the sex industry that nevertheless impact sex workers’ lives (Murray, 2001; Lucas, 2005; Boris et al., 2010). Sex work research over the past three decades has moved from problematising the ideological binaries created by the sex wars, towards such mundane aspects as money management, labour organisation and working conditions (Agustín, 2010). In order to explore some of the research that has helped to move the academic conversation about sex work from sex to work I will now explore how the sex wars have been challenged and then move on to look at how labour organisation in the sex industry has been researched. This section ends with an exploration of the ways that researchers have engaged with the question of gender in sex work given that the sex industry is still highly gendered, primarily because it is still overwhelmingly women who sell sexual labour and men who purchase sexual services (Zatz, 1997).

The criminologist Maggie O’Neill has been highly influential in challenging the binaries set up by the sex wars. In her book, *Prostitution and Feminism* (2001), O’Neill sought to interrogate prostitution and feminism in order to move the debate away from the ideological binary detailed above. By challenging this binary, she argued, researchers could move towards a ‘politics of feeling’ where they would be able to truly listen to women in sex work and engage with them in participatory ways, rather than simply interpreting their words through ideological takes on the sex
industry. O’Neill argued that feminists should work together to transcend the binaries that had been created by the sex wars in order to achieve praxis—the meeting of theory and practice—which takes into account the multiple lived realities of sex workers. O’Neill argued that:

we need to develop better understanding of prostitution and feminisms by acknowledging the paradoxes, the contradictions and the similarities and differences between and amongst women by problematising prostitution and feminism (O’Neill, 2001, p. 187).

O’Connell Davidson was also influential in her criticism of the sex wars, and her work sought to interrogate some of the understandings that informed feminist thoughts about sex work (O’Connell Davidson, 2002, 2006). Sanders (2004; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b; 2007; 2008; Sanders et al., 2009) is arguably one of the most prolific writers and researchers into the sex industry over the previous decade. Her first book, Sex Work: A Risky Business grew out of her PhD and engaged with multiple aspects of indoor sex work in the UK. Without aligning herself with either side of the sex wars, Sanders engaged with research that sensitively explored some of the difficulties faced by women in indoor sex work contexts. Since 2005, Sanders’ prolific and robust engagement with various aspects of the sex industry, including clients, has helped to shape sex work research. Sanders explored specific management techniques undertaken by some sex workers, including using humour (Sanders, 2004), acting particular performances of femininity (Sanders, 2006a), bodily exclusion zones as a way to manage public/private sex (Sanders, 2005), and the ways that women move in and out of sex work (Sanders, 2007a).

Wahab (2003) also critiqued the divisive positions established by the sex wars. She wrote about how she came to realise that by identifying with a radical feminist
perspective her work was contributing to dichotomous ideas of good/bad women in sex work. She argued that through participatory research with sex workers, feminists, social workers, and other ‘helping professional[s]’, scholars would be better able to resist viewing sex workers as only ever victims (Wahab, 2003, p. 640).

Agustín argued that looking at sex work through a cultural studies approach would include exploring ‘intersections with art, ethics, consumption, family life, entertainment, sport, economic, urban space, sexuality, tourism and criminality’ as well as ‘race, class, gender, identity and citizenship’ (Agustín, 2005, p. 619). In order to illustrate her point, she explored various types of sex work in Spain to argue that there were many other factors that were not considered in the majority of research, including how gender norms are reiterated within sex work. Furthermore, Agustín called for research that engages with how women in sex work take a ‘leading role in their own life stories, complete with making decisions about taking risks in order to get ahead in life—their agency’ (Agustín, 2010, p. 26).

Situating prostitution as work has been fundamentally helpful for both sex workers and academics who wish to avoid viewing sex work as exploitation. It has also been useful for academics who wish to avoid moralistic explorations of sex work in order to look at the contextual, complex and discursively contingent aspects of the sex industry in various sex markets and cultural contexts. First coined in the 1970s by activist and sex work performance artist, Carol Leigh (aka Scarlet the Harlot) (Chapkis, 1997) the term ‘sex work’ was instrumental in opening up discursive understandings of prostitution that were foreclosed by the violence against women discourse. Individuals in sex work, as well as feminists and academics, now had the language to explore the potential agentic aspects and experiences of sex work (for example, Chapkis, 1997; Nagel, 1997; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998) as well as the
organisational structures, work practices, and how laws and regulations produce particular types of sex work and ways of being a sex worker (Scoular, 2004a).

Despite many scholars and activists positioning prostitution as work, individuals in the sex industry are one of the last categories of workers to become unionised (Brewis & Linstead, 1998). Gall (2007) argued that this is slowly changing as sex worker rights groups and activists are moving from arguing for human rights to worker rights. Sex workers have been dubbed ‘red collar workers’ by academics interested in this aspect of the sex industry (Brewis & Linstead, 1998).

Redefining prostitution as work has, in part, involved linking the labour and skills performed by sex workers with labour and skills performed by people in other occupations (Agustín, 2005). One aspect of this debate is gendered work performance. Organisational theorists have identified many mainstream occupations that require employees to perform gender ideals, such as flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983) and secretaries (Benet, 1972; Pringle, 1988) (for an overview see Sanders, 2006a). While there are many overlapping aspects of the work performed by sex workers and the work performed by people in other occupations, not only in regard to gendered aspects but more mundane aspects such as business and interpersonal skills (Lucas, 2005), sex work is still seen as unique for the almost universal moral condemnation under which sex workers operate (Sanders, 2006a).

Despite a possible mainstreaming of the sex industry, including sex work, in Western countries, sex workers and clients are still considered with ambivalence in general society (Brents & Sanders, 2010). The increase and mainstreaming of the sex industry in Western countries is argued to be due to neo-liberal policies, cultural changes (Brents & Sanders, 2010) and globalisation (Scoular, 2010). Despite this possible increase of the sex industry in many parts of the world there is still little
research addressing this and exploring the effects on individual sex workers and clients. Brents and Sanders’ (2010) work is one exception. Drawing on research in Leeds and Las Vegas, they argued that the growth in the sex industry is linked to the growth in leisure consumption and that this:

- translates into accessible, visible and potentially normalised sex markets.

Despite this, the social and cultural acceptability of sex markets have not fully mirrored this mainstreaming. As a result, individuals who engage in the sex industry on either side continue to be regulated by social stigma and moralist attitudes (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 60).

Brents and Sanders (2010) have argued that the sex industry is becoming more mainstream but that despite this, the men and women who buy and sell sex are still subjected to stigmatisation. Consequently, sexual commerce may be becoming more socially acceptable, while selling one’s sexual labour may still not. In this way, the larger community continually subjects sex workers to stigmatisation. While the stigmatisation of sex workers can be explained in part by Judeo-Christian understandings of sex and sexuality, it can also be explained by the ways that ‘experts’ influence which discourses about sex work are appropriated by individuals in the broader community by lending scientific authority to them as described in much of this current chapter.

This condemnation, and the stigmatisation of sex workers which accompanies it, can cause women to feel shame about themselves and the work that they do (Petro, 2010). However, the urge to confess (Foucault, 1976) can result in women feeling as though they should disclose their work to those around them. Petro (2010, p. 159), herself a past sex worker, found in her ethnographic research that ‘the decision to be
truthful was a preoccupation for most respondents who sold sex without their partner’s knowledge’.

Ann Lucas (2005) explored the notion of crime as work within the USA from the perspectives of women engaged in prostitution. Lucas sought to explore how middle class women in sex work gave meaning to sexual labour within illegal sex work contexts. She found that many of the women argued that sex work was no worse, if not better, than other types of work. For example, the women in her research argued that while sexual harassment was an unwanted experience of ‘straight’ [non-sex work] jobs, sex work taught them how to handle such situations in a more effective way. Lucas cited other reasons for why sex work was viewed as work by the women in her study, including the development of interpersonal skills, business skills (particularly if the worker was managing her own business), income and flexibility.

Despite many sex workers claiming that they started sex work out of economic need, the role of money is still under-researched (Willman & Levy, 2010). In much radical feminist research, the functions of money are cast aside for more psychological reasons such as childhood sexual abuse (Jeffreys, 1997; Farley, 2004). As dancer Jo Weldon wrote:

While every interviewer asks me whether I was sexually abused as a child, none of them have ever asked me a single question about the financial mindset, or even the financial motivation, involved in my decisions to work in the sex industry (Weldon, 2010, pp. 147–148).

Weldon argued that sex work is unique because individuals can make money in a day or just a few hours, rather than needing to wait until payday. Sex work, therefore, provides access to money that is needed, or desired, almost immediately.
Furthermore, sex work provides more money than most jobs that are available to women the world over (Willman, 2010).

Positioning sex work as work can also be restrictive as it forecloses understandings of sex work that are entwined with notions of sexuality, pleasure and desire. Opening up the category of sex work, however, is difficult as understanding prostitution as work has helped to challenge notions of sin, crime and immorality (O’Neill, 2001). Speaking about women’s sexual pleasure in sex work may, therefore, inadvertently undo the work that many have done in promoting the view that prostitution is work, thus making speaking about sexual pleasure in sex work tenuous terrain. While sexual pleasure is difficult to talk about, sex worker rights movements have arguably been bolstered by those who seek to disrupt restrictive categories of sexuality and ‘deviance’ which has resulted in a ‘queering’ of the sex industry and a marriage between sex work and queer sexual identities (Chapkis, 1997).

Understanding sex work as a marginalised sexuality also has its problems. First, by positioning it as a sexual identity there is the potential to feed into the hands of those who claim that sex workers are socially conditioned by past experiences of sexual objectification and/or childhood sexual abuse (Farley et al., 1998). Second, there is the potential for scholars to fall back on essentialist notions of sexual desire and pleasure, rather than viewing all sexual acts, desires and pleasures as constituted and constrained by the discursive and material structures that surround them (Scoular, 2004b).

Arguably, it has been sex workers themselves who have challenged the view that their work is only work without buying into the notion that they are bad or deviant. This can be seen in the reclamation of the word ‘whore’ in an attempt to exert pride rather than shame (Zatz, 1997). Another example is Perkins and Lovejoy’s
use of the term ‘prostitute’ rather than ‘sex worker’ in their research as an attempt to challenge and dismantle the negative connotations that accompanies the term ‘prostitute’. Further, women in sex work who come from middle or high socio-economic backgrounds, are university educated, who do not have drug habits and who choose to engage in sex work despite having other financial options available to them, have also helped to change how sex work is given meaning and positioned as a choice which is enjoyed emotionally, sexually, and professionally (Bernstein, 2007a, 2007b).

In her work with Finnish sex workers, Kontula sought to explore sex work as sexuality for some women in Finland who, due to free education and a strong welfare system, had other options available to them and yet enjoyed and sought to sustain their sex work. She noted the absence of research into this aspect of sex work, arguing that ‘the sexuality of sex workers seems to be the most sensitive and contested topic—about which no one asks sex workers’ (Kontula, 2008, p. 607). Kontula’s work has the potential to move the conversation towards opening up this category of work without falling back on previous understandings of women who enjoy sex with multiple partners and thus (re)creating the binary of Madonna/whore, with women who gain sexual enjoyment from clients as the latter and women distinguishing between ‘good’ private sex and ‘performance’ sex at work as the former.

This divide was sustained in the women’s narratives with which Kontula engaged. Rather than locating sex work as sexuality per say, the women instead spoke about the ways that sex work could increase their sexual enjoyment in personal encounters with partners and lovers. Where the women did speak of sexual enjoyment at work, Kontula argued that this was due to the particular structures, regulations and social contexts in Finland. She argued that women in sex work in Finland are few in numbers and yet are meeting a greater demand (relative to their small numbers as
compared to other countries) and therefore were in a better position to select their clients according to criteria such as sexual attraction.

It has also been argued that sex work provides sexual empowerment for women as they are constantly praised on their looks and sexual desirability. For example, in Bernstein’s ethnographic research with middle class sex workers in the United States, many of the women spoke about the positive effect that constant compliments had on their self-esteem (Bernstein, 2007b).

New social technologies have played a role in changing the landscape of sex work, allowing women to bring new, and former, skills to their sex work as well as attracting women who are well educated and have various employment opportunities available to them (Bernstein, 2007a). So-called ‘middle class’ sex workers have helped to change the meanings and practices of sex work to include such notions as the ‘girlfriend experience’ and authentic, interpersonal relations between sex workers and clients (Bernstein, 2007a). ‘Girlfriend experience’ is a term often used on websites for private workers, escorts and also some brothels in order to attract clients. It has become widely used for denoting a service and has been identified as desirable for many men seeking sex workers. As Sanders found in her research with male clients:

The ‘girlfriend experience’, which usually involves kissing, caressing and other sensual acts (rather than brief sex acts), is sought by many men and is met with triumph and congratulations on message boards when a client reveals he experienced the ‘GFE’ (Sanders, 2008, p. 407).

It has been argued that this practice, however, can also be more emotionally tiring (Weitzer, 2009) as a greater emotional engagement with clients is expected and longer amounts of time are spent together. Understanding this as a class division
functions to allow the voices and experiences of women who do experience violence and exploitation through their sex work—often street based sex work—to still be heard while also validating the experiences of women who find their sex work financially, professionally and emotionally rewarding (Bernstein, 2007a).

It has been argued that whether or not sex work is work is no longer relevant as the majority of scholars appear to agree that understanding sex work as labour is more productive for advancing women’s rights rather than only viewing it as exploitation or the epitome of women’s sexual objectification (Benoit & Shaver, 2006).

While understanding sex work in terms of sexuality, deviance and violence are all heavily disputed in academia, many feminists concur that sex work is highly gendered. The effects and functions of this, however, are contested. Radical feminists see it as subordination of women through unequal sexual and economic power relations, while pro-sex work feminists argue that it is a site where these same gendered power relations can be overcome through challenging the notions of monogamy and the unequal distribution of wealth between men and women. Both sides of the sex wars therefore locate sex work as mediated by gender. Likewise, feminists who attempt to transcend these binaries also situate sex work as existing within broader notions of gendered power relations. For example, law academic Scoular (2004b, p. 348), argued that:

Sex work may be more usefully viewed with ambivalence given that it is an activity which challenges the boundaries of heterosexist, married, monogamy but may also be an activity which reinforces the dominant norms of heterosexuality and femininity.
One way that the normalisation of gender can play out in sex work contexts is through the sex worker identity that sex workers perform with their clients (Sanders, 2006a). These sex worker identities are how women perform gender according to normalised notions of feminine beauty and sexual desirability (Sanders, 2006a). Sanders argued that women performed stereotyped notions of feminine beauty while at work but were able to transition into their personal notions of femininity when not at work. In this way, women in sex work can perform heterosexual femininity in ways that enables them to capitalise on social norms. Sanders argued:

producing a certain kind of identity in the sex industry, borne out of the specific requirements of male desires that clash with female desires to separate sex as an economic unit from romantic relations in private, is intrinsic to how some sex workers perform the ‘prostitute’ role (Sanders, 2006a, p. 3).

Sanders drew heavily on the work of the social psychologist Goffman, who argued that ‘selfhood lies in expressive performance’ (Jenkins, 2004, p. 71) and that individuals take on and perform ‘socially approved norms’ (Ashe et al., 1999, p. 101). In this sense, Goffman argued that actors could embody their performance by taking on social norms and conventions (Ashe et al., 1999, p. 101). Sanders (2005) drew on Goffman’s theory of performance to argue that ‘manufactured identities’ serve two purposes in sex work, to minimise psychological stress, and to capitalise on stereotyped ideal femininity. She argued that:

For most women, sex work is not the transference of private sexual relations to a commercial context but, instead, is considered one particular type of gender and sexual performance that is different from gendered embodiments in other parts of their lives (Sanders, 2005, p. 239).
While the sex wars are still relevant today for the ways that they influence public perception and public policies, the majority of sex work researchers and academics are transcending this binary by looking at other aspects and experiences of sex work, including aspects such as money management, labour organisation and notions of self and identity in sex work contexts.

**Postmodern and Foucauldian Sex Work Research**

Sex workers and the people around them, including clients, managers and loved ones, all have discursive understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and sex work available to them; including essentialist understandings of gender, gendered understandings of sexuality and stigmatising knowledges about sex workers. Research which engages with the ways that individuals understand these categories, however, is at risk of reproducing these discourses, rather than interrogating them and finding new and alternative meanings that can be applied. Postmodernism can help researchers to avoid this by acknowledging that there are multiple knowledges and meanings which individuals can apply to their understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and sex work. In this way, postmodern research can avoid privileging one discourse over another.

Postmodernism provides a theoretical paradigm for questioning and dismantling understandings of sex, gender and sexuality as stable and continuous and therefore unchangeable, thus opening up these categories for debate. Postmodern research into sex work has helped to move the conversation towards not only multiple experiences of sex work, but also the potential for it to be changed and transformed. This is because once categories such as sex, gender and sexuality are able to become unstuck from essentialist and fixed understandings, their meanings can be changed and so too can individuals’ experiences of them. Much of this work has drawn on the French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, to critique, challenge and unpack
certain discourses in relation to various power relations. As Carmody argued, not in relation to sex work, but in regard to sexualities in general:

The rupturing of essentialist and one-dimensional views on sexuality ... has resulted in a reinvigorated debate about sexuality and the development of diverse sexualities influenced strongly by postmodern critiques of grand narratives such as radical feminism and the growth of queer theory and studies of masculinities. A good deal of this fresh approach to theorising sexuality, power and gender derived from these bodies of work and emergent philosophical debates, especially from the work of Michel Foucault. It is by considering these alternative discourses that the space is created to develop a different possibility of sexual consent (Carmody, 2003, p. 205)

Postmodern researchers have looked at how understandings and practices of sex work sit within broader social norms (Zatz, 1997; Phoenix, 2000; Scoular, 2004b), including how these knowledges are shaped by historical, social and cultural norms within particular societies (Zatz, 1997). For example, Phoenix (2000) argued that broader discourses about sex, sexuality and gender feed into sex workers’ meanings of sex work. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, she explored the narratives of 21 women who worked primarily from the streets or their homes in the UK. Phoenix argued that sex workers’ understandings of sex work are constructed as both ‘gendered survival’ and ‘gendered victimisation’ (Phoenix, 2000, p. 53) and that by thinking creatively about discourses researchers are able to bridge the gap between the victim/agent binary to see how sex work can be both influenced by discursive power relations and a site of agency:

It is by thinking creatively about discourses of meaning that it becomes possible to explain women’s sustained involvement in prostitution as not
either an instance of women’s victimisation or their agency, but rather as shaped by both their agency and their lack of agency (Phoenix, 2000, p. 53 emphasis in original).

Postmodern sex work researchers are able to resist only viewing sex work through restrictive notions of power:

The benefit of ... postmodern [sex work research] is that by maintaining a critical distance from oppressive structural factors, theorists are able to resist attempts to see power as overwhelming and consuming the subject (Scoular, 2004, p. 352).

Through a postmodern paradigm sex work has be viewed as a site where some discourses are challenged and others are sustained (Zatz, 1997; Scoular, 2004b). For example, sex workers who wish to understand their sex work as skilled labour and their personal sexual experiences as intimate and emotional affairs may uphold the distinction between public/private sex and sexuality. As Zatz argued:

The complex, multiple prostitution exchange is a site of powerful sexual pluralism, capable of contesting hegemonic constructions of sexuality that at first seem far removed: the movement from anatomical sex to sexuality to identity and the maintenance of the public/private distinction through the isolation of sexuality and intimacy from productive work and commercial exchange (Zatz, 1997, p. 306).

The ability for sex work to provide alternative understandings about gendered relations has led some scholars to argue that the legalisation of sex work could offer, ‘subversive practical and discursive potential to sex workers’ as restrictive discursive categories of sex, sexuality, monogamy and gendered relations can be challenged and resisted (Zatz, 1997, p. 306).
Postmodern research into sex work has also helped to challenge understandings about migrant sex workers. While this thesis does not explore this population, the use of postmodern and Foucauldian explorations of the ways that migrant workers are discursively constructed is relatable to this research. Researchers working in this field have challenged discourses which position migrant sex workers as only ever victims of trafficking by illuminating how they have been infantilised in much feminist discourse (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Doezema, 2000, 2001). Furthermore, in their interrogation of the discourses which underpin negative understandings of sex work scholars have illustrated that certain knowledges of sex work draw on discourses which function to maintain certain social norms. For example, Doezema (2000) argued that the use of white slave discourses about sex trafficking ‘serve to reinforce the construction of gender relations that determine that women’s purity and dependence are essential to family wellbeing and national honour’ (Doezema, 2000, p. 47).

Scholars have also used Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore how discourses function to produce certain ways of experiencing bodies in sex work. Along with an extensive exploration of sex work discourses, Brewis and Linstead (1998; 2000a; 2000b) looked at how certain discourses about femininity fed into sex workers’ understandings of their work and their bodies. Furthermore, they argued that sex workers not only take on discursive understandings of bodies but also change and produce other ways of knowing their bodies and their work:

Sex workers both draw on bodily regimes in the shaping of their subjectivities and modify and make them available for others ... Yet they also feed back into and change their own and others’ bodily regimes through their discursive
practice, their educational and social work, and their political activity (Brewis & Linstead, 2000b, p. 177).

Foucauldian discourse analysis and postmodernism has also been used in research with peep show dancers (Quadara, 2006) and women working as strippers (Spivey, 2005). Research into such public sexual acts as peep shows and strip clubs has been useful for looking at how women in sex work negotiate public sexual identities and performances as well as private space. For example, Quadara (2006) drew on Foucault’s work to explore the space between women’s performance of sexual femininity they assume in sex work and their ‘outside’ identities. Quadara looked at how the ‘overlap or threshold between ... interactive strategies employed by women at strip clubs, and their interactive strategies outside the clubs’ created a ‘folded subject’ (Quadara, 2006, p. 4, original emphasis). That is, the ways that women experience their sexual identity and performances in peep show contexts is not cut off from their own experiences of themselves, but rather is folded in as a part of their subjective experiences. In order to theorise about this, Quadara drew on the published narratives of women who had worked in this context, including Funari, who wrote:

I am suddenly reminded that there is an outside world, and that it’s raining there, because he lifts his curved bamboo umbrella handle to his lips and begins sucking and tonguing it. I laugh, and I silently thank him for having a sense of humour (Funari, 1997, p. 21)

Spivey (2005) researched the private and public resistance techniques employed by women working as strippers in a nude bar. These resistance techniques were observed by Spivey to have two forums, ‘back stage’ and ‘front stage’. Drawing on Goffman’s notion of dramaturgical analysis, Spivey argued that ‘back stage’ forms
of resistance to the embodiment of stigmatising discourses and the ‘front stage’
techniques of resistance to customers’ objectifying behaviour were very different.
Drawing on Ronai and Ellis (1989), Spivey supported the assertion that ‘as males
dominate and control societal institutions, females respond with micro-dimensional
forms of power’ (Spivey, 2005, p. 419). One form of micro-level resistance noted by
Spivey was the use of narrative to counteract, and reject, negative dominant imagery
(Spiney, 2005, p. 420). This can be in the form of not participating in all of the
behaviours deemed as essential to the negative label; resisting sexualisation from
customers (front stage) through desexualising the body back stage; and creating
discourses that contradict common knowledge of sex workers’ bodies (Spivey, 2005).

Foucauldian discourse analysis has also been used in ways that sustain
dominant understandings of sex work as psychologically damaging. For example,
within the New Zealand context, Barrington (2008) undertook Foucauldian discourse
analysis for her Master’s thesis on the ways that prostitution was discursively
constructed through discourses in newspaper articles pertaining to the debate around
decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand in 2003. Barrington viewed sex work
as a psychological harm that was being discursively repositioned as agency and
choice by some academics and sex work activists. While she drew on Foucault’s
middle area of work around the productive power of knowledges to produce
subjectivities Barrington failed to disrupt the truth-status given to research which
claims that sex workers are socially conditioned through childhood sexual abuse and
that they suffer from PTSD (Barrington, 2008).

In contrast to Barrington’s work, Scoular (2004a; 2004b; 2007; 2007; 2010;
2010) drew on Foucault’s notion of governmentality as a form of productive power
relations where individuals internalise the laws that surround them and thus modify
their behaviour through self-surveillance. She argued that various laws and regulations often ‘operate to support hegemonic power relations’ thus promoting and sustaining particular ways of knowing sex work (Scoular & Sanders, 2010, p. 14). For Scoular, viewing sex work laws and regulations as discursive—in the ways that they shape subjectivities and experiences of sex work—mark them as worthy of critical analysis and interrogation.

Bell (1994) used Foucault’s middle and later works to explore the two periods that she argued sex workers have been involved in creating their own discourses of what it means to do sex work. The two periods were the pagan and the post-modern. In order to explore the ways that sex workers/prostitutes have created their own, and been subjected to, discourses about prostitute bodies, she traced this in four discursive epistemes (or time periods), including ancient Greece, Modern European feminisms, postmodern prostitute feminisms and postmodern prostitute performance art in North America. While possibly romanticising the pagan and ancient Greek notions of prostitution (Scoular, 2004b), her work provided a useful genealogy of the construction of sex worker bodies as well as how sex workers are able to actively resist these, particularly by constituting themselves through sex worker performance art. Bell’s work is a fine example of Foucault’s notion of genealogy as a ‘history of the present’ (Roth, 1981). Continuing with Foucault’s assertion that there are no essential truths, Bell’s overarching aim was to:

show how it is that the referent, the flesh-and-blood female body engaged in some form of sexual interaction in exchange for some kind of payment, has no inherent meaning and signified differently in different discourses (Bell, 1994, p. 2).
Bell’s aims sum up the usefulness of Foucault’s work—within a postmodern frame—for interrogating the ways that sex work is given meaning through discursive power relations. Bell’s work was also the only example of sex work research found which draws on Foucault’s work on the ethics of care of the self. While research that has explored the ways that sex workers are constructed through discursive power relations that claim to speak the truth of who they are and who they should be is important for looking at the construction of sex workers, Foucault’s later work around ethics is a way of exploring these discursive power relations through the notion of agency and choice (explained further in Chapter 3).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the need for research that examines how sex workers manage the multiple understandings of their work. It also demonstrated that a postmodern lens provides sex work analysis that challenges and moves beyond the binaries created by the feminist sex wars towards explorations of sex work from multiple experiences and understandings. Foucault’s middle work around the productive power of discourse to produce subjectivities has been useful for sex work research, in that it provides a theoretical lens for interrogating the multiple experiences of sex work. Further research is required into how women respond to these many restrictive discourses and how they change their sex work understandings to move towards a greater sense of agency. While there has been a plethora of research undertaken with sex workers using Foucault’s middle work, his later work on ethics of care of the self may help researchers to explore how women in sex work make sense of, appropriate and resist various discourses about sex work.
3. Theoretical Underpinnings

This chapter describes the way that theory is used in this thesis. It details specific aspects of Foucault’s works that are used to frame the data analysis. Foucault’s middle and later areas of work provide a sound theoretical basis for examining the ways that women negotiate negative and stigmatising discourses about sex work, as well as how they are able to draw on other knowledges in order to sustain positive understandings of their work and their sense of self. This chapter explores Foucault’s notion of power and how it functions in people’s lives and self-understandings, followed by an exploration of Foucault’s later work around the ethics of care of the self and how this supplements his middle work.

Given that sex workers are subjected to negative and stigmatising discourses about their work it is important to examine how these are appropriated and taken on as self-understanding. Foucault’s middle area of work provides a theory for interrogating this, while his later area of work around ethics of care of the self enables readings about how individuals can choose the meanings that they take on as their own self-truths.

Foucault’s works are notoriously difficult to decipher (Bevir, 1999; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000; Graham, 2005; Weeks, 2005). First, they have been open to various, and often contradictory, readings. Second, they have been taken up and interpreted by scholars with groundings in a variety of disciplines, each interpreting Foucault to different ends. In this sense, ‘we cannot escape the fact that we are always organising and centring Foucault, making him mean something, as we work with him’ (St Pierre, 2004, p. 328, original emphasis). This is all the more complicated by Foucault’s own critical readings of his works,
resulting in apparent shifts and retrospective reinterpretations of his past work. In one such retrospective of his life work, he stated that:

[My life work] has not been to analyse the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 777).

This chapter organises and centres Foucault (St Pierre, 2004) to highlight the way that Foucault’s work functions in the data analysis for the thesis. There are many researchers and scholars who have used Foucault’s works to look at a myriad of social phenomenon to explore the truths that are appropriated by individuals, written on their bodies, and lived out through their knowledges of themselves (Bordo, 1989; Butler, 1989; Bordo, 1992, 1997; Hook, 2001; Edwards & Imrie, 2003; Oksala, 2004; Heyes, 2007; Beres & Farvid, 2010).

**Power/Knowledge/Discourse**

Unlike previous understandings of the concept of ‘power’ as hierarchical, dominating and unidirectional, Foucault understood power as producing subjectivities (Foucault, 1980b). Rather than only dominating individuals or groups, or regaining control through acts such as revolution, Foucault conceived of power as something that is always present in everything that individuals do and think.

The genealogy explored in Chapter 3 provided examples of various discourses about sex, gender, sexuality and sex work. These discourses function to produce subjectivities in their image. This is because different discourses claim to speak the
‘truth’ and when individuals believe that these discourses are ‘true’ they appropriate these understandings as their own self-truth. Discourses can also be considered as ‘expert’ knowledges. The authority given to fields such as science, psychology, sexology and health science means that ‘experts’ are in the position to claim to speak the ‘truth’ of sex work, gender, mental health, biology and health in general. ‘Expert’ knowledges function to produce subjects in certain ways and according to certain ‘truths’ (O’Leary, 2002):

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

While ‘expert’ knowledges create discourses, so too do knowledges that are not considered ‘expert’ at the time, or which may come from other places such as local knowledges (Jørgensen, 2002). These knowledges may include localised understandings and beliefs about what it means to live in particular places, have particular behaviours and may include knowledges such as family narratives (Besley, 2002). Sometimes these ‘expert’ discourses clash with localised discourses, leaving individuals to make sense of the contradictions.

Among other areas, Foucault was interested in the ways in which individuals knew and experienced their sexualities according to dominant, scientific and localised discourses. His first volume of The History of Sexuality explored how sexuality had been put into discourse and how this impacted on how individuals experienced and

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5 Throughout this thesis the terms ‘truth’, ‘discourse’, and ‘knowledges’ are used interchangeably and often in the plural. These three terms should be read as a questioning of the ‘truth-status’ of the statement rather than any affirmation of its value as ‘truth’ (Veyne, Porter, & Davidson, 1993; Bacchi & Beasley, 2005).
lived out their sexualities, as well as how they resisted these discourses (Foucault, 1976). While Foucault only mentioned prostitution in passing (Foucault, 1976), other scholars have drawn on Foucault’s work on the productive power of knowledge to argue that sex work, and sex workers, have been constituted in discourse and that this impacts on the ways that sex work is given meaning (Bell, 1994; Phoenix, 2000; Scoular, 2004b).

In contrast to Foucault’s earlier work on disciplinary power, and with which the analysis in this thesis does not directly engage, Foucault argued that discourses such as those mentioned in Chapter 3 come to be taken on by individuals who then regulate their thoughts and behaviours accordingly. Foucault termed this self-regulation ‘self-government’ (Foucault, 1971, 1980b) and argued that individuals who come to think of themselves in certain ways, thus no longer requiring them to be regulated and dominated externally appropriate discourses. For example, discourses which position sex workers as ‘immoral’ and ‘sinful’ may result in individuals self-regulating how they think and act in order to be in line with discourses about ‘good’ and ‘moral’ women.

In his Two Lectures, Foucault cautioned against four methodological pitfalls for the analysis of power (Foucault, 1980b). These precautions illustrate the nuances of Foucault’s understanding of power and how it functions productively.

- First, Foucault asserted that power should be viewed at its most external point where ‘subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted

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6 Foucault’s earlier work was concerned with the ways that subjectivities are produced through disciplinary powers exerted by techniques of domination. He explored the effects of the disciplinary powers displayed in institutions such as mental asylums, prisons and hospitals in The Birth of the Clinic, (1973) and Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1977a). Here, for Foucault, subjectivities consisted of ‘docile bodies’ and discipline ‘determine[d] the conduct of individuals and submit[ted] them to certain ends of domination, an objectivising of the subject’ (Foucault, 1980b, p. 18). Sometimes referred to as his ‘docile bodies’ period, Foucault argued that discipline ‘produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies’ (1977a, p. 138). ‘Docile bodies’ were theorised as vessels for the implantation of desired acts and behaviours through disciplinary power exerted in institutions such as prisons, schools and mental asylums.
through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc.’ (Foucault, 1980b, p. 95).

- Second, Foucault argued that it is futile to ask ‘why’ and ‘who’ holds power and instead to look at the functions of productive power relations.

- Third, Foucault cautioned against viewing relations of power as unidirectional and argued that power was better understood as a web, through which individuals are continuously being affected by and affecting power relations (Foucault, 1980b, p. 95).

- Fourth, Foucault argued that despite the assertion that individuals move through networks of productive power relations this is not to say that power should be understood as democratically spread (Foucault, 1980b).

This thesis seeks to explore the function of discourses in the production of sex worker subjectivities and does not look for any intention in discursive power relations. It is not interested in asking why certain institutions or groups promote particular discourses about sex work and sex workers. Further, it is not interested in quantifying the power that any of the women may exert; rather, it is interested in how the women traverse discourses that claim to speak the ‘truth’ of sex work, sex workers and gender.

Foucault borrowed the term ‘genealogy’ from Nietzsche to describe the method that he used in some of his historical inquiries (Foucault, 1977b). As detailed in Chapter 3, a genealogy is a history of particular discourses over time (Davidson, 1986; May, 1993; Levy, 1998; Prado, 2000). It is a history which follows the ways that ‘truths’, knowledges and ideas change and shift at different times in history, as well as how they are echoed in contemporary times. Genealogies are, therefore, also histories of the present as they look at the ‘truths’ that have contributed to knowledges
that are taken for granted in present times (Roth, 1981). Foucault rejected goal-orientated views of history and argued that while history has brought us to where we are today, it has not followed a trajectory where knowledge is built upon knowledge as we get closer to an essential ‘truth’ of who we are as human beings. Foucault saw this totality as a hindrance to research (Foucault, 1980b, p. 81) arguing that history should be viewed with an understanding that there are multiple ‘truths’ and that these are produced in accidental ways. Postmodern feminist, McNay, understood genealogy as a way to interrogate taken-for-granted ‘truths’:

The genealogist tries to rediscover the multiplicity of factors and processes which constitute an event in order to disrupt the self-evident quality ascribed to events through the employment of historical constants and the ascription of anthropological traits (McNay, 1992, p. 15).

One way that ‘truths’ and ‘knowledges’ are espoused is through acts of confession (Foucault, 1976). Foucault refuted the argument that the Victorians were sexually repressed and that sex was silent. He argued that sex was often spoken about and therefore was ‘put into discourse’ (Foucault, 1976). One way that sex was put into discourse was through acts of confession. Confession, for Foucault, constituted many more acts than seeking penance, as it bled out into other arenas and came to be understood as a way that individuals could unburden themselves from their secret ‘truth’. Confession no longer needed to be elicited but instead, individuals felt an imperative to confess their acts and desires in order to be ‘free’ of the burden. Foucault was not interested in psychoanalytical explanations but was rather interested in the ways that individuals are compelled to confess in such areas as psychoanalysis, to one’s doctor or parent. McNay argued that the promise of ‘self-liberation’ incites a desire to ‘confess’ one’s ‘innermost’ thoughts.
In psychoanalysis, confession is not extracted from the subject under analysis; rather, the urge to confess becomes so deeply embedded in the modern subject that it is no longer perceived as coerced, but is regarded as an act of self-liberation (McNay, 1992, p. 87).

Confession is not only about disclosing one’s secret self, but also about creating one’s self (Besley, 2005). When individuals confess they also speak the ‘truth’ of themselves by drawing on various discourses that accumulate to produce seemingly consistent (and sometimes contradictory) narratives or meanings of one’s life and self. There is also an imperative in Western societies to hear the confessions of others. Acts of confession, in this sense, have not only spread from the confessional to the psychiatrist’s couch to relations between children and parents, students and teachers, patients and doctors, but also to the public realm in general (Brown, 1998).

This imperative to confess, along with the way that confessions function to create one’s self is useful for the analysis in this research. It provides a way of exploring how sex workers may feel compelled to speak about their sex work in order to unburden them from the secret ‘truth’.

Just as individuals speak the ‘truth’ of themselves through confession, so too do they communicate ‘truth’ through actions. Discourses produce certain actions while restraining others. Discursive power relations incite individuals to perform certain acts on themselves, their bodies and their lives. Foucault was interested in the conduct of individuals as it not only speaks of one’s action but also serves ‘to lead’ others in their actions (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). Discourses can, therefore, enable certain actions while restricting others and these actions can communicate to others the knowledges to which the individual gives ‘truth-value’.
The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).

Government, in this context, Foucault argued, should be taken at its broadest definition. That is, government is the way that ‘the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed’ to act, or to conduct themselves, their bodies and their lives (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). The government of possible actions, for Foucault, can only be exercised by people who are faced with a range of possible actions and this is where productive power relations are linked to freedom. This is not an essential notion of freedom, but rather interactions between productive power relations and an individual’s freedom to engage with different, and often competing, possibilities for actions. Productive power relations that incite individuals to perform certain actions are not akin to instances where violence or slavery is enacted on one person by another; ‘Slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 790) it is rather, an issue of constraint and domination. Nor does power replace freedom. Rather power and freedom interact in complex ways:

In this [truth] game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination) (Foucault, 1982, p. 790).

The interplay between power relations and freedom is useful for exploring the women’s narratives about the meanings they ascribe to their sex work and other aspects of their lives. Without this interplay there is a risk of seeing an individual’s
relationship to productive power relations as akin to domination and docile bodies, where the women are only empty vessels to be filled with discursive knowledges of the meanings of sex work. Furthermore, this interplay allows explorations of the multiple discourses that the women have drawn on at any particular time, including contradictory and clashing ‘truths’, and the discourses that are foreclosed to them. Sometimes the appropriation of one particular discourse can restrict the truth-value being applied to another.

As individuals draw on various discourses they inevitably resist others. This, however, does not occur outside of discourse, but rather in relation to discourses that are available to the individual. Foucault is often quoted as writing that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’, however, he adds to this a clarification, ‘and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (Foucault, 1976, p. 95). Looking for instances in the women’s narratives where they have resisted certain ‘truths’ is a useful way of exploring the ‘truths’ that the resisted discourse claims. Abu-Lughod, (1990, p. 42) suggested inverting the first section of this quote to, ‘where there is resistance, there is power’ to situate resistance as a methodological tool ‘for the study of power in particular situations’. Foucault wrote: ‘in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 780).

Discourses are not resisted in the same way all of the time. Some discourses are more resistant to disruption and critique, particularly if the individual has given them truth-value for a long time, or if the structures and people around them draw on the discourse and resist any attempt made by others to subvert it. Other discourses are
easily resisted, particularly when there are various alternative discourses available to
the individual, helping them to challenge others.

there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that
are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage,
solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; still others that are quick to
compromise, interested or sacrificial (Foucault, 1976, p. 96).

The ways that individuals resist certain discourses about sex work, sex
workers and gender, is useful for looking at the function of particular discourses.
Discourses which replace what has been resisted are also useful for looking at the
complexity involved when women give meanings to their lives and their work. For
example, when sex workers resist discourses about sin and crime it is interesting to
note that discourses about labour and work provide alternative ways of thinking about
sex work.

Foucault has been criticised for failing to look at the ways that gender is
discursively constructed (Groz, 1994). In order to explore how the women engaged
with discursive constructions of gender one particular aspect of Judith Butler’s work
was drawn on (Butler, 2004b, 2004a). That is, when gender norms are resisted they
always also signify that which is being resisted. This aspect of Butler’s work on
gender is congruent with Foucault’s notion of resistance, as also indicating discourses
that claim to speak the ‘truth’.

Positioning theory enables explorations of the ways that individuals are
located, or positioned by either themselves or other people (Hollway, 1984). In
relation to this research, it useful for exploring how women in sex work are
discursively constructed. While positioning theory has been used in different ways
and to different ends (Hollway, 1984; Harré & Langenhove, 1991), Willig’s (2000)
reading of positioning theory was drawn on to explore both the ways that the women are positioned through ‘expert’ discourses as well as how they position themselves in relation to, and against, these discourses. Willig (2000) argued that there are two ways that researchers can use positioning theory through a Foucauldian lens. The first is to explore ‘expert’ knowledges. The second is to explore the ways that individuals' position themselves in relation to discourses that speak the ‘truth’ of who they are.

This thesis seeks to explore both the ways that the women are positioned in certain ways by ‘expert’ knowledges, and how they position themselves in relation to these discourses. Positioning theory is useful for looking at how other people may position sex workers and the discourses that informs this. Further, how the women predict that other people may position them is a way of looking at effects of stigma on the women’s lives and sense of self.

Another way to explore the effects of negative discourses on the women’s lives and self-understandings is through Foucault’s ‘dividing practices’. Individuals can be ‘divided inside himself (sic) or divided from others’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). That is, discourses that claim to speak the ‘truth’ of women in sex work can divide them from others because sex workers may discursively construct their self-understandings in contrast to how they may be positioned by other people. Sex workers can also be divided from themselves by taking on negative understandings of their work and lives. This can cause internal conflict for sex workers as they engage with how they are externally positioned by others—including ‘experts’, loved ones and acquaintances—and how they internally position themselves. Dividing practices can therefore cause individuals to be divided from other people and also divided internally (Hillier, Mitchell, & Mulcare, 2008).
In his essay, *The Subject and Power* (1982), Foucault argued that many struggles against the ‘domination’ of one’s class, gender, or race, over another are actually struggles against how particular groups are discursively positioned and divided from others. Foucault argued that ‘opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, or administration over the ways people live’ are not anti-authority struggles. They are rather struggles that seek to address the ‘effects of power’ that exercise ‘an uncontrolled power over people’s bodies, their health, and their life and death’ through claiming to speak the ‘truth’ of who they are (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). In these struggles, the ‘enemy’ is located as immediate, rather than as a ‘chief enemy’ requiring revolution or the ‘end of class struggle’. Individuals and groups involved in these struggles ‘question the status of the individual’, where simultaneously they argue for the ‘right to be different’ while condemning knowledges that separate individuals, leading to a loss of community. They also struggle against being positioned by scientific and administrative discourses ‘which determines who one is’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Sex worker activist groups and sex worker rights movements are struggling against the ways that sex work and sex workers are discursively positioned, not only by the broader public, but also by governments and expressed through certain regulatory laws as well as the by medical and psychiatric industries which position sex work and sex workers as potentially causing health (and moral) risk to the general population or themselves (Cornish, 2006). Much of this struggle is about asserting alternative knowledges of sex work. Individuals also struggle against being positioned in certain ways, and against being divided by others and divided internally from themselves and in this way they contribute to these larger struggles.
Ethics of Care of the Self

Given the multiple discourses that individuals have available to them for the construction of their subjectivities, how is it that individuals appropriate certain discourses but resist others? Foucault’s work on ethics of care of the self provides one possible way of answering this. By exploring the ethics of care of the self, Foucault addressed some of the problems in his earlier work. Whereas his earlier work could be considered nihilistic, in that it only focused on how individuals are made into subjects through external productive power relations, his later work sought to explore how individuals were made subjects through the practices of the self, as a part of the relationship that one has with one’s self (Foucault, 1986).

Foucault termed the production of the self as technologies of the self. He argued that this particular technology (which was the last of four, including production, signs and power) permitted:

individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way-of-being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state—of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1980a, p. 18).

Foucault took a turn in his second and third volumes of The History of Sexuality towards technologies of the self, in relation to, and against, discursive moral codes. In the third volume, The History of Sexuality: Care of the Self Foucault wondered what ‘the technology of the self before Christianity was?’ (Foucault, 1984b, p. 341). While Foucault asserted that he was not looking for ‘the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people’, he did however propose that we have found ourselves in a similar position to
the ancient Greeks, where, ‘most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life’ (Foucault, 1984b, p. 343).

Foucault argued that rather than relying on external moral codes (such as that espoused in Judeo-Christian doctrine), or only looking towards legal and political systems to provide individuals with the ‘truth’ of themselves, individuals draw on a multitude of discourses to ‘fit one’s self out’ with rules and practices on how to live an ethical life (Foucault in Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, Gomez-Muller, & Gauthier, 1987).

One cannot care for self without knowledge. The care for self is of course knowledge of self ... but it is also knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations (Foucault in Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987)

For Foucault, external moral codes and internal practices of the self—even if drawn from external sources—were different from each other:

Ethical practices for Foucault were distinguishable from the domain of morality, in that, moral systems are, by and large, universal systems of infuction and interdiction—thou shalt do this or thou shalt not do that—and are more frequently articulated in relation to some relatively formalised code (Rose, 1998, p. 30).

In contrast, ethical practices are techniques that individuals can perform on their lives, bodies, thoughts and behaviours to transform themselves into the person that they want to be. However, this is not to say that Judeo-Christian doctrine does not include techniques of self designed to transform individuals in order that they become the person that they should be to be closer to God (St Pierre, 2004), rather these too
are comprised of self-forming techniques. According to Foucault, because Western societies were in a similar place to the ancient Greeks, where individuals no longer desire all-encompassing moral codes to instruct them on how to live their lives and what kinds of people they should be, individuals must draw from, reject, and appropriate discursive understandings of who they are and who they should be from a multitude of sources rather than from overarching moral codes (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). This is the practice of ethics of care of the self.

In order to care for one’s self; individuals choose which discursive ‘truths’ that they use to create their subjectivities. This is not ‘free choice’, but is restrained and enabled by the particular discourses that individuals have available to them. For Foucault, the practice of choosing the ways that one constructs one’s self was an art, or an ascetic, of existence. Individuals can pick and choose the knowledges of themselves from an array of available, ever increasing, discourses, rather than being made subject to dominating moral codes. Foucault wrote:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should a lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (Foucault, 1984b, p. 350).

While this is an intriguing utopian image, depicting individuals as completely free to design themselves and their lives as one would a piece of art (although it is also arguable that art cannot be produced outside of discourse), how this plays out is more restricted, although to varying degrees. One problem with this image is that it may wrongly suggest that disentangling one’s self from discursive moral codes, or discourses which position and ‘speak the truth’ of whom one is, is easy and can
almost be done on a whim. This would be a mistaken reading of Foucault, for he argued that the techniques that one practices on one’s self are constituted in discourse and that some discourses are harder to resist than others (Foucault, 1984b).

Related to this, Foucault argued that care of the self ‘implies complex relationships with others in so far as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 287). This complex relationship with other people is an important point of analysis for this thesis because the discourses which the women take on as their self-understanding impacts not only themselves, but other people as well. Likewise, the knowledges that individuals appropriate as their self-understandings are also impacted by the complex relationships that they have with the people in their life.

One way that Foucault explained the difficulty involved in changing the discourses that one draws on in order to be who one wants to be was through four aspects of any ethical system (O’Leary, 2002). Together, they illustrate the complex relationship that one has with one’s self—*rapport à soi*. Foucault’s four aspects of ethics were:

- The *ethical substance*. This is the aspect of one’s self that one would like to change.

- The *mode of subjection*. The individual identifies the ways that the particular ethical substance is communicated to them. That is, individuals look for and make problematic that ways in which they ‘are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations’ (Foucault, 1984b, p. 353).

- Self-forming techniques. These are the techniques and practices that an individual performs on their body, thoughts and/or behaviours in order to ‘assist one in the task of self-transformation’ (O’Leary, 2002, 173).
• The telos. This is the goal of the person that the individual would like to become, or the ethical substance that they would like to replace with the aspect of their thoughts, desires or behaviours that they have challenged.

Sex work has long been considered problematic within Judeo-Christian moral codes as well as state regulation, public health discourses, psychology and radical feminism. Sex workers can position themselves against these negative discourses through resistance, but when these discourses are appropriated and become the ‘truth’ of themselves sex workers can be divided internally from themselves. One way that individuals are able to disentangle their self-understandings from these discourses is through Foucault’s four aspects of ethics. By locating and challenging the ethical substance that they would like to change they are able to identify how this has been communicated to them, for example, through religious doctrine, messages in popular culture and the discourses that circulate and are given truth-value by the people around them. Self-forming techniques then move individuals towards the goal of this reflexive journey; towards the person that they would like to be. This is an ethics of care of the self which:

  involves both the task of identifying those aspects of our lives where we are more free than we thought ... and the task of creating new forms of life with those newly opened spaces of freedom (O’Leary, 2002, p. 170).

Or, as Foucault wrote, ‘Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse what we are’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 785).

Foucault’s four aspects of ethical systems illustrates how there is not a ‘self’ that exists prior to discursive power relations, nor are subjects only ever constituted by discursive power relations of which they have no means to choose. Rather, while discursive power relations make individuals subject, they are also able to challenge
and change how they are constituted. It is within the spaces left behind that individuals are able to appropriate alternative understandings of themselves. This relationship to self constitutes acts of self-care as one engages in the task of producing one’s self rather than being produced externally.

The self-forming techniques that one practises on one’s self in order to move towards the person that they would like to be are also enabled and restrained by discursive power relations (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). In this sense, the possible discourses from which individuals may draw in their self-construction are limited to those which individuals have available to them. The ethics of care of the self is only an act of freedom in that individuals can draw from the field of possible discourses rather than to constitute themselves completely outside of discourse (O’Leary, 2002). The range of possible discourses, however, is not static and, as individuals gain new subject positions, so too do they gain access to discourses that are new to them (Green, 2010).

Because of this, access to alternative discourses is important for individuals to practise an ethic of care of the self. Access can be gained through other people, self-help books, popular culture, literature and education. Further, access can also be restrained or enabled by culture, class and gender. The discourses that individuals have available to them, and therefore can choose from, are not available to all individuals all of the time. The usefulness of Foucault’s ethics of care of the self is that while these mediating factors may be restraining or enabling, they are not overwhelming power structures that completely cut off access to other ways of knowing one’s self. Rather, these knowledges can cut through structures such as class and gender, particularly as individuals work on their relationships to themselves by
challenging how they ‘know’ themselves and performing self-forming techniques on
their thoughts and behaviours.

Other people are able to help individuals practise ethics of care of the self in
two ways. First, by giving advice about techniques that one can employ in one’s own
life, thoughts and behaviours. Second, by challenging the ways that they ‘know’
themselves, by conducting themselves in ways that subvert certain discourses while
promoting others. The role of other people in ethics of care of the self is useful for
looking at the ways that sex workers give and receive advice about what it means to
be a sex worker. It also illuminates the role that sex worker activism can play in
helping sex workers to challenge discourses that might alienate them internally from
themselves, or externally from others by presenting a range of other knowledges
about the ‘truth’ of sex work.

Postmodern feminism and its critics

As argued in Chapter 2, there has been a recent growth in sex work research
and theory that uses Foucault’s works through a postmodern lens and that this is
helping to deconstruct essentialist and structural understandings of sex work and sex
workers. This current section details feminist postmodernism and addresses some of
the critiques made against it by feminists who are concerned about the move away
from structural influences on understandings of ‘self’ and lived experience.

The term, ‘postmodernism’, originated from the visual art and architecture
fields as a way to describe a particular aesthetic movement that critiqued ‘modern’
understandings of beauty and function. Following this, the term was adopted by social
scientists to describe ‘more general social conditions and attitudes’ (Lanre-Abbas
A prevailing definition of postmodernism in the social sciences is that which critiques either essential or structural meta-narrative about individuals. Rather than viewing structural or institutional influences as creating subjects and shared experiences, postmodern feminists look for multiple realities and subjectivities and are sceptical about claims of a single truth or reality. A commitment to plurality and the tolerance of difference is important to this approach. Feminist postmodernists reject the notion of one privileged standpoint and challenge the belief that women’s experiences and identities are determined only by gender (Allen & Baber, 1992, p. 4).

Postmodern feminists argue that structural social theories—such as Marxism—produce understandings of the social world that are totalising and intolerant of difference and multiplicity. Critics of postmodernism, on the other hand, argue that this emphasis on multiple experiences can lead to relativism—where all beliefs and actions are considered equally as valid as any other. This is particularly problematic for feminists given the shared goal of creating changes to unequal power relations.

The danger of uncritically adopting feminist postmodernism is that as feminists uncover their differences, they risk sliding toward a depoliticized relativism where every viewpoint becomes equally valid and true (Allen & Baber, 1992, p. 6).

This concern about postmodern relativism can be observed in the ongoing feminist debate about the body and gender. Material feminists argue that the body is constituted by material conditions, such as class and race and that these structures construct the ways that notions such as ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are expressed. This is not an essentialist understanding of gender, but rather, a constructionist
view—subjectivities and experiences are constructed by the forces and institutions around them.

Judith Butler has critiqued such materialist understandings of gender as drawing on assumptions that gender is the value given to ‘sex’, and that it has no value until it has received it from society. The following quote by Bordo illustrates this assumption.

The body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical communities of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body (Bordo 1989 p.13).

Butler argued, instead, that ‘sex’ should be thought of as something that ‘does not accrue social meanings … but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on’ (Butler, 1993, p.5). That is, rather than particular representations of gender overlaying natural sex, the body takes-on and becomes that gender ideal.

However, material feminism and postmodern feminism may have common goals.

materialist feminism shares much of postmodern feminism’s concern with difference, subjectivity, and textuality, but it emphasizes their materiality specifically (Hennessy, 1993, p. 35).

This is true for critics of postmodernism such as Bordo who, in her own work, explored how discourses about women’s bodies can lead to illnesses such as anorexia (1989). In this way, her concern with postmodernism was not about the appropriation of discourses by individuals, and the various ways that they did this, but more that it can lead to the relativism mentioned above.

No matter how exciting the "destabilizing" potential of texts, bodily or otherwise, whether those texts are subversive or recuperative or both or neither
cannot be determined in abstraction from actual social practice (Bordo, 1992, p.165)

This is a concern about how some feminist postmodern texts seek to destabilise common social understandings and beliefs by throwing it all into question. For critics like Bordo, this can lead to not only uncertainty but also a romantic view of difference without the anger to effect changes to structural and material inequalities.

A related issue is the language often used in postmodern texts and the alienation this can breed between the individuals whose lives are being explored and the texts exploring them (Bordo, 1992).

As academic theories become more complicated and the language becomes more removed from that used in common daily discourse, postmodern feminists risk increasing rather than decreasing mystification.’ (Allen & Baber, 1992, p. 8).

The analysis undertaken in this thesis has attempted to address both of these main concerns. Foucault’s middle work on the power of knowledges to produce ‘truth’ together with his later work on ethics that provides a lens for looking at the multiple ways that individuals take on various discourses as their own self-understandings helps to address the concern of moral or ethical relativism. Further, this thesis has been written with both an academic and a lay audience in mind and it is hoped that all theoretical terms and language has been explained in a way that any interested person may understand it.

**Conclusion**

Foucault’s middle work about the power of knowledges to produce subjects is useful for exploring how sex workers may draw on various knowledges of what it
means to be a sex worker. His later work on ethics is useful as it provides a theoretical lens for exploring the work that women do on their relationships to themselves and the discourses which surround them. The ways that women challenge, critique and change how they know themselves as women and sex workers in legal contexts enables readings of agency in the women’s narratives while also viewing how they practise this as situated and restrained according to the discourses that they have available to them at any given time. Discourses clash and vie for dominance, providing spaces where sex workers may be able to appropriate other ways of ‘knowing’ their work and themselves. The following chapter details the specific research tools utilised in order to look at how women in legal sex work in Victoria relate to discursive power relations as well as how they challenge and change their self-understandings.
4. Research Design

This chapter details the design of this research, including the methodology, methods, recruitment, data analysis and ethical considerations. This research used a qualitative methodology which included a vignette interview with nine women and follow-up interviews using participant-driven photo elicitation with six of the same women during 2009 and 2010. The analysis uses Foucauldian discourse analysis as well as an exploratory analysis of how the women practised ethics of care of the self in their lives. This chapter concludes with capsule biographies (Dowsett, 1996) in order to briefly introduce the women who shared their thoughts and stories for this research.

It has been argued that we currently exist in an interview culture (Denzin, 2001) where individuals are incited to confess their innermost thoughts, behaviours and desires in public arenas such as television and radio talk shows and through autobiographies and current affairs programs. Due to the proliferation of a culture of interviews, where much of what is currently known as ‘private’ is consumable and made ‘public’, we would be forgiven for thinking that interviews provide us with ‘the truth’ of ourselves. Rather than providing truth:

[t]he interview is a way of writing the world, a way of bringing the world into play. The interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world, nor is it a window into the inner life of the person ... Seen in this way, the interview functions as a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves (Denzin, 2001, p. 25).

The interviews undertaken with the women in this research similarly do not point to the ‘truth’ of sex work. Rather, they detail what the individual women felt
like sharing, on that particular day(s), with the researcher, in that particular environment, given their levels of tiredness/engagement/enjoyment, and what aspects or perspectives of their stories they privileged at that particular time. While interviews are only representative of a voluntary snapshot they are still useful for multiple readings of the narratives that emerged.

The semi-structured interviews allowed space for the women to think about and explore the unique ways that they give meaning to their lives as people, as women and as sex workers. The semi-structured nature of both the vignette technique and the photo elicitation interviews also gave form to the interviews and as an apprentice researcher and interviewer this was useful for both the researcher as well as for the women. Using a qualitative methodology also enabled an exploration into the meanings that the women gave to their sex work, and also, on a practical level, it allowed room to follow up on and clarify, answers with them during the interviews.

The follow-up interviews also allowed time to ask questions that emerged from the previous interview. For this reason, the women’s interviews were transcribed and read over before the second interview. It was noted by the researcher that the participants were more relaxed at the second meeting and explored their lives and meanings in more in-depth ways. This last point may also be due to the structure of the photo elicitation interviews and is discussed below. Another reason may be that the women may have felt reassured that the interviewer was not going to position them in negative ways.

Interviewers and interviewees both contribute to the meanings generated. Researchers do not work in a value, or bias-free, vacuum. Rather, together with participants, they impact on, and are impacted by, the social world around them (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Objectivity is therefore impossible. Researchers need to
strive for transparency regarding the possible biases and personal values that may impact on the ways that they have conceived the research and viewed the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Not only do researcher preconceptions, values and prejudices influence what is considered valid and interesting in the findings, they also have the potential to influence every aspect of the research process. This includes research decisions such as the research aims, the research tools, including the wording of interview questions, the venues chosen for interviews and the recruitment strategies. Being transparent about these values allows readers to view the research process and findings with the knowledge that particular beliefs may have influenced its implementation and results. In relation to sex work research, and the morals and values that often accompany understandings of sex, sexuality and gender in Western societies, Agustín wrote that:

since sex is felt to form a crucial part of Western identities, it will be natural for some people to feel uncomfortable with sexual research in general and commercial-sex research in particular. In that case, researchers need to be prepared to confront their own preconceived ideas, their own ‘outsider’ status and the structures of power they inevitably participate in. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher will be an essential element of the work, a continual questioning of where moral reactions come from and a humble attempt to leave them aside (Agustín, 2005, p. 627).

As well as being transparent about beliefs and values, researchers need to strive for a reflexive practice in their research. This involves an active process of self-awareness about personal feelings and reactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Reflexivity has been defined as a ‘continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532).
Researchers’ emotional responses are often under-reported. This may be due to a fear that they will be positioned within academia as not being objective (Hammond, 2010). In her research with men who pay for sex in the UK, Hammond (2010) experienced difficulty in hearing her participants’ stories about gender relations and relationship breakdowns. Being in a heterosexual relationship herself, Hammond began to question the value and longevity of her own relationship. Similar to Hammond, I also found that some of the women’s stories and understandings about gendered relations influenced my thinking about my own personal relationship. This is one example of the importance of researcher reflexivity. Without reflecting on the effect that my research was having on my own self-understanding there was a chance that it could influence the way that I read the women’s narratives.

The reason why some of the women’s talk around gender and heterosexuality was emotionally difficult for me was because many of the discourses about men’s essential need for sex were ones that I had previously thought of as truth. I also felt that many of the people around me also believed this. As a (step)mother to two young boys and a teenage girl, I was also aware of the dominance of this discourse, coupled with its counterpart that women’s sexual desires and drives are often erased in sexuality discourses (Fine, 1988; Carmody, 2003), as portrayed in the television shows that the children in my care watched on a daily basis. This led me to feel as though my efforts to help them confront this were futile in the face of its dominance. This emotional reaction resulted in an initial avoidance of engaging in a meaningful way with the texts, which then produced thin analysis. The flow-on effect of this included critical feedback from my supervisors which, in turn, led me to deeply question my ability to sustain the level of intellectual engagement required for the attainment of a PhD. Interestingly, the emotions that threatened the stability of my
subject position of researcher were not so much linked to my previous sex work, but more to an immediate day-to-day engagement with discourses pertaining to gendered sexual relations.

There is a strong feminist discourse that encourages researching up or across (rather than down) power relationships. For example, this may include women researching women, lesbians researching lesbians and sex workers researching sex workers (Allen & Baber, 1992). Some feminist methodologies involve conversational interviews and mutual disclosure between participants and the researcher (Reinharz, 1992). This can, however, lead to a silencing of participants’ voices through ‘over-sharing’ on the part of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992). During the early stages of the research design I considered using an interview format that was akin to these early feminist methodologies. Due to the highly sensitive nature of this topic, and the decidedly opposing feminist and political discourses concerning sex work I decided that it was better practice to keep my disclosure to a minimum. Instead, the interviews focused exclusively on the women’s experiences and understandings of sex work, while my personal experiences (similar or different to the participants) were kept out of the interviews.

While it is important for the ‘outsider’ researcher to practise reflexivity, so too is it important for the researcher who is positioned as an ‘insider’ (if not more so). The insider is loosely defined as a researcher who has direct experience, or a shared social, sexual, or racial identity with participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). However, the insider/outsider duality is not a clean-cut binary; rather, researcher subject positions change according to who is viewing and positioning the researcher and the political and/or social context in which they are embedded (Crang, 2003). For example, within this research, as a PhD student, a woman and a person who has
worked in sex work, various political groups, participants and academic peers would position me differently. For example, some participants may position me as an insider because I have worked in Melbourne brothels as a sex worker and others may see me as an outsider because I am no longer in the sex industry (and have not been for many years). Others still may view me as an insider if they are both sex workers and postgraduate students.

How I position myself in relation to the women who participated in this study may have affected the research decisions, the findings that I privileged and my interactions with the women. Two aspects of this research stand out as potentially having been influenced by my personal experience. First, I was extremely sensitive about anonymity. When reflecting on my own sex work I imagined that the thought of a document, like a consent form, linking my name to sex work, even with assurances that it would be locked away and then securely destroyed, made me feel very uncomfortable. This, along with the same concern being raised by a contact at the Australian peak body for sex workers, Scarlet Alliance, prompted the decision to offer participants the choice of either signing a consent form or giving their consent verbally using their chosen pseudonym. Second, the decision to omit the reproduction of any of the women’s photos may have also been influenced by this previous fear of disclosure. Another researcher, who did not have personal experience of either sex work nor of keeping their work secret, may feel more comfortable about including the photos that the women took for this research. This decision may have been influenced by my past experiences in sex work, however, despite denying readers the visual stimuli of the women’s photos, the risk that the rooms or personal objects may identify any of the women to a reader was one I did not want to take (Pink, 2003).
At the beginning of the first interview the women filled out a demographic sheet about their age, the age that they first started sex work and how many years they had worked in the sex industry (Appendix II). This was not for comparative purposes but to add context to their responses. The women also chose a first name as a pseudonym. The first two women completed both interviews before the other women were interviewed. This was loosely a pilot phase. These women have not been identified as part of a pilot phase because the research tools did not need any changes. These women read a participant information sheet about being one of the first two participants and indicated that they understood that if the research techniques were not viable then their data would need to be withdrawn. Everything else in the participant information sheet (Appendix II) remained exactly the same as for subsequent participants.

All interviews were expected to last around one and a half hours with one or two weeks between interviews, depending on each woman’s convenience. The majority of women attended interviews in the interview room, or a small meeting room, at the La Trobe University City Campus, which is a small building housing a few of the University’s research centres. One woman chose to attend interviews at another La Trobe University centre, as this was easier for her to access than travelling to the city. The women were offered an $A50 gift card for a popular department store and affiliated chains. This was a token of appreciation for the women and did not appear to be an incentive for any of the women.

One of the women, April, opted to undertake the interview in writing via email. This was after months of email exchanges trying to organise a time and place that we could meet to do the interview. Given that April had a new baby to care for, it was decided that she would complete the interview via email. To maintain
confidentiality, given the silence that sex workers often maintain around their sex work, April set up a temporary email account using a pseudonym for the research. She then responded to the consent form indicating that she understood the research and consented to participating. After this was obtained, April emailed her responses to the vignette interview. April’s responses were well thought out and in most parts, written in an academic voice. It has been argued that ‘with no direct personal interaction between interviewer and interviewee, there is less incentive to adopt a “public” image or façade’ (Jenkins, 2010, p. 95) in email interviewing and thus the resulting transcripts may subvert the social acceptability bias. This may have occurred in April’s response because she was able to write all of her thoughts, feelings and theories about sex work in her written response without any verbal or non-verbal responses from me.

April responded to the last question of the vignette, ‘what are your thoughts on the scenario?’ more critically than any of the other participants. She felt that some of the questions assumed a negative understanding of sex work and suggested that positive questions would have been more appropriate. While this may have been the case, it could also be argued that because I was not present to ask follow-on questions from April’s responses, she was restricted to answering only the vignette questions, which may have felt more prescriptive than dynamic. While I responded with follow-up questions in written form, these were never answered and so April’s narrative remained as it was without further exploration of her text.

Given this, it may have been better practice to conduct this interview over an instant message exchange possibly resulting in a more dynamic exchange. While April’s thoughtful and polished responses to the vignette have made an invaluable contribution to this research it has also had the effect of contrasting heavily with the
narratives of the other women in regard to the tone of the narratives. Wherever April’s quotes are used throughout the data chapters it is indicated that this was an email response in order to continually remind readers that this narrative was the result of quite different interview conditions.

Recruitment

Sex workers are considered to be a hard to reach research population (Pyett, Haste, & Snow, 1996). Further to this, people working in indoor locations, such as brothels, escort agencies and privately, are considered as being harder to reach than people working in more visible sex work locations and who are more familiar with outreach services and researchers, such as people working in street sex work (Sanders, 2006b). Given that sex work in Victoria is legal in regulated, licensed brothels and escort agencies, as well as for licensed private workers, it could also be argued that there are fewer barriers to reaching this group than in countries or states where all forms of prostitution/sex work are illegal. Despite this legality, recruitment was slow and difficult, spanning 2009 and 2010. Many other sex work researchers have found it difficult to recruit sex workers in these conditions. For example, Pyett and colleagues argued that sex workers working in indoor settings were particularly difficult to recruit:

While it is not easy to access sex workers in any section of the industry, in most cases it is particularly difficult to carry out research in brothels or escort agencies. In addition to the relative invisibility of these prostitutes, researchers may be confronted with problems associated with management opposition and denial of access to venues, as well as resistance from workers who distrust organisations and individuals (Pyett et al., 1996, p. 86).
Because of the difficulty in reaching sex workers in indoor settings, a multi-pronged recruitment drive was developed. This included creating relationships with ‘gatekeepers’ from two specific Victorian sex work organisations. ‘Gatekeepers’ are often contacted by researchers seeking to research in areas that they may not otherwise have access to, or that are difficult to recruit from. This appears to be standard practice with sex work researchers:

Access [to women in sex work] is often obtained by researchers through ‘gatekeepers’ such as sex work projects, which help to introduce them to service users and enable them to become familiar with working conditions (O’Neill & Pitcher, 2010, p. 208).

Two Victorian sex work organisations were approached and asked if they would assist with recruitment for the project. The organisation Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry (RhED) provide support and education for the sex industry. RhED assisted with recruitment by making the research flyer (Appendix I) available, as well as posting a link to the flyer on their social networking page and on their website. Furthermore, RhED emailed the flyer through their member list. A peer support group for sex workers also sent an email through their email list, explaining the research and calling for participants. Project Respect was the other sex work organisation approached to assist with recruitment. While they agreed to hand out flyers during their outreach to brothels, there were not any participants who identified as finding out about this research through Project Respect.

Both of these services are sex work specific and offer support and counselling to sex workers. However, RhED and Project Respect are ideologically incompatible in relation to their understandings of the social, emotional, physical and political aspects of sex work. RhED aims to actively promote sex worker rights while also
offering support and education for both sex workers and the sex industry as a whole (including owners and managers of sex industry establishments). They seek to offer positive sexual health education and wellbeing strategies that are inclusive of sex worker voices (RhED, 2003). Project Respect also offers support for people in the sex industry; however their perspective of sex work is the polar opposite to RhED’s. More aligned with abolitionist and radical feminism, sex workers are positioned as victims and prostitution is viewed as a result of patriarchy where women are sexually dominated and exploited by men. Focusing more on helping women to leave the sex industry, Project Respect runs workshops for current and previous sex workers, including those who have migrated or been ‘trafficked’ into Australia (Project Respect, 2008).

The reason why two very divergent organisations were approached to assist with recruitment was because of the highly varied meanings and reasons that sex workers give to the work that they do, why they engage in sex work and the effects that they feel that it has on their wellbeing and society in general. Further, these two organisations actively promote different discursive truths of sex work and can therefore provide a basis for sex workers to draw on when making meaning of their work. In this sense, it was hoped that recruiting through both organisations would allow the researcher to access women in sex work who drew on different discursive truths to give meaning to their sex work and their lives in general. Furthermore, there were no other specific sex worker organisations known to the researcher that were Victorian-specific.

The peer-run, peak body for sex workers in Australia, Scarlett Alliance, was also contacted for advice about the research design and aims. The researcher met with representatives from this organisation in order to receive their feedback on the
feasibility of the research. While the researcher was not seeking formal endorsement, the resulting feedback was nevertheless valuable and some aspects of the research were changed on their advice. The main change was related to the terminology used on the recruitment flyer. The term ‘ex sex worker’ was changed to ‘has been a sex worker’ in order to avoid an accidental privileging of the ‘past sex worker’ subject position. While all of the feedback received was carefully considered, some of it was unable to be incorporated into this current project for various reasons. For example, advice that the project should have a steering committee, run by Scarlet Alliance and including sex workers at the cost of $A1,000 was not possible due to the limited resources made available to PhD students. Given that the panel who confirmed my research proposal at the University consisted of well-respected academics in the field of sexuality, health and society, it was decided that they would provide enough checks and balances on the research progress and direction.

Given the political nature of sex work activism, and the fight that the sex worker movement has with the ways that they are regulated, discriminated against and spoken for, it is not surprising that a concern of this current research was that it would inadvertently produce knowledge that can be used by the detractors of sex work. This concern has led to a campaign by sex work activists to develop a hold on what, and by whom, research on sex work is conducted. Furthermore, they are seeking to direct the ways that sex work is portrayed in the media. A website, *Nothing About Us Without US* (http://Nothing-About-Us-Without-Us.com, 2012) seeks to organise Australian sex workers against research and media that present them, or their work, in negative ways.

Another concern raised by Scarlet Alliance regarding this current research was that the photo elicitation interviews should either not be undertaken, or if they were,
the researcher should either show the photos at an exhibition or publish the photos separate to the thesis. Given the secrecy that many individuals (although not all) in sex work maintain around their work it was decided that it would be better ethical practice to keep the photos either only for elicitation purposes, or to only publish those that were not identifiable in the thesis. All of the women who took photos were offered copies of their own photos on CD. Not all of the women opted for this.

Another recruitment strategy included advertising in the directory section of the free Australian magazine for same sex attracted women, Lesbians on the Loose (LOTL). This decision was made following an edition that was guest-edited by Scarlet Alliance. Following this edition, LOTL published a few letters to the editor from sex workers in lesbian communities. A small call for participants was placed in the business directory calling for participants in Victoria (Appendix I).

Further to these recruitment strategies, the research flyer was also either sent or taken directly to legal brothels in Victoria and given to management by the researcher. Additionally, participants were offered a flyer to pass on to other sex workers. Flyers were also placed on public notice boards in universities. This decision was inspired by a newspaper journalist’s investigation that found that some sex workers in Victoria (they purported 40 per cent) were working in the sex industry to pay their way through university (Reilly, 2008). Research in the UK produced similar results (Roberts, Sanders, Myers, & Smith, 2010).

Of all of the recruitment strategies, three were more successful than the others. These were the flyers sent or taken directly to brothels in Victoria; the calls for participants through the email lists and the display of the flyer on RhED’s website.

A specific, non-personal, email linked to La Trobe University was set up mainly because I identified myself as someone who had been a sex worker on the
recruitment material. Once a potential participant made contact then they were given my full name. Further to this, a toll-free telephone number was set up for participants to call and remained active for the duration of the data collection. This aimed to reduce the financial burden for potential participants as well as providing an alternative to advertising my personal mobile number. The recruitment flyers and the telephone number were funded through the student research allowance made available by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS).

Participants

It was decided that between 8 and 12 people who identify as women (including trans-women) would be sought to participate in two interviews lasting around 90 minutes each. The age range for participants was at least 18 years with no upper limit. The age of legal sex work in Victoria is 18 years (which is the same for drinking, smoking, driving and voting in Victoria, Australia). While men can and do work in the sex industry, this research sought to explore sex worker meanings, discursive truths and care of the self with women sex workers (for research with male sex workers see Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Minichiello et al., 2002; Scott et al., 2005). The scope of the research and the relatively small number of participants meant that analysis could focus in on the discourses that were available to women sex workers, allowing greater depth of analysis. Further to this, discourses that are available to women and the ways that they practise ethics of care of the self may be different from those that are available to men in sex work. While worthwhile, research into the ways that men in sex work make and manage meanings of sex work will need to be left for a later date or taken up by other researchers.

There are many other voices which are absent from this research, including women who work in outdoor settings, trans-people (explained below) and clients.
Also absent are the voices of individuals in roles surrounding sex work such as drivers, managers, receptionists, cleaners, partners and children of women in sex work and brothel and escort agency owners and managers (Agustin, 2010).

The recruitment flyer was carefully designed. The flyer (Appendix I) was based on a 1950s theme and included an image of five women (some of which were mannequins) lined up at the top of an A4 sheet of glossy paper. The images were from a different era and were slight variations of femininity from this time. I was keen to avoid using highly sexualised or stereotypical images of women and/or sex workers and so thought that using images of women from another era communicated the message that anyone could be a sex worker and also that I was not necessarily recruiting one particular gender performance. The wording used in the flyer was designed to attract women who understood their sex work—at least some of the time—in positive ways. It was also hoped that it would attract women who were interested in talking about the ways that they managed community understandings of sex work and how they cared for themselves, personally and professionally. The women in this research mostly spoke about their sex work in positive ways. It is, therefore, not a representative sample of all sex workers in Victoria, but rather, explores how the women gave meaning to their sex work in positive and ambiguous ways.

Further to this, the flyer called for participants who identified as women, including trans-women. It was thought that given that trans-women engage with discourses around femininity, sexuality and sex work, including trans-women in this research would not only inclusively engage with the diversity of women in sex work, but also provide interesting narrative on discourses around femininity and sex work. Despite sending the flyer to trans-women-specific brothels in Melbourne, there were
no enquiries from trans-women. There may be many reasons for this lack of response from trans-women, including that the gatekeepers whom I came to know over the research duration were sex worker-specific and not necessarily linked to trans-gender sex work communities. Research into the ways that trans-women negotiate discursive understandings of who they are, and who they should be, as women and as sex workers as well as how they challenge and change how they position themselves and their work through Foucault’s ethics of care of the self, would be valuable research at a future time.

As mentioned above, in the recruitment flyer I identified myself as someone who had been a sex worker in the past. There were two reasons for this researcher-disclosure. First, because sex work is highly stigmatised, this possibly helped to position me as a potentially safe person who was not likely to approach the research from a voyeuristic motivation and who would not judge them. Second, by identifying myself as someone who had been a sex worker, I was practising a degree of honesty that I felt the women deserved. At the end of the first interview, Lillith kindly agreed to look at the flyer and speak about her impression of it, including the fact that I identify myself as someone who has worked in sex work. She said:

It’s very bright at first ... I quite like the women ... I like the fact that they’re old-fashioned, like you didn’t take a stereotype, which ... I am getting quite sick of at the moment (laughs) ... Well they are just everyday women. (In relation to researcher disclosure) [I wondered, however] if I did start talking about my experiences ... if you would start saying ‘this is what I did’ ... which is quite fine and it would have been a lovely conversation but ... I knew at the back of my mind, that if you did start doing that, then this isn’t actually being
taken as seriously as it ought to be (laughs) ... but um no I don’t feel like you’ve been biased at all.

A couple of other women mentioned the fact that I used to work in sex work when they first contacted me regarding participating in the research. They mentioned that they felt that I was not only brave by ‘coming out’ about my past sex work, but that it was something that may help to address the stigma that sex workers often experience. Other women did not mention this at all.

**The Vignette Technique**

All of the women participated in the vignette interview and the research tool elicited a large amount of the data. Constituting hypothetical situations, decisions and ethical dilemmas, vignettes are basically tools designed to elicit narrative (Wilks, 2004). They are often based on previous research in order to be relevant to the participants (Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2002; Hughes & Huby, 2004). ‘Vignettes act as a stimulus to extended discussion of the scenario in question’ (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183) and often elicit ‘it depends’ responses from participants leading to narrative which explores various mitigating factors (Hughes & Huby, 2002).

Vignettes have been used in both qualitative and quantitative research (Barter & Renold, 2000). In some quantitative surveys, vignettes have been used as open questions in order to elicit qualitative-style data; others have provided respondents with lists of possible answers. This however, is more researcher-driven and has the potential to miss the finer details accompanying a person’s response to the vignette (Barter & Renold, 2000). Vignettes in qualitative research have also been used in differing ways. Their overarching aim is often ‘to study attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and norms within social science’ (Wilks, 2004, p. 80). Furthermore, because vignettes
provide a third person narrative, through which the participant can talk about their values and ethics, vignettes provide an ethical way to engage with sensitive topics (Hughes, 1998). For this reason it was decided that the vignette interview should be the first interview with the women.

One difficulty that can be encountered in vignette interviewing is when the scenarios depicted in the vignette do not appear plausible to the participant as they may contradict the participant’s lived experiences and/or discursive understandings of the situation (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010). While all effort should be made to pilot and check the validity of the vignette against previous research and possibly other sources such as autobiographies written on the topic, producing a vignette that is considered an authentic representation to all participants may be impossible (Jenkins et al., 2010). While all effort should be made to minimise the potential for aspects of the vignette to seem implausible, when this does occur, the interviewer can use it as a way to elicit narrative from the participant about the differences and contradictions between the participant’s experiences and those depicted in the vignette (Jenkins et al., 2010). Furthermore, telling the participant before the interview that this may occur allows them to prepare for this as well as indicating that the researcher is interested in the ways that the vignette scenarios differ from their own experiences and understandings (Jenkins et al., 2010).

The vignette used in this research began with a paragraph that I read aloud at the beginning of the interview. Participants also had a copy in front of them. This was so that the women knew what it was that was being asked of them as well as indicating that it was fine to skip questions if they so wished. The paragraph read:

Together we will look at a scenario about a fictional woman whom I have given the name Catherine. This scenario highlights different decisions that
Catherine is faced with about aspects both at work and away from work. Each section includes a few questions about how you think that Catherine might respond. While this scenario is about a fictional character, I would like to hear how you have thought or acted in similar situations, or even how you have never had a similar experience. Because of this I will ask you to reflect on the answers that you have given to Catherine’s situation in terms of your own experiences. However, if you feel that you would prefer not to go into any personal experience at any time you can just say ‘pass’ and we will move on.

Some of the women in this research expressed that the vignette scenario which depicted the character, Catherine, having a booking with a client who was ‘a bit rough’, was not representative of their experiences in sex work. The responses to this question, however, produced interesting narratives around clients’ motivations and resistance of discursive productions of sex work as inherently violence against women. Without this scenario to resist, however, the women’s particular constructions of clients in other ways may not have arisen. The scenario, in the vignette, which positioned Catherine as a ‘business woman’ also produced different responses from the women. While some of the women responded in enthusiastic concurrence with this, other women found the association humorous because of the images that it conjured for them of corporate women in suits. Again, this conflict elicited narrative about why this understanding of sex work did not fit with some of the women’s positioning of sex work in their lives. It also produced narratives about how sex work may be seen by other sex workers as a business. These examples highlight the care that needs to be taken when devising a vignette to elicit narrative in

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7 The vignette character’s name was Kate during the interviews. However, as one of the participants chose the same name as her pseudonym, I have changed the vignette character’s name to Catherine in order to minimise confusion.
qualitative interviews. It also illustrates the ways that important data can emerge from contradictions between the participant’s lived experience and the vignette.

The vignette addressed decisions that Catherine was faced with in relation to her sex work and her personal relationships. This included whether or not she might tell people outside of the sex industry that she worked in sex work (and how she might explain it to them), and what factors might impact on her decisions. Two other characters, Grace and Nicole respond to Catherine’s speaking about her sex work to them in diverse ways. Other themes in the vignette included personal sexual relationships with clients, negative client behaviour, why she thinks some men see sex workers, negotiating emotions, sexual pleasure and making a business out of her work. These themes were designed to explore the ways that individual participants’ views were discursively constructed and how they resisted discourses about what it means to be a sex worker and a woman. The themes were established by exploring sex work literature, especially sex work research and the themes that emerged from these studies (for examples of research that informed this vignette see O’Neill, 2001; Sanders, 2005; Quadara, 2006). The themes were also derived from my personal experience in the sex industry. Many drafts were devised before the vignette was used and each time more and more details were removed to allow each participant to view their own lives through the vignette character. Whenever a participant asked for more details about any of the vignette situations I responded that they could go wherever their mind wanted to. This satisfied them and they continued on with their responses.

Critics of the use of vignettes in interviews have claimed that they elicit responses that are moulded by what the participant believes is either the most socially desirable answer, or what they believe that researcher wants to hear (Hughes, 1998). The first response to this argument is that this is a common concern for all social
research, and not just vignettes (Hughes & Huby, 2002). The second response is that because this study is also interested in the current dominant discourses around sex work, identifying what is believed to be socially desirable is of interest, and can be used in the analysis. Research into the sharing of injecting drug equipment amongst people moving in and out of jail found that the vignette produced not only perceived socially desirable responses but also what the researcher termed ‘realistic’ responses (Hughes, 1998). The researcher found that the latter responses were often expressed after the participant had heard what the vignette character ‘actually’ did. For example, after hearing that the main character did lend her injecting equipment to another person in jail, one participant in Hughes’ study responded:

Maybe this girl was really hanging out and she knows how it feels to hang out. Yeah, that is probably what it was, I never thought of that. This girl was probably rattling you know hanging out and she knows how it feels and that’s why she handed over the works [the injecting equipment] (Jane in Hughes, 1998, p. 391).

Another concern of vignette-driven data is that the researcher(s) do not understand the boundaries of vignettes (Parkinson & Manstead, 1993). Specifically, vignettes should not be used to understand ‘real-world’ actions, but rather perceived values and beliefs (Hughes, 1998). The semi-structured design of the vignette interview used in this current research meant that participants were able to move between speaking through the vignette character and drawing on examples from their own lives. This was explained to the participants before the beginning of the vignette (detailed above). They were also advised that they could disregard the vignette entirely if they preferred. This occurred with one participant, Kate, whose narratives and stories flowed easily, and, with one eye on the vignette themes, I felt confident
that most of the themes were being covered. As the end of the interview was reached, she was drawn back to the vignette in order to present her with parts of the vignette scenario that I felt she had not yet covered. While this suggests that these interviews could have been as easily achieved using a standard qualitative interview technique where the interviewer keeps the main themes or questions in mind, the vignette provided a more structured way of exploring the contrasts and similarities between responses during the analysis.

**Photo Elicitation Interviews**

Some researchers have engaged with sex workers through the use of creative and experimental research methods and tools (O’Neill, 2001). I was particularly inspired by O’Neill’s (2001, O’Neill et al., 2002) practice of using art as a reflection of women’s lived experiences of sex work and while her methods were not replicated as such (O’Neill et al., 2002) this did lead me to explore the possible role of the visual in interview contexts. Participant-driven photography brought this visual element into the interview and where it was used, it provided narratives that were engaging and often surprising.

Photo-elicitation is a method of simply introducing photographs into the interview process. This research tool was first developed in 1957 by photographer and researcher John Collier (Harper, 2003). Collier, an anthropologist, argued that the inclusion of photos in interviews aided participant memory retrieval and ‘elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews’ (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2008, p. 3). Since Collier introduced the idea of using photos to elicit narrative, it has been used to explore many research topics, from Oliffe and Bottorff’s

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8 O’Neill developed a methodology called ethnomimesis which involved working with women, community members in areas where street sex work was prevalent, and art therapists in order to access the participants’ ‘feeling worlds’ through the use of art (O’Neill, 2001; O’Neill et al., 2002).
(2007) exploration of the health and illness experiences of men with prostate cancer to Liebenberg’s (2009) research with teenage mothers in sub-economic South Africa and their experiences with motherhood. Many researchers who use photos as a way to elicit narrative speak of its ability to: produce rich and detailed data; aid in a reflexive research process; and be collaborative in regard to the shared creation of knowledge between the research participant and the researcher (Pink, 2001; Harper, 2003; Clark-IbáÑez, 2004). Further to this, photography has been cited as a way to include more ‘vulnerable’ participants’ voices, including people with disabilities (Aldridge, 2007). Given that sex workers are highly stigmatised and for this reason may be considered a ‘vulnerable’ population this research technique was chosen as a more participant-driven research technique, hopefully resulting in richer data than may have arisen from a standard qualitative interview.

Photo elicitation can be either researcher-driven or participant-driven. There are various methodological approaches that can create and seek different kinds of knowledges. For example, Epstein et al. (2008) took photos of the camp environment that they would be exploring with children with cancer on their perspectives of specialised summer camp. They chose to use researcher-driven photographs because the knowledge that they were seeking was the ‘perspectives on and responses to the physical and social environments’ and therefore participants could look at photos of the camp environment but produce different ways of seeing them (Epstein et al., 2008, p. 4).

Clark-IbáÑez (2004) coupled photo elicitation with ethnography to explore inner-city childhood experiences, at school and at home, in South Central Los Angeles, California. She found that using photo elicitation was not only a fruitful way to gather data/narratives but also a way to empower the young people in her research.
Further to this, she found that through exploring the photographs with the children, meanings arose that otherwise might have stayed dormant in a pure talk interview. For example, a photo taken by a girl of a tree across the street from her house became a symbol for the fact that the girl was not allowed to leave her house after school because of fear that immigration officers may see her and deport her and her family.

Radley & Taylor (2003) used participant-driven photo-elicitation to look at the role that the physical space and settings played in patients’ experiences of recovery from surgery. The researchers asked participants to take photos of aspects of the hospital room that were salient to them. The photos were used as a way to elicit narratives about recovery and as data in themselves. The researchers argued that ‘what photographs mean—what they come to mean—is, therefore, dependent on the readings that are made of them by patients and researchers together’ (Radley & Taylor, 2003).

For this research, it was decided that photos would be participant-driven. Due to my personal experience in sex work it would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to capture images that were not in some way linked to my own experiences. This would force participants to respond to my vision of sex work rather than allowing them to capture their own diverse views. Further to this, participants were asked to take photos of things that related to their lives in non-sex work contexts as well as sex work contexts. This added to the breadth of possible images as the women in the research had available to them diverse cultural, social and political discourses and contexts. Another reason for the use of participant-driven photos is that researchers may be inclined to take photos that are aesthetically pleasing or shocking (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). For example a photo of a nun walking past a brothel may
highlight an interesting juxtaposition of differing values and morals, while having no relevance for participants.

Interestingly, the narratives elicited from the photographs were far from my initial readings of the images. This highlights the decidedly individual meanings that researchers and participants bring to interviews; constituting them as highly negotiated texts, created by both interviewers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). That is, interviewers engage with participants through their own individual lens, which is coloured according to their multiple subject positions (including, race, economic status, sexuality and gender), as well as the multitude of discourses with which individuals engage and which tint their view and give various meanings to their experiences, reflected back on the meaning making that is undertaken in interview contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

There are considerable ethical and practical considerations around asking participants to photograph aspects of their lives (Epstein et al., 2008). To begin with, participants may take photos of places, body parts or objects that may identify them to readers. To minimise this, participants were expressly asked not to take photos that could reasonably identify them, in the participant information sheet, on the ‘Notes for Taking Photos’ sheet and also verbally at the end of the vignette interview. A related ethical issue was that of third parties who have not given their consent to the research (Pink, 2007). For this reason, participants were asked to refrain from taking photos which involve other people either known to the participant or strangers, such as coincidental people in a street scene. Participants were advised that photos of this nature could not be used in the research.

As the photos were for elicitation purposes only none of the photos were used as data. Below are details about some of the various photos taken by the women for
this research to give readers a feeling for the photos while maintaining the decision not to publish any of them. The women’s photos were sometimes raw, sometimes artistic, sometimes provocative and always varied. There were some similarities between some of the photos, however. Melina, who was in her mid-forties and had been working for only a couple of years when I met her, and Samantha, who was in her early fifties and had been working for 20 years both took photos of similar places, spaces and objects; however, they were not known to each other. For example, both women took photos of their dogs, their television, food labels and vitamins, parks, their kitchen, their bedroom, outdoor furniture in the sun and exercise equipment. In this sense, some aspects of their narratives were similar as they both spoke about taking care of their bodies (for both appearance and health reasons), relaxing at home and spending time with their pets.

The other women’s photos were all different from the ones mentioned here, and various aspects of their lives came into play as they reflected on the ways that they cared for themselves in everyday life. For example, Kitty’s photos were all taken inside her home but featured much of her creative pursuits and her spiritual journey. Cherry’s and Lillith’s photos were heavily targeted to the list of statements that they were given and they both spoke metaphorically about the images and the objects in the photos. Sara came to the second interview but did not take photos for it. She explained to me that she had found the photo taking particularly difficult and felt that this was because she was not a ‘visual person’. Despite the lack of photos, the statements included in the notes for taking photos sheet (Appendix II) were invaluable as Sara had read over them during the week in between the two interviews, and had reflected on the statements. The sheet also provided a useful structure for the interview as it was placed on the table between us and, when it was time to move on,
Sara would indicate to me which statement she would like to talk about and her associations with it.

The women were asked to photograph things that represented any of a list of feelings, emotions and actions (Appendix III). In this sense, the photos that emerged could not always be identified as representing an aspect of the woman’s private and internal world and processes. For example, one woman took a photo of a doorway covered in graffiti to represent the ways that she felt that women in her life (both personally and professionally) placed their ‘messy’ emotions onto her and also how she kept this from affecting her own emotions. Through exploring the photograph with her, the meaning of this image emerged, ‘[w]hat photographs mean—what they come to mean—is, therefore, dependent on the readings that are made of them by [participants] and researchers together’ (Radley & Taylor, 2003).

Bringing photography into the interview was a highly individual process and each time, with each participant, was a unique experience for me as an interviewer. There were, however, commonalities between the interviews which speak to the validity of this research technique. What was common amongst the five women who took photos for the research was the way that the photos showed me what the women wanted me to see about their lives. As an example of the individualised way that the women approached this research tool, Lillith’s photos were beautifully symbolic and full of visual metaphor; an image pointed skyward through the internal tube of a shot tower showed an explosion of sunlight at its endpoint. This image elicited narrative that spoke of the way that work (whether sex work or other types of work) could become all-consuming for Lillith. The image represented her feeling that she developed a ‘tunnel vision’ about her life and she neglected to give herself ‘leisure time’. There
were over 100 photos in total that the participants brought to the interviews and which all had their individualised meanings for the women.

**Analysis**

The women’s narratives were entered into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo (versions 7 and 9) and coded according to themes. Some of these were directly related to the vignette while other themes emerged from the women’s narratives. For example, the essentialist notions of gender, which some of the women strongly espoused, was not a theme that was predicted, whereas speaking, or maintaining silence, about their sex work to family and loved ones was. Once this broader coding was completed to as near saturation as possible, finer level analysis was carried out on hard copies of the resulting themes or ‘nodes’. This was done using highlighters, notes scribbled in the margins and mind maps on pieces of butcher’s paper so that I could access the data visually in order to see connections and to interrogate the discourses that were echoed in the women’s words.

The analysis was performed from a postmodern understanding that knowledges exist in multiplicity and in this regard, searching for a totalising and stable ‘truth’ of sex work was resisted (Agger, 1991; Foucault, 1994). As Foucault wrote, ‘I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are multiple truths and different ways of speaking the truth’ (Foucault, 1984a, p. 51). In contrast to linguistic discourse analysis—which examines syntax and word placement to extract meanings from narratives—Foucauldian discourse analysis examines the taken-for-granted truths and knowledges that are situated within a particular paradigm (Cheek, 2004). In this sense, discourse not only refers to language but also to anything that serves as a symbol of ‘truth’ and meaning, including images, documents, advertising, conversations, interviews and bodies (Bordo, 1989; Butler, 1989; Cheek, 2004).
While discourses denote what can be said—what can be known as ‘truth’—they also foreclose other ways of speaking the truth. ‘Some discourses (for example, scientific/medical understandings of the body) gain prominence over others [and this] is the result of socio-historical influences operating on them’ (Cheek, 2004, p. 1143).

Our discursive understandings of our lives and ourselves are multiple. These multiple discourses do not neatly sit one upon another, nor do they smoothly transition as one is challenged and another taken up as the ‘truth’ of our selves. Rather, there are always competing discourses with which individuals engage and which they appropriate in order to ‘know’ themselves:

It is important to recognise that at any point in time, there are a number of possible discursive frames for thinking, writing, and speaking about aspects of reality (Cheek, 2004, p. 1143).

The women’s narratives are, therefore, explored in as many ways as possible; looking for echoes of discourses as well as how they may pertain to ‘fitting oneself out’ with ‘truths’ as an ethics of care of the self (Foucault in Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987) and as a way to manage, negotiate, make sense of, resist and transform how they are positioned and position themselves as sex workers and women. For this reason, I attempted to acknowledge ‘uncertainty and indeterminacy’ (Diamond & Quinby, 1988) in the women’s talk, exploring the data from various positions and through multiple lenses. The women’s narratives were thus analysed for the ways that multiple discourses may be vying for dominance, or meshing together to provide seemingly coherent understandings of themselves and the social world in general.

The women’s narratives were read with uncertainty and with an acknowledgement that there are an infinite number of readings that could be performed on any given text, with none of them holding more truth-value than any
other. As explored above, these readings were also undertaken with an acknowledgement that, as a researcher, I too have particular subject positions and discourses are available to me and that these have the potential to make particular discursive constructions more visible to me than others. In this regard, using a postmodern approach to Foucault’s works enables one to be aware of one’s own life narrative and discursive truths:

Postmodernity is the era of enhanced reflexivity, in which processes of detraditionalisation and individualisation mean that people are increasingly aware of creating their own life narratives, and of their ability to exercise critical judgments about expert systems (Rosencil, 1999, p. 164).

While Foucauldian discourse analysis often involves searching for discursive constructions in either ‘expert’ knowledges, including genealogies, or as echoed in lay people’s talk, using his later work around ethics of care of the self as an aspect of this discourse analysis provides the conceptual space to explore the ways that the women practised self-forming techniques in relation to the discursive power relations that they had available to them. His later work thus enables more agentic readings to occur without erasing the productive power of knowledges in the production of subjects.

Reading resistance, reconfiguration and critique of particular discourses in the women’s narratives produces space to explore the ways that the women are freer than they may feel in their ability to draw on alternative discourses about sex work and sex workers. Foucault’s ethics of care of the self allows for readings that do not see individuals as ‘docile bodies’ but more as creators of their own lives by choosing and appropriating various discourses and knowledges in order to make meanings of their sense of self and their work. In this sense, Foucault’s ethics of care of the self allows
readings of subjects not ‘as the passive product of an external system of constraint and prescriptions, but as the active agent of its own formation’ (Hofmeyr, 2006, p. 216).

**Ethical Considerations**

This research gained ethics approval from the Faculty of Health Science’s Ethics Committee at La Trobe University as it was deemed to be low risk. Where changes were made to aspects of the research approval for the modifications was sought and gained prior to the changes being implemented. Throughout the research and data collection, ethical considerations were made about various aspects such as recruitment, what was being asked of the participants, how the women’s photos and data were handled and how anonymity was maintained. Some of these considerations have been detailed throughout this chapter; this section focuses on the ethical considerations and procedures not yet covered.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The resulting narratives were kept for the duration of the research in a locked filing cabinet and a password protected computer in a locked room at the University. After completion of the research all resulting data, including the photographs (on CD) and consent forms will be kept in a locked data-storage room at La Trobe University for a period of five years, after which they will be securely destroyed.

The women heard about the details of the research either over the phone or via email. The women had access to information pertaining to the research on a website. This was linked to the research centre’s website but was not accessible via any links. This website included copies of the participant information sheet, the consent form and the withdrawal of data form (Appendix II). The main purpose of this was in case the women chose not to take the participant information sheet, the consent form or withdrawal of consent form with them after the first interview; likewise, if they lost or
misplaced any of the information they could easily access it. Pseudonyms—chosen by the women—have been used throughout this thesis. Furthermore, aspects of the women’s narratives have been changed including the women’s ages, which have been altered slightly to ensure anonymity.

It was arranged with both the RhED and Project Respect services that if any of the women became distressed during or after the interviews that they would provide a counselling session that would be paid for through the student allowance at ARCSHS (Appendix II). None of the women became upset during the interviews, nor reported any distressed feelings in response to the interviews. The women spoke more of enjoying the interviews and there was laughter rather than tears throughout all of the interviews.

**The Women**

Nine women shared their time, thoughts, stories and understandings of their sex work and their lives in general for this research. The women differed in ages, length of time in sex work, socio-economic status, relationship status and, as is explored in Chapters 6–8, the meanings that they gave to their sex work and their lives. Three of the women identified as either lesbian or queer. Two women were New Zealand citizens. Two women were single mothers, one with a baby and the other with a teenage son. The other seven women did not have children that they mentioned; with one woman planning to have a child in the near future. Many of the women had worked privately and in brothels, with one woman also having done escort work. None of the women spoke of doing street sex work. Only one woman spoke of a de facto partner, while others spoke about past partners.

What follows are capsule biographies (Dowsett, 1996). These are snapshots of the different women in this research. While there was a demographic sheet for the
women to fill out at the beginning of the first interview (explored above), it only asked about their age, type of sex work and how long they had been working. Because of this, other elements from the women’s narratives furnish the rest of the biographies. This includes what they indicated as important to them at the time, the ways that they spent their time and the significant people that they spoke of. The biographies provide readers with a sense of the different women and remind readers that the women held many subject positions, as mothers, lovers, daughters, grand-daughters, students and friends (Bradley-Engen & Hobbs, 2010). Sex work was the only aspect of their lives that they all had in common with each other. They are all, ‘individuals who have lives, relationships and experiences outside of the sex industry’ (Sanders et al., 2009, p. 18).

Cherry was in her early twenties when I met her and had been working in sex work for two years. Originally from New Zealand, Cherry moved to Australia to access better wages in her hospitality profession. While working in hospitality, Cherry met a woman who worked part-time as a manager of a brothel in Melbourne. When Cherry was in high school, a few years earlier, she presented to her Year 11 class about the merits of legalising prostitution in New Zealand. This, together with meeting the woman who managed a brothel part time, led her to think about sex work as a way that she could make more money than she was receiving at the time. Cherry spoke about how sex work was a means to make and save money so that one day she could own a tattoo and body piercing business. Cherry spoke about how she enjoyed bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) in her personal sex life with men and women and that she had had a couple of relationships with women who were also sex workers during the previous couple of years.
April had been working in sex work for over ten years, but had discontinued sex work for the time being while she had her first child, who was one year old. April responded to the vignette interview via email and this, together with her thoughtful and academic use of language, produced a narrative that was quite different from the other women’s. April identified herself as queer, university educated and in her mid-thirties.

Kate was in her early thirties. She had begun sex work privately three months before the first interview, while continuing her other employment in a caring profession. Kate began working in sex work as a way to ease her financial debt before having a baby. During the short time that she had been in sex work she had found that it was more engaging and enjoyable than she had thought it would be. Kate had a bubbly personality and her ability to convey stories of her experiences in sex work thus far was engaging.

Samantha was in her fifties and had been working for twenty years, although she told me that she wished that she had started a lot earlier. As well as running her own private sex work business, Samantha managed an investment property and ran a small business involving the care and maintenance of other people’s pets. She lived with her male partner and a female housemate, as well as various pets, in a house that she described as the best house she had ever lived in. Health and fitness were very important for Samantha. She had played tennis for many years, enjoyed walking her dogs and watched her weight and nutrition carefully.

Melina also loved animals and walked her pet dogs every day before or after work. Melina had been working in the same Melbourne brothel for the two years that she had been in sex work. She was in her mid-forties when I met her and was undertaking a postgraduate degree. Like Kate, Melina was also surprised at the level
of enjoyment that she experienced in sex work. She had a teenage son whom she had put through private school and also had a home that she loved. She was proud to be able to pay the mortgage, despite studying full time and being a single mother.

Lillith was in her mid-thirties and had been working in sex work for four years. At the time of the interviews, she was working nights in a Melbourne brothel. She was very close to her grandmother and spoke fondly about her during both interviews. Lillith spoke of wanting to be a writer one day and told of how she had kept journals since she was a child in which she collected story ideas. Lillith lived alone and liked to put comics and cartoons on her wall. She laughed a lot during the interviews, expressing her dry humour and sharp intellect.

Sara was in her early twenties and, like Cherry, was from New Zealand. She had worked in sex work for around four years. While she originally started work in the sex industry in a New Zealand escort agency, she quickly developed a private sex work business tailored mostly to international businessmen visiting New Zealand. When I met Sara she had recently begun working in a Melbourne brothel because she felt like a change to the way that she organised and practised her sex work. Sara identified as queer stating that while she enjoyed sex with both men and women, she was mostly attracted to trans-men. Sara was well educated, well spoken and confident in her demeanour.

Kitty was a fashion student in her early thirties when I met her. She had been working in various sex industry jobs since she was 17. Kitty was out about her sex work to all people and had been a sex work performance artist at different times. She was interested in Eastern spirituality and practised Tantric sex with some of her clients. She was also studying Sanskrit and had recently been to the Amazon jungle. Kitty enjoyed her relationships with her clients and was very selective in who she
would have as a client. Kitty had spent many years living and working around the world.

Natalie was in her mid-thirties and had been working in sex work for over ten years. She spoke about how she preferred not to tell boyfriends or friends that she worked in sex work. She wore jeans and a T-shirt to the interview and spoke about how she preferred a tomboy look. She generally got along better with men than women—particularly men who worked in manual trades. Natalie was very upbeat during the interview—she laughed a lot, referred to the ‘listeners’ by speaking to the digital recorder and mimicked other people’s voices while telling stories.

This chapter has explained the way that the research was conducted, including the methodology, research tools and data analysis. It has also introduced readers to the women who volunteered their time for this research and whose narratives are explored in the following chapters. The following chapter is the first of the three data chapters. It explores negotiating speaking about, or maintaining silence about, sex work.
5. Delicates of Disclosure

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the stigmatisation of sex work can affect how sex workers think of themselves and their work. Previous research has explored the ways that women in indoor sex work contexts in Britain utilise strategies to keep their work secret from loved ones, family and friends as a strategy for managing stigma (Sanders, 2005). Furthering the work of other researchers (Sanders, 2005), this chapter presents an exploration of maintaining secrecy and speaking about sex work through a Foucauldian lens. Foucault’s work on the power of knowledges to produce subjectivities is useful for exploring the ways that stigmatising discourses about sex work permeate individual’s understandings of themselves. When family and loved ones validate these stigmatising discourses, sex workers need to work on their relationships to themselves to avoid taking on these understandings as their own self-truths. Foucault’s work on the ethics of care of the self provides a theoretical lens for exploring how sex workers can resist this by working on their relationship to self. Wendy Brown’s (1998) engagement with Foucault’s work is also drawn upon. Her work provides a useful conceptual framework for exploring silences as a way that women may maintain positive relationships with themselves and others.

The title for this chapter, ‘delicates of disclosure’, emerged from the interviews with the women, as it became increasingly clear how they delicately managed speaking about, and maintaining their silence about, their sex work. The women told many stories about how they manoeuvred, handled, responded to, resisted and made sense of the ways that speaking, or maintaining silence, about their sex work, affected them and the people around them. Despite its use in the title of this chapter, the term ‘disclosure’ is understood to be problematic. Synonyms for
‘disclosure’ include terms such as ‘leakage’, ‘discovery’, ‘admission’ and ‘confession’, and for this reason ‘non-disclosure’ and ‘disclosure’ in terms of ‘maintaining silence’ and ‘speaking’ about sex work are used respectfully as an attempt to avoid the implicit association between the term ‘disclosure’ and the act of ‘confessing’ or ‘coming clean’ about one’s ‘secret self’.

Given the stigmatisation of sex work, and the potential for sex workers to take on negative understandings of themselves and their work, this chapter asks the question of how the women negotiated issues around speaking or maintaining silence about their sex work to friends, family, loved-ones and acquaintances. In order to address this question this chapter uses Foucault’s work on confession and how it has become a way that individuals ‘know’ themselves. This work is useful for examining why speaking about sex work may feel like an imperative for the women because it is linked to discourses around emancipation and therapeutic notions of ‘coming clean’. This chapter explores how the women managed being positioned by other people and how this affected their decisions about speaking about their sex work. Some of the women spoke of having positive experiences of speaking about sex work. This is explored in relation to feeling more intimate with friends and loved ones. Maintaining silence was an important way that the women could resist being positioned in negative ways by other people. This is viewed through Foucault’s work on ethics of care of the self and care of other people.

**Foucault and Confession**

As detailed in Chapter 3, Foucault argued that the imperative to confess our innermost thoughts, desires and behaviours grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the confessional. He sought to disprove the hypothesis that the Victorians were sexually repressed, and argued instead that sex was often spoken of, dissected and
interpreted. Foucault directed us to arenas where sexual acts and desires were put into discourse. For Foucault ‘the confession produce[d] intrinsic modifications in the person who articulate[d] it’, they were modified, exonerated and redeemed through speaking aloud their sexual desires and acts (Foucault, 1976, p. 61). Not only has confession lost its localisation and ritual but also comes in many forms including interrogations, consultations, and autobiographical narratives (Foucault, 1976, p. 63). Furthermore, confessions are recorded, transcribed, published, commented on and given meaning. Foucault explored the ways that the imperative to confess sexual acts and desires led to the medicalisation of sexuality, particularly so-called ‘deviant’ sexual acts, desires and behaviours, which also created a space where ‘confession’ could be heard:

> It is no longer a question of simply saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it (Foucault, 1976, p. 63).

Understanding individuals’ experiences, motivations, beliefs and behaviours in terms of their social group or social identity is currently commonplace in both social and health research and broader understandings of society (Brown, 1998). Confession plays an integral part in the conflation of individual experiences to the ‘truth’ of the entire social group or phenomenon, which therefore strengthens the discourse that claims to speak the truth of that group.

In an age of social identification through attributes marked as culturally significant—gender, race, sexuality, and so forth—confessional discourse with its truth-bearing status ... not only regulates the confessor in the name of
freeing her (sic), as Foucault described that logic, but extends beyond the confessing individual to constitute a regulatory truth about the identity group: confessed truths are assembled and deployed as ‘knowledge’ about the group (Brown, 1998, p. 320).

In this sense, truth and confession are symbiotic; truth is what one confesses, and confession produces truth. Radical feminists in the 1970s constructed women as a unitary group and this extended to women in the sex industry. Women whose experiences of sex work affected them negatively were upheld as examples of all women in the sex industry. These acts of confession, in front of live audiences, in autobiographies and on talk shows served to strengthen the production and understanding of sex work as only ever damaging to woman (Chapkis, 1997). This is not to say that some, even many, of the women at the time did not experience their sex work in these ways, rather, through the act of confession and truth telling, this truth was given greater validity than less-confessed truths:

even as feminism aims to affirm diversity among women and women’s experiences, confession as the site of production of truth and its convergence with feminist suspicion and deauthorisation of truth from other sources tends to reinstate a unified discourse in which the story of greatest suffering becomes the true story of woman (Brown, 1998, p. 320).

The suffering confessed by some has become, ‘a unified discourse ... the true story of women’, in general and in the sex industry (Brown, 1998, p. 320). Engaging with Foucault’s work on the productive power of truth together with his later work on ethics of care of the self provides a conceptual space for reading and exploring the ways that the women in this research spoke of, or maintained silence about, their sex work in their personal lives, both in terms of the truths of sex work that they produced
through speaking, and the care of themselves that they practised as they challenged
and shape shifted the meanings that other people in their lives gave to sex work.
Further to this, the practice of maintaining silence around their sex work was for some
of the women a practice of care of the self.

**Being Positioned by Others**

Subjects and subject positions are not created in a vacuum but are rather
created together, and against, other people, in a reflexive project where subjectivities
are constantly folded back on themselves and reconfigured according to various, and
often competing truths of who we are and who we should be (Rose, 1998). Women in
sex work are constantly subjected to various and competing knowledges of who they
are and who they should be and these are communicated to them not only through
‘expert’ knowledges but also other discursive truths which circulate and are
appropriated by the people around them. This section explores some of the ways that
individual women in this research made sense of and/or subverted how other people
positioned them as sex workers.

Sara, who had started sex work in an escort agency in New Zealand before
moving to Australia, spoke of accessing alternative understandings of sex work to
better articulate the meanings that she ascribed to herself and her sex work. In her
second interview, Sara spoke at length about how she had gained information and
understandings about the various ways that sex work and sex workers are positioned
and how this had helped her to create, and make concrete, her self-positioning. In
relation to reading and listening to academics and activists talk through a radical
feminist perspective of sex work, Sara said:

Because so many people criticise you and what you do and it’s really easy to
feel really down on yourself because you hear these people saying that you are
contributing to, you know, this really, um, bad thing, you know you are aiding, you are colluding and all this kind of, of oppressive stuff. And that’s really hard, you know, that’s really hard to hear. So, I think it’s really easy to internalise all those arguments but I think, for me ... one of the things that I’ve done is just to really understand those arguments and that keeps me safe in myself. But it’s still hard to not feel angry (pause) that people aren’t supportive.

Discourses about who we are and who we should be do not seamlessly thread together, providing clear-cut and continuous truths of ourselves. Rather, they often jar, clash and vie for dominance. This produces what Foucault termed ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 1982) where individuals are engaged in a never-ending practice of reflection, taking on, rejecting and sorting through the various ways that they are positioned externally and also internally. Sara’s discussion about radical feminist notions of sex work—and gender relations in general—speaks of this reflexive project. Actively seeking alternative knowledges, however, she drew on competing truths of sex work and internally battled with discourses which positioned her as harmful not only to herself but to the advancement of all women. Taking on the discourse that your work contributes to a repressive social order for women would be a heavy burden to carry. By seeking other ways of understanding the role of sex work in this larger context, Sara resisted internally positioning herself as someone who damages the advancement of women.

This discourse positions women in sex work as not only harming women’s economic and sexual advancement by colluding with a sexual order that exploits them, but they are also positioned as victims. The psychological discourse of ‘false consciousness’ exonerates sex workers from the position of colluder and perpetuator
and positions them instead as victims of men’s sexual and economic privilege in Western societies. Sara spoke about telling a lover about her sex work and that her lover’s response positioned her in this way:

I told her ... after a little while of seeing her, I told her, and um, (pause) no, she didn’t like it. She had what I call the ‘victimisation response’. You see some people ... label you as a victim. So she got very upset and did that whole ‘oh, I wish I could be your sugar mamma so you’, all this—which was really annoying, cause I, I actually choose to do this work. I don’t need someone. So, I got the victim, like the victim response from her (Sara).

Sara’s exploration of academic and feminist understandings of sex work enabled her to locate and name the response that she received from this lover. Understanding that there are many different ways that people understand sex work helped Sara to resist taking this on as her self-understanding. As Rose (1998) argued, subjects consist of folded and folding discursive subjectivities as well as ongoing acts of resistance. The work that Sara had already done in regard to identifying that there are various ways that sex work is given meaning meant that she was equipped to resist appropriating this discourse. Furthermore, the clash between the discourse that her lover gave ‘truth-value’ to (sex workers are victims) and Sara’s discursive understanding of sex work as different from this, created a dividing practice where, through the appropriation of different knowledges, the two women were divided from each other.

Sara spoke about the difficulty involved in trying to change other people’s understandings of sex work. One reason for this difficulty is because the discourses that are appropriated also impact other people and society in general. If Sara had accepted the discourse that she is a victim she would have helped to maintain a
dominant understanding and avoided conflict in her relationship. Another reason why this is so difficult is because of the ways that discourses function to produce lived realities and ways of being in the world. Sara spoke of this difficulty:

I think it’s really hard. I think it’s like one of the hardest things is to convince people that you are okay about what, the work you do ... I think that sometimes it’s not possible, actually ... Yeah, sometimes that opinion is too strong. But um, you know, addressing, you know, asking her like, to really clearly articulate what exactly it is that her concerns are ... But they can’t actually specifically say what um, what exactly it is that concerns them, because they don’t understand the sex work and they don’t know what’s going on really. They just have this feeling inside them, from, you know, from life and you know from, everyone (laughs), everyone in the world convincing them that it’s this really icky thing (Sara).

Cherry also spoke about the difficulty involved in persuading people outside of the sex industry that she feels good about her sex work. Cherry spoke about a strategy that she had used to try to maintain certain images of the sex industry in other people’s imaginations by only telling them about the good aspects:

I could tell them ten good stories but the one they’re going to remember is the bad one—in my opinion ... I guess as time goes on that could change, but, not in my experience so far. I don’t really talk about the not nice stuff. Yeah. Or I make a joke of it too like, ‘oh a really fat guy came in and he stunk, ha ha’, you know, whatever. But I don’t, like I wouldn’t really, ‘cause it’s so hard to um get someone, I feel that it’s hard to get someone that’s, I guess, not in the industry to accept it as it is. So, I would, yeah, exactly what I just said, I’d only tell the good things, yep (Cherry).
Cherry explained the effect of making jokes about her work. She framed it around caring for other people, ‘I wouldn’t want them to worry about me, well, yeah ... I wouldn’t want them to feel bad for me, that’s not right; I wouldn’t want them to worry about me. Yep.’ Cherry shifted in this statement, from not wanting people to worry about her to not wanting them to feel bad for her and then self-correcting to reiterate her first sentiment. Doing so, Cherry responded to, and practised, an internal division between how she positioned sex work and how other people may position her as a sex worker. Not only that, but how I, from a researcher subject position, may position her and sex work. That is, if she did not want people to ‘feel bad’ for her then I, as the interviewer, may form the opinion that Cherry thinks that there is something about sex work that would mean that other people should feel sorry for her. The example of her use of humour, ‘oh a really fat guy came in and he stunk, ha ha’, could be read as a reframing of the idea that sex workers are victims of men’s sexual and economic privilege. It could be understood, therefore, that Cherry used humour as a way to reframe her experiences as humorous rather than exploitation. Cherry continued to explain how humour helped her to manage her own reactions, emotions and understandings of these types of situations:

Laugh it off ... which kind of helps me as well cause then I don’t get down about it. Like I just, like not to the client’s face, sometimes but, you know. If they do something that’s inappropriate or not right, I find it easier for myself to just kind of laugh it off (Cherry).

Cherry’s use of humour is consistent with research findings by Sanders (2004, p. 279) who argued that ‘humour, as a form of resistance, was evident when sex workers described how prostitution affected their lives’. Looking at this through Foucault’s work on ethics, it appears that Cherry was attempting to direct the ways
that other people positioned her and her sex work through making light of some of her ‘not nice’ experiences with clients.

Like Sara, Cherry also received a negative reaction from a woman she was dating when she spoke about her sex work to her. She spoke about how at first it was okay and ‘there wasn’t really much said about it’ but that later it was brought up and ‘it kind of turned around and became a bit of a slandering match’. Later in the interview, in relation to the negative response that the vignette character, Catherine, received, Cherry alluded to people being influenced by common understandings of sex work and that a person’s ability to resist these understandings depended on their internal convictions and their relationship to themselves:

I guess it depends, um, how secure and sound you are with yourself as to whether you can make up your own mind or whether you are going to follow someone else’s opinion of you on it (Cherry).

Managing other people’s understandings of sex work was not only important for Cherry and Sara because of the ways that they were positioned by other people, but also for the way that this could influence their own understandings of themselves and their sex work. April also referred to conviction of self in relation to the vignette character, Grace, who responded in a positive way:

Grace may have a strong sense of herself and may not see closeness to the topic or activity of sex work in anyway threatening to herself or her life circumstances (April, email response).

April continued, ‘she may have already debunked mainstream values in relation to sex work and repositioned herself’. As a result, April positioned individuals as able to confront, question and disrupt discourses and truths about sex,
sexuality, gender and sex work and that this helps them to accept that sex work can be a valid work choice.

Kate, who had been working as a private escort for a few months before I met her, also experienced a negative response when she told one of the women whom she worked with in her non-sex industry job. Kate, however, had spoken about her sex work to many friends—though not family—and this was the only negative response that she had received:

The only bad reaction was I told one of the girls at work and she burst into tears and she cried for about an hour! And she couldn’t look at me without bursting into tears again. And I’m like, ‘it’s alright, you know, I’m really okay with this, like the job is great, my clients are just lovely’ (Kate).

Later in the interview, Kate revisited this incident and explained how she felt that this response stemmed from personal issues that this particular woman was having in her private life:

My friend who cried for an hour and a half, her father is dying of cancer at the moment so her emotions are really see-sawing and so she was sort of sitting there laughing and crying and said, ‘I don’t know why I’m crying, I’m just very emotional about your decision to do this’ (Kate).

Like Sara, Kate reacted to this woman’s response by framing it in a way that did not change the way that she understood herself or her sex work. Kate empathetically reflected on this woman’s response not only in consideration of her father’s medical condition but also in relation to having a sense of the negative images and understandings of sex work that this woman may have been drawing on to give meaning to Kate’s talk of her sex work:
but now that she, I guess, you know, I’ve explained to her a bit more about the
work and how I work and the kind of clients that I see, she’s um, she’s not
upset about it, I think she was just a bit shocked initially. Um and had her, had
a picture in her mind of, I guess, what street work is like with the, the,
violece and I guess drug abuse and crappy clients and things like that, that
you know, um I guess a lot of people have in their heads, so yeah (Kate).
Similarly, Kate spoke about potential negative reactions from her family as
influenced by the same kinds of images of street sex work, drugs and disrespectful
clients:
I suspect that my aunties will have an ethical issue with it and feel like it is
sordid and yucky, which, you know, that’s not the way that I feel about it so
that, that will be their issue, but I guess that it’s mainly the safety. I don’t
want them lying in bed at night worrying about where I am and it’s taken a
little while with my best friend and my work friends, everybody that I’ve told
their first reaction is, you know ‘are you sure this is a safe thing to do? Don’t
hesitate to call me, I don’t care if it is 3 o’clock in the morning, if you ever get
in trouble’, you know, ‘are you sure you are safe doing this? What safety
precautions are you taking?’ Um, and I, I don’t want my parents to be lying in
bed at night worrying about who I’m out seeing as a client and whether I’m
going to come home safe at the end of the day. I’m sure they will have many
of the misconceptions that I probably had about the industry, if not more so I
guess, being um, I guess a little bit more conservative than I am (Kate).
Kate first speculated that her aunties would react from an ethical or moral
basis. She then shifted, however, to suggest that they would be mostly concerned
about Kate’s safety. Melina also imagined that safety would be a concern for loved
ones: ‘I think if my mother found out she would be worried about safety’. Melina’s male partner had discovered that she was working in sex work several months before I met her. This resulted in the breakdown of their long-term relationship. One concern that he raised was her safety: ‘he was all funny about, you know, “do you have alarms, do you have this? Do you have that?”’ Melina, Cherry, Sara and Kate all positioned this worry about the safety of their work as coming from highly negative and mainly street-based images in the media and popular culture. Viewing sex work as potentially dangerous for women may also be influenced by the dominant discourse that men are controlled by an evolutionally-driven sexual desire, which positions all men as potential sexual predators (Jones, 1999).

As a way to manage this perception in other people, Cherry and Lillith spoke about being careful about marks and bruises that clients may leave on their bodies and how loved ones and lovers may interpret them. In response to the vignette character, Catherine, receiving a negative response when telling her friend, Nicole, about her sex work, Lillith spoke about how Catherine may need to be more careful at work so as not to obtain bruises or marks on her body.

Researcher: What ways do you think she might look after herself [given Nicole’s reaction]?

Lillith: ah just keeping herself safe I suppose ... in the work place, umm cause it can be only small things like a finger print and all that kind of stuff and I always—I’m paranoid about these kind of bruises because how else do you explain them if it’s like [touches shoulder with hand—thumb on inside of shoulder bone] whatever um (long pause), so if Nicole were hypothetically to continue ... their friendship and that, she would start noticing little things and blow things out of proportion.
It would be easy to respond to the idea of women obtaining bruises through their sex work as abhorrent and akin to signs of violence; however, this quote suggests that for Lillith, these bruises and marks were more worrisome for the way that they may be interpreted. Throughout this quote Lillith used language such as ‘only small things’ and ‘noticing little things’ to downplay the importance of the bruises themselves, instead placing the emphasis on how they may be given meaning by an observer, especially to an individual who already positioned sex work negatively. The way that Lillith positioned her hand provided me with a visual understanding of the way that she may obtain the marks and bruises that she was referring to. This suggests that Lillith was also trying to put me, as the interviewer, at ease—Lillith possibly did not want me to ‘blow things out of proportion’ either.

Cherry spoke about marks and bruises in a different context. While she spoke about the marks in relation to the vignette question that asked about feeling sexy at home it was still in relation to how other people may view them. Unfortunately, at the time of the interview this was not followed up on and Cherry quickly moved on in her narrative.

Um, maybe something that does affect [me], if I have a partner, is sometimes clients will leave marks on you and then I feel a bit, not, not sexy, but I do feel a bit like I don’t want my partner to see that (Cherry).

Despite this oversight at the time of the interview, it is interesting how Cherry shifted in this sentence from talking in the first person, ‘if I have a partner’, to the third person, ‘sometimes clients will leave marks on you,’ and then back to first person, ‘and then I feel’. Cherry may be distancing herself from the act that has/may produce marks and bruises but is placing herself in the forefront of her feelings about it in relation to her partner. Another reading could be that Cherry is indicating through
her use of ‘you’ that this can happen to anyone in the sex industry and that it is not particular to her. Further still, Cherry may have used the term ‘you’ to help me to identify with her experiences. This later reading suggests that, like Lillith, Cherry is downplaying the significance of clients leaving marks and bruises on her body through the generality of this part of her narrative, ‘sometimes clients will leave marks on you’.

As mentioned above, some of the women spoke about how they believed that many people would draw on the image of a drug-addicted street sex worker in response to their talking about sex work. Natalie, who had been working in brothels for fifteen years, told me that women who do not work in the sex industry were most likely to attach street sex worker stigma to her if she spoke about sex work to them:

But, it’s just that stigma attached and when you tell someone who doesn’t know anything about prostitutes, she’s going to think of some junkie on Grey street [a street in a Melbourne suburb, St Kilda, known for street sex work] and she’s going to think that that’s what you’re doing and when you try to explain it, she might be okay—it depends on what sort of friend she is. But, you know, you’ll see after, but you don’t want to go around telling everyone, so you probably wouldn’t tell people unless you really thought that they are going to be okay with it (Natalie).

Similarly, Melina spoke about the image that she felt that her parents would draw from if she were ever to speak about her sex work to them. Once again it is the image of her working on the street:

But I can understand from someone that has no understanding of it at all, that you would just think, ‘well it is just the most disgusting thing that you can do’.
So, for my parents, it would be just, you know, ‘you’re that hooker standing on the street in St Kilda’, I think that’s what that represents (Melina).

Melina and Natalie appeared to be speaking of the level of visibility of street sex workers in St Kilda because of the outdoor nature of street sex work. Further, all three women located a lack of knowledge and understanding as the reason why other people may draw on the image of street sex work suggesting that because of the absence of alternative discourses they were most likely to draw on the image that was most available to them.

Lillith also spoke about the image of street sex work. She spoke of using the term ‘sex industry’ rather than ‘prostitute’ or ‘_hooker’ when first speaking about her sex work as a way to depart from the image of the street worker:

I think ... they are going to think, because they care for you, they are going to think the worst and they are going to think street worker or something like that (Lillith).

Likewise, Samantha spoke about education as a mitigating factor in the kind of response to her speaking about her sex work that a person may give. In relation to when her parents found out that she worked in sex work Samantha said:

people are morally, um, offended you know, it’s like, ‘you are doing that to me, you are going to be a sex worker, you are doing that to me’. It’s a bit like, I think parents, you know, it’s, that’s what my parents would have felt when they found out; ‘you are doing this to the family,’ you know, ‘you are defaming the family name,’ so um, and that, and that’s their education (Samantha).

Four of the other women also spoke about trying to determine how other people may respond to their talk of their sex work before deciding whether or not they
would speak about their sex work. This was often spoken of in terms of ‘sussing out’ how a person may respond to them speaking about their sex work. The term ‘sussing out’ refers to an act of determining, without letting the other person know, something about them. In this situation, the women were referring to trying to determine, or predict, another person’s position on sex work and therefore how they may respond. April wrote of this most succinctly in an email response:

Most commonly, the process of disclosure for me involves a subtle sussing out of the person’s positioning in relation to sex work in order to ascertain what kind of response I may be facing (April, email response).

Kitty also spoke about trying to predict how people understood sex work, ‘I think you have to, um, suss out the people really’. In response to a question about she might approach determining another person’s position on sex work, Kitty articulated that sometimes it is very straightforward, ‘you probably wouldn’t want to tell (laughing), you know, an 80 year old grandma at a bus stop’. Cherry, on the other hand, expressed that the questions pertaining to talking about sex work were difficult: ‘Yeah, that’s a really, really hard question. All of them are hard’. She expressed that this was because there was a disconnection between the advice that she would give to another sex worker about telling people and what she has done in her own life. She did, however, give an example of one way that she had ‘sussed out’ a friend to determine whether or not she might speak about her sex work to him:

A guy ... I got him to drop me off at the car park. There’s a McDonald’s there and the brothel’s on the side there. I got him to drop me off there and said that I was going to the train station and I had to jump out and get something out of the back of the car. And, you know, there’s only two buildings there. He laughed and I said, ‘what are you laughing at?’ and he said, ‘oh,’ you know,
pointing to the brothel and having a laugh. So, I guess for me, if he is aware that it is there then he must have some kind of an opinion about it so I can bring it up. If he had of completely ignored it I wouldn’t have brought it up because I guess he wouldn’t have wanted to bring it up in front of me for a reason. Whether he goes there, whether he doesn’t acknowledge that that kind of industry is around, he might not like it and there’s lots of different reasons (Cherry).

Cherry took advantage of their physical proximity to a brothel to read her friend’s reaction to it. She felt that this gave her insight into his potential reaction to her telling him about her sex work. Cherry expressed that she read his pointing and laughing at the brothel as ‘he must have some kind of an opinion about it so I can bring it up’ whereas if he had ignored the brothel she would read that as he either does not acknowledge the sex industry or that he would have his own confession to make about it, such as that ‘he goes there’. Sara also spoke about how she, or other sex workers, may determine how the people around her may position sex workers.

Researcher: ... how do you think that she [the vignette character, Catherine] would go about talking to other people, um, in order to gauge if they would be okay?

Sara: mmm, I think probably it might happen without her instigating it, so if there was discussions in social situations, or something like that, around different issues. So, you could just stumble across it by accident ... I think it’s really a question of waiting to hear people’s attitudes. Or, people are very outspoken of their disapproval, so you would know, (pause) gauge if it was safe to tell them.
Many of these responses emerged from the vignette scenario detailing the main character, Catherine, speaking of her sex work to two friends. One of the friends, Nicole, responded negatively claiming that she no longer wished to be friends with Catherine, while the other friend, Grace, stated that it did not make a difference to their friendship. These scenarios were designed to see how the women made sense of other people’s understandings of sex work. Two of the women framed Nicole’s negative response in terms of religious and Christian moral codes:

Ahhhh (long pause), I think that it will come down to personal ethics ... which can be determined by either religion, or upbringing (Lillith).

Oh I haven’t [been told] that ‘I can’t see you, or hang out with you’, but I assume some would, yeah some Christian, they don’t even like abortions and stuff so they probably wouldn’t put up with a sex worker (Natalie).

In her email response to the vignette, April wrote that Nicole may be drawing on ‘her own socio-political and feminist ideas about sex work’ to make sense of her friend’s involvement in sex work. April, earlier in her vignette response, had highlighted how she believed that the most accepted narrative of sex work is that of powerless victim. Sara’s experiences detailed above also speak to this. Both women however, demonstrated a practice of care of the self when they criticised the validity of this disempowering narrative and its effect of producing self-deprecating thoughts.

In her response to the follow-on question in the vignette which asked about how the main vignette character would feel about Nicole’s reaction, April wrote about how this kind of response may feed negative feelings: ‘it may invite her own internal whorephobia to rear its head as she re-examines her worthiness within friendships’. April wrote about how her own experiences of respecting and responding to other people’s negative understandings of sex work led her to:
Seek ... counselling, to increased solitude, and to seeking companions who are
more sex worker friendly, or, usually if I am feeling more vulnerable to the
judgments from friends I may curtail my own actions, often with a sense of
submerging aspects of myself (April, email response).

Kitty expressed that Nicole’s response to the vignette character Catherine’s act
of speaking about her sex work may be due to the way that Catherine explained sex
work to her in the first place. Kitty felt that Catherine may already think about her sex
work in negative ways and that this may affect how her friends react:

it could be the way um, Catherine came across also, the way she explained it,
or you know ‘cause a lot of times, I, I do, ah, know that a lot of sex workers
feel bad about themselves and then the way they come across is pretty, ah it
could be rude, at the same time, it could be in your face a little too much ...
unfortunately, you know, it’s just our society, you know, you gotta deal with
the, the limitations of that (Kitty).

As explored above, Cherry was very careful about how she described sex
work, only talking about the positive side so as not to feed the stigma that she felt
informed many people’s understandings of sex work. In response to the vignette
character Nicole’s reaction, Cherry expressed that maybe, ‘it’s my fault too, for not
explaining to her in a better way, what I do’.

The ways that other people may respond played a large part in the women’s
decisions about speaking about their work or not. Similar to Sanders’ findings that
women may think about the values, beliefs and understandings of sex work when
deciding whether or not to speak about their work (Sanders, 2005) so too did the
women in this current research. While maintaining silence about their work was a way
that the women could care for themselves by avoiding confrontation and
stigmatisation, the women also cared for themselves by locating and naming likely, or received, responses to their speaking about their work. Furthermore, they identified where and how other people gained access to meanings about sex work—from television, the media, films and religious or psychology frameworks. Identifying this helped some of the women; including Sara, Cherry, April and Kate, to resist taking on these negative understandings as their own truths of themselves.

**Positives of Speaking about Sex Work**

While individual women may feel compelled to speak about their sex work to other people out of an imperative to ‘come clean’ and confess their sexual behaviours, there may be other reasons why some women choose to speak about sex work to certain people in their lives. Samantha was in her mid-fifties and had been working as a private sex worker for around twenty years when I met her. She spoke about gaining a more honest relationship with friends after speaking about her sex work with them and enjoying telling people because then, ‘I can be myself’. It could be read that Samantha’s understanding of ‘self’ is fixed and essential and therefore is contrary to Foucault’s notion of self as something formed rather than discovered. Her reflection, however, on how it makes her feel to speak about her sex work to close friends is consistent with the ethical self-creation that Foucault observed in his genealogy into Ancient Greek and Roman ethics. That is, Samantha developed an understanding of herself and the quality of her relationships; seeing many benefits for both herself and her close friends by talking about her sex work with them:

I think a lot of um girls in the industry don’t tell anybody that they are a sex worker. I personally do, um, once I have met anybody socially that I feel is becoming a friend or someone I’m going to see regularly, whether that’s a male, as in a personal relationship, or other couples or um, or girlfriends, um I
let them know, it gives them an opportunity to um, to decide whether they
want to be, um, continue a relationship with me or not and I’ve never in all my
years found that it’s made any difference, I ah, I and I enjoy it because I can
be myself (Samantha).

Samantha spoke about how speaking about her sex work gave close friends the
opportunity to decide whether or not to continue the friendship as well as to get to
know her better: ‘I feel there is a need to [speak about sex work] when somebody
becomes a close friend, I think they really need to know who their friend really is’. A
part of Samantha’s strategy for living a life that allows her the freedom to be herself
was choosing particular types of people as friends:

also there might be some people that I know that I don’t tell because, I do
choose people that I befriend usually have outgoing personalities so [it]
becomes easy [to tell them]. People that maybe just remain acquaintances and
of no real worth as a close friend, I may never tell them (Samantha).

While April wrote about the how sometimes she envies women in sex work
who can and do maintain silence about their sex work in regard to their partners, she
also spoke how sharing this aspect of her life can foster greater intimacy:

I prefer transparency and openness between partners—and it is important to
gift each other with the possibility of learning about each other’s journey
deeply—what has made us who we are ... at times I have found that disclosure
can lead to a deeper intimacy in relation to sexuality and intimacy ... and I
think that partners can benefit enormously from the repertoire of sexual and
relationship intimacy skills that a sex worker cultivates (April, email
response).
April challenged the notion that speaking about sex work to partners is always injurious to the relationship, and instead, decided that the benefit that may come from sharing this aspect of her life with loved ones justifies the risk. Talking about sex work to a potential or current lover, however, requires delicate considerations. April suggested that if the vignette character were to talk about her sex work to a lover, then it may be easier if this occurred early in the relationship, ‘if she hasn’t disclosed early on in the relationship, it may become harder and harder to disclose as she invests more in the relationship’. April wrote about how this strategy has worked as a kind of litmus test to predict the potential relationship’s ability to function respectfully and intimately:

I have always preferred to disclose early on [in relationships] usually prior to the engagement with a lover simply because their response informs me of the relationship’s capacity to cope with an important aspect of my life/identity. This also gives me an indication of the kinds of stigma and discrimination I may experience from a potential lover, and therefore is an important signal for my own self-care and mental health and wellbeing (April, email response).

April’s preference to speak to potential lovers about her sex work was a way that she could care for herself—particularly her future self—by looking for signs that her sex work may impact the relationship, and subsequently, her mental health and wellbeing. In this way, speaking about her sex work to lovers and potential partners was important for April’s sense of self, while also fostering more intimate relationships for her with lovers and partners.

Unlike the other women in this research, Cherry spoke about actively deciding to share her sex work with her parents. Cherry told her father and her stepmother about her sex work and found that her stepmother was concerned about the moral
implications for Cherry, while her father was more concerned about her safety. When deciding whether or not to speak about her sex work to her parents, Cherry felt ‘ninety per cent’ confident that it would be okay to tell them. When she did, she found that her father reacted the way that she had hoped that he would, ‘he thought about it and he asked me some questions’. While her parents were visiting Cherry from New Zealand she walked them past the brothel where she was working so that they could ‘see where I worked and um, see how like safety requirements—measurements—and stuff like that [worked]’. Cherry believed that this helped her father to see how things were for her rather than relying on his imagination:

I wanted my dad to understand that it’s um, it’s not like how it is on TV or you know, I’m not, I don’t feel that I’m in any immediate danger and I want him to be settled about that. Yeah. So he doesn’t, like if I just said to him, ‘Dad, I’m a sex worker’, then he’d have all these thoughts, you know, imagination can be a pretty wild thing, so I guess I just tried to explain it to him, in a, in a way that he can see physical things, and procedures and so forth. Yeah, I don’t talk about the men, just like; the things that he needs to know (Cherry).

Foucault’s ethics of care of the self not only involves creating and maintaining greater freedom for individuals by challenging, reflecting on and changing, their relationship to certain moral codes but also ‘giving due concern and respect to others by attending to their needs’ (Infinito, 2003, p. 162). In this situation, Cherry cared for her parents by critiquing the discourse that she should keep her sex work a secret from her family. She expressed that it would be better if she told them, rather than if they found out at a point in the future:

I think it’s important for them to know because if something happens to me it would be worse for it just to come out and have them not know. I may be dead
and like ‘oh, my daughter was a hooker’ you know? (laughs) So I just, I think, and even if they didn’t accept it, um, I think it is still better for them to know anyway (Cherry).

Cherry’s narrative suggests that she had challenged the notion that she should not speak about sex work to family by trying to see into the future and predict what it would be like for her father and stepmother if they found out another way. Cherry reflected on this discourse and decided to walk her parents past the brothel to an attempt to replace mental pictures they had of sex work with the one that she felt was more representative of her working life. Likewise, when talking about sex work to her father, Cherry was always careful to keep the conversation away from the actual sex and her clients, therefore controlling the images and discourses that her father might draw on when giving meaning to her work.

**Caring for Self and Others through Silence**

All of the women, except for Kitty, maintained at least some silence about their sex work. While this may be read as restrictive for them, Brown’s (1998) work on silence as a practice of freedom provides another reading. There is an assumption that ‘coming clean’ leads to the emancipation from the ‘burden’ of keeping aspects of one’s sexual acts and practices secret. When something is spoken, however, there is also the potential for it to be regulated and discursively produced. As a result, silences can serve to protect an individual from being positioned by other people in ways that may complicate their relationship or adversely affect an individual’s self-positioning. Foucault wrote that ‘silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance’ (Brown, 1976).
It could be tempting to read Foucault’s notion of silence in the face of disciplinary and regulatory discourses as a form of resistance that leads to emancipation. A more useful reading, however, is that rather than seeing silence as only an act of resistance to restrictive productive power relations, keeping silent may also be a strategy used for negotiating within discursive understandings of the social group or phenomenon (Brown, 1998). Understanding silence as ‘defence in the context of domination, a strategy for negotiating domination, rather than a sign of emancipation from it’ (Brown, 1998, p. 324) is helpful for looking at the ways that silence functioned in the women’s lives.

Brown’s exploration of silence in the face of the imperative to confess acknowledges the complexity involved when keeping secrets. It is, therefore, important to resist substituting confession for silence as the most liberating way of handling the stigmatisation of sex work. That is, while silence may be one way that individuals manage how others position them this does not mean that it is more valid than speaking about sex work, which can invite judgement. The women in this research approached silence and speaking about their sex work in different ways. However, there were some common themes that emerged amongst the women’s narratives. This section looks at the ways that some of the women spoke about caring for themselves and others by maintaining silence about their sex work.

Kate, Melina, Sara, Lillith, April and Samantha all spoke about a difference between telling friends and telling family about their sex work. Kate, who had spoken about her sex work to many friends and colleagues at her non-sex work job, expressed that she had not told her family. This made her feel uncomfortable however because, ‘I’m a very open person and I’m not use to having to be evasive or deceptive about things’ (Kate). There was a disconnection between how Kate saw herself and the
behaviours associated with keeping this aspect of her life secret from her loved ones. Nevertheless, Kate indicated that her silence was necessary to prevent her father from finding out. In the same interview, Kate talked about how she believed that her parents would draw on the same image of sex work that she did before she began working and that this knowledge of how they would/might position her and her sex work influenced her decision not to tell them:

Um, um I don’t want my dad to feel ashamed or embarrassed about it and I suspect that he (pause) might, he’s very (pause) uncomfortable talking about emotional things and very uncomfortable talking about, particularly anything that’s sort of sexual, you know? If we are watching a movie together and there’s a sex scene or something, one of us has to get up and make a coffee or something (laughs). Um, so that’s just something that is particularly between Dad and me, you know, I just don’t want to make him uncomfortable with my choices (Kate).

Kate’s relationship with her father made talking about sex and sexuality difficult in general. Kate’s decision to keep her sex work secret from her father was a way that she could negotiate particular dynamics of this relationship, sustaining it through the separation of this father/daughter relationship from sexuality, even with coincidental images of sexuality such as in a movie. Kate reflected on the particular way that this relationship functioned in order to predict how her father would feel if he was exposed to the image of her not only as a sexual being, but as someone who engaged in commercial sex. Reading Kate’s specific silence in this way suggests that contrary to feeling restricted by this secret, Kate had freed herself from destabilising a relationship that in other ways she was satisfied with, ‘I’m comfortable with my choices, but I, you know, he’s a fantastic dad and he’s a good man and, (pause) yeah,
I just don’t want to burden him with that if I don’t have to, yeah’ (Kate). In this way, by maintaining silence about her sex work, Kate also cared for her father by maintaining his knowledge of her as a ‘good’ daughter.

April also wrote about the difficulties of disclosing to family in her email response. April had recently had a baby when she contacted the researcher in regard to participating in this research study. In her response to the vignette, she wrote about how since having a child she had felt less motivated to speak about her sex work than she had in the past. She wrote about how she now feared how speaking about sex work may impact, or reflect on, them as a family:

I am more concerned about the effects and worries my family have about how others perceive my work. Now I have a child, I am more closeted than ever out of concern for their wellbeing and social acceptance and how we as a family are perceived (April, email response).

April’s decisions about speaking and maintaining silence about her sex work were formed in consideration of power relations that functioned to produce her in ways that may be contrary to discourses of the ‘good mother’. Not only this, but since having a child, April may have become more aware of broader social impacts of her sex work. That is, by becoming a mother, April was no-longer only resisting discourses about what it means to be a woman, but also a ‘good’ mother. Melina, whose child was in his late teens when she was interviewed, also spoke about this and expressed fears about how she may be seen through her son’s eyes if he were ever to find out about her sex work.

But family absolutely no way, I couldn’t, you know, I think my parents would just be devastated; I couldn’t do that. As for my son; oh god no. It would just
be so embarrassing. He would be mortified; yeah he would be mortified, I think, yeah (Melina).

Melina’s decision to keep her sex work secret from her family came from an understanding about how her parents and her son may position her if they were to know about her sex work. Further, by keeping her sex work secret she was also protecting them from the power relations and discursive tensions that they may be confronted with. In this sense, maintaining silence about her sex work was also a way that Melina could care for her parents and her son. As mentioned above, when her partner at the time discovered that she worked at a brothel he was challenged to make sense of the conflicting understandings of sex work and monogamy. Melina spoke about how this was difficult for him, and while they tried to continue the relationship, it soon broke down:

I think, he did try very hard to deal with that but it was um, I think it’s hard for a man to, to cope with you going off and doing that, yeah ... I think men are very territorial and I think, ah, they just don’t like the idea of other men, you know, touching you and they don’t like that, sense of intimacy that you have with other men. Um, ‘cause I know for him, when he said, when he found out, he said that it was, he felt really sick, and you know, actually was physically sick. And I think that’s um, I can understand that really, when it’s someone that you love and um, I think it’s very, very difficult. I can understand that from his point of view. It’s difficult (Melina).

While there was sadness and loss in Melina’s story about the breakdown of her long-term relationship, as well as empathy for his understanding of the possible sexual and intimate meanings of sex work, Melina did not appear to have taken this stigmatisation on as her own self-understanding. Melina understood her partner’s
response through discourses of territorialism and monogamy: ‘they just don’t like the idea of other men, you know, touching you’. Heterosexual discourses about ‘sexual ownership’ and monogamy, as well as the essentialist gender discourse which attributes more worth to women’s sexualities and fidelity (explored above in Chapter 3) provided a way that Melina could give meaning to her partner’s reaction to her sex work and the subsequent breakdown of their relationship.

Lillith also feared that her relationships with family members might be compromised if they know that she worked in sex work. The person that she spoke of as the closest to her was her grandmother. The fear that her grandmother may find out about her sex work impacted her decisions about disclosing to other family members. Lillith told me that she would be comfortable telling her sister and mother about her sex work if she were certain that the information would not reach her grandmother. Rather than speaking about her sister and mother as being more willing to accept her sex work, it appeared that it was more that Lillith did not feel as though their changing understanding of her would impact the way that she saw herself: ‘but if it was my Mum or my siblings I’d frankly have the attitude, “well this is what I do so you can accept it or not”’. Lillith indicated that the way her Grandma may view sex workers was only one part of the reason why she did not want her to know:

it is a generational thing in the fact that one, it’s um, definitely only certain types of women do sex work and that if, like, the lower class kind of woman but, um, but on the other hand she would be hurt in the fact that I didn’t come to her for money when I needed it (Lillith).

While this quote suggests that it is more the specifics of Lillith’s relationship with her grandmother that is of issue, another reading is that Lillith suspected that her grandmother would position sex work as something that one does out of desperation
rather than as a choice: ‘whereas to me this is a job, this is where I get my pay day from’. If her grandmother was to know about her sex work then she may position Lillith as a victim of economic circumstances rather than as engaging in an occupation of her choosing. Due to the discourse that women only enter sex work out of economic desperation, Lillith felt that her grandmother would feel disappointed that she did not come to her for financial help. Furthermore, maintaining silence about her sex work with her Grandmother, Lillith was also caring for this person who was very special to her. If she did tell her Grandmother Lillith would be putting her in the position of being challenged by the conflict between the discourses about granddaughters and those associated with prostitution.

Like Lillith, Sara also kept silent about her sex work with her family. However, she spoke of recently weighing up whether or not to tell one of her sisters. Sara spoke about how this sister had a close friend who worked in the sex industry and how this had changed her sister’s understanding of sex work: ‘I’ve watched her attitude really change over the last year or two’. Despite her mother actively supporting the decriminalisation of the sex industry in New Zealand, Sara was concerned that, ‘it comes from more do-goody [position], like it’s okay for other people to do, but not my daughter’. In relation to her parents, Sara she did not feel as though she would lose her relationship with them if she were to speak about her sex work but that ‘they would be too upset; they wouldn’t be equipped to cope with it at all’.

Keeping sex work secret requires a degree of deception, particularly if time and money need to be explained (Sanders, 2005). Some of the women talked about fabricating jobs as a strategy to maintain their silence. This appeared to be a necessary factor in managing the ways that people in their lives not only positioned them but
also felt okay about how they were living their lives. Sara had created intricate layers of stories amongst her family members, where some family members believed that she was engaging in a different, non-sexual, monetary activity that other family members may frown upon. Sara told me about how claiming that she was engaged in this particular activity explained both her secretiveness as well as her money to family members who were worried that she was breaking the law. Sara also spoke about how she had learned over the last few years that it is important to create an ongoing story that lays the groundwork for future actions. For example, Sara knew that she wanted to buy a house within the next year and that while her finances were above board in relation to tax, they were not known to her immediate family. How family members understood her financial position was an important ingredient to Sara’s credibility as a homeowner in the eyes of her family. As her story stood at the time of the interviews her parents believed that she was working as a temp in various jobs.

So, I have to start creating a story, so I have to tell them that I’m thinking of buying a house and I’m starting to save and then a couple of years down the track I will just have to pretend that I just bought it, when I would have bought it a couple of years ago (Sara).

Melina had told her partner that she was cleaning to get extra money while she went back to study. This, however, did not match her actions and she told the researcher, ‘I think he just thought that was a bit odd, because I was putting makeup on to go cleaning (laughs), shaving my legs to go cleaning (laughs); he’s not that stupid’. Natalie had decided to tell people that she worked in a call centre as ‘a call centre is pretty standard’ (Natalie). Some years ago a boyfriend at the time asked her about her work and so Natalie conducted research into call centre work so that she could pass as a call centre worker to other people:
you start researching the job that you said and then you know all about it.

Yeah, I rang up 013 (a previous telephone number for directory assistance in Victoria) once, back when Telecom was 013 for directory, this is back in the olden days, and I said (laughing), ‘I’m doing a university paper on public communications, can I talk to a manager? Can you give me some information about the job?’ I lied my little head off. I was ringing from work, from the back phone (laughs) (Natalie).

Maintaining silence was one way that women in this research cared for their family, friends and loved ones. By staying silent about sex work and creating plausible narratives about their lives and their work the women in this research attempted to sustain their families’ understandings of them. Maintaining silence about their work was not about shame for these women, but was more about protecting family members from confront their own preconceived ideas about sex work. By understanding other people’s opinions about sex work as resulting from popular images of sex work and sex workers the women in this research were also able to resist taking on these understandings as their own self-truths.

**Conclusion**

This chapter engaged with the women’s stories and thoughts on speaking or maintaining silence about their sex work. Foucault’s work on confession argues that individuals are compelled to talk about their sexual feelings and desires as a way to liberate themselves from the burden of secrecy. Because sex workers are subjected to many stigmatising discourses, speaking about sex work is potentially damaging as it can not only divide sex workers from other people who position sex workers in negative ways, but may also divide them from themselves if they take on the negative understandings held by others.
The women’s narratives suggest that understanding the different discourses about sex work may aid sex workers when they decide whom, when, and if to talk about sex work with other people. Some of the women found that speaking about sex work to close friends, family, or loved ones increased their feelings of intimacy. For other women, maintaining silence about their sex work was a way that they could sustain relationships in ways that supported both their and the other persons understanding of the roles and dynamics—Kate’s relationship with her father is one example of this. While some women may feel an imperative to confess, such as Kate feeling as though by maintaining silence she was being deceitful and contrary to her understanding of herself as an open and honest person, most of the women were about to sustain positive understandings of their silence and locate it as a way to care for other people without taking on feelings of shame as their own self-truths. Cherry’s narrative stands out, however, because of the way that she so carefully constructed sex work as a positive experience. She appeared to do to not only put other people at ease about her sex work (such as her father) but to also prevent being positioned as a victim.

The following chapter looks specifically at the ways that the women responded to, appropriated and resisted various discourses about gender.
6. Disrupting Gender

The previous chapter explored the ways that the women spoke about being positioned by other people as sex workers, including how they sought to manage this through various strategies including humour and silence. In this chapter, the ways that the women positioned themselves as women in sex work and also how they positioned some of their male clients are examined. Sex work is often positioned as highly gendered due to the fact that there are currently many more women sex workers than men, and that men form the majority of clients (Gall, 2007; Barrington, 2008). Further, as explored in Chapters 2 and 3, radical feminists argue that sex work is the epitome of women’s sexual oppression and that sex work is always violence against women (Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 2009). However, other feminists note that sex work is gendered by the way that it still forms one of the most accessible sources of income for women the world over, as well as how sex work fits within broader dominant discourses of men and women’s sexual desires, pleasures and acts (Scoular & Sanders, 2010).

This chapter explores how the women spoke about notions of sex, gender and sexuality, including essentialist notions of gendered sexual desire and normalised understandings of (heterosexual) feminine beauty and attractiveness. It looks at the ways that the women drew on various gendered discourses in order to understand their work. Further, it explores the work that some of the women did in order to change how they knew their work, their clients and their femininity; exploring how the women negotiated gendered discourses as well as how they disrupted some knowledges while drawing on others.
Traversing Femininity Discourses

Dominant discourses about women’s sexual desirability generally position that which is desirable to heterosexual men as thin, young, large-breasted and typically blonde. While women who work in street work are often portrayed as under-fed, drug addicted and victims, women working in indoor settings are sometimes portrayed as so-called ‘high-class’ and fitting current notions of feminine beauty. This section explores how three of the women negotiated these images with their own sense of self as sex workers.

At the time of the interview, Melina was 47 and undertaking a postgraduate degree full time, as well as working day shifts in a Melbourne brothel. She spoke about the way that she positioned her body before starting sex work and how this was influenced by understandings about women’s ageing bodies as sexually undesirable. This dominant discourse (Dillaway, 2005) influenced how Melina thought about her body and her sexual desirability:

I felt sort of matronly, kind of um, because I was much older ... I kind of thought, you know, things were kind of over and um, I don’t know, maybe I didn’t feel that attractive, or whatever. When I first started working, I used to wear a wig and I tried to look really different to myself ... I tried to do the whole, kind of, you know, I had the straight blonde hair and, you know, all that thing, you know, that I thought would go down better and um, tried ... more risqué kind of clothing (Melina).

Butler’s theory of overplay provides a way of exploring how Melina negotiated the difference between her desire to work in sex work and her concern about her attractiveness. Butler argued that overplay is a form of parody (Butler,
1990) which illuminates how bodies have been discursively constructed through binary knowledges of femininity and masculinity (Jones, 2009). For Melina, sex work became a place where she overplayed femininity in a way that fitted with her understandings of current norms about heterosexual women’s attractiveness—wearing a long blonde wig and particular types of clothing.

While at the time it was difficult for Melina to see her body as desirable to men, other people who had different knowledges about sex work and clients tried to help her to see this. As detailed in Chapter 3, care of other people is an aspect of Foucault’s ethics of care of the self. Making changes to how one thinks of oneself and then communicating this to other people is one way that individuals care for others through care of the self (Rabinow, in Foucault, 1997, p. 287). The owner of the brothel that Melina first approached for work attempted to care for Melina by challenging her understanding of her age as a hindrance to sex work.

when I started, I remember saying to the owner, ‘oh, I don’t think this is going to work, you know, I think I’ve past it,’ I remember her just saying to me, ‘you’ve got to be kidding, you’ve got no idea how this works,’ and she said, ‘just give it a go, and talk to me in a couple of weeks’. And a couple of weeks later it was, it was like, ‘yeah you’re right’, you know? (Melina).

Once Melina had challenged the discourse that sex workers need to be of one body type, she gained access to an alternative, subjugated, discourse that clients are attracted to a variety of ages and bodies, ‘you don’t have to look like Pamela Anderson’ (Melina). This disruption provided a space within discursive power networks where Melina could position her attractiveness in a less restrictive way.

Drawing on dominant discourses about men’s heterosexual desire of women’s bodies positioned her own body as unattractive; whereas the subjugated knowledge that
Melina accessed allowed her to understand her body as attractive to men. This resulted in Melina trying new ways of performing femininity at work; she dispensed with her wig and risqué clothes and instead wore her hair and outfits in a way that closely resembled how she wore her femininity in other contexts when she desired to feel and look sexy.

While other researchers may read this through the notion of ‘manufactured sexual identity’ for commercial or psychological reasons (Sanders, 2006a), I read this as Melina gaining access to subjugated knowledges about men’s sexual desires and that her first attempt to appear sexually attractive at work (with the straight blonde wig) was an attempt to manufacture a sexual performance that was influenced by dominant discourses about femininity.

Melina also challenged this discourse with help from her clients. The affirmative responses that Melina received from them helped her to continue to disrupt her previous understandings about performances of femininity that are desirable to heterosexual men:

then I went in with a lot of clients that I’d been with before and they were like, ‘oh you have got different hair’, and I was like, ‘yeah well actually it’s my hair,’ and they went, ‘oh, much better!’ and I was like, ‘okay’ (Melina).

Foucault argued that the act of thinking about how one constitutes one’s subjectivity is imperative to being able to interrogate the truth of one’s self. This is where self-reflection and self-understanding enable individuals to look at their thoughts, behaviours and understandings. It is necessary for changes to be made. Melina practiced this by stepping back from her actions and reflecting on how she constructed and performed her femininity at work. In doing so, she challenged the understanding that she was too old for sex work. Disrupting this, Melina drew on
other knowledges about femininity and heterosexual desirability in order to fill the space left behind (Butler, 1989; O’Leary, 2002).

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does; the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects upon it as a problem (Foucault, 1984a, p. 388).

At the time of the interviews, Cherry was in her early twenties and had been working in legal brothels in Melbourne for the previous two years. She appeared to struggle more than the other women with feelings about her clients. Despite struggling with feelings of anger towards her clients, she expressed that this was changing and that it would continue to change as she got ‘know herself’ better. For Cherry, there was a jarring between how she thought about herself in non-sex work contexts and the gender performance that she felt was necessary in sex work contexts. Whereas Melina enjoyed wearing makeup and feminine shoes in everyday situations, for Cherry this was an uncomfortable aspect of what she felt was necessary to attract clients. She spoke about how she preferred to cover her body when she was not at work in order to give herself a break from being looked at. Both times that I met her, Cherry wore hooded jackets, T-shirts and tracksuit pants or shorts. Her hair was short and she did not wear any makeup. Cherry told me that she did not like wearing ‘girly shoes’ at work and that she felt that her tall height allowed her to avoid wearing high heels:
No I never wear high heels because I’m 6 foot so um, no I might look like a tranny [transexual woman] (laughs). There’s parlours for that, and it’s not where I work (Cherry).

Butler argued that one cannot simply put on a gender as the acting would be glaringly obvious (Butler, 2004b). Rather than signal her gender performance at work as an overplayed performance of femininity, Cherry performed heterosexual desirability in a way that shifted her gender performance in a less obvious way than she felt would come from wearing high heels. As a further comment on how she was continuing to interrogate where her gender performance fitted within heterosexual sex work, Cherry spoke about her tattoos:

Cherry: I have lots of tattoos. That’s why some people don’t book me. Um yeah. And I just like, um, I like everything about it and the main reason why I am doing the job is so that I can save money and um, hopefully I can start my own business. I like to do piercing so basically most of the money that I earn from that goes to savings, I try and save it. It’s not always the case but a lot of it. Yep.

Researcher: what do you like about tattoos and piercings?
Cherry: ... like that’s just how I, or how I see myself, that’s just the image I have of myself in my head ... I don’t normally wear shorts [Cherry was wearing shorts at the interview], I normally wear pants and a T-shirt all the time and partly because, I guess, last week [at the previous interview] when I came I was wearing a hooded jumper and stuff because you get looked at, at work all the time, sometimes it’s nice just to, not be looked at and I also don’t

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9 ‘Book’ and ‘booking’ are colloquial terms used to describe the client’s act of choosing a sex worker and the actual engagement itself.
want, like it is okay for the clients who book me—I guess—but I don’t necessarily want other people to recognise my stuff, like my tattoos (Cherry).

Cherry’s tattoos functioned as a crossover between her gender performance at work and in other contexts. Further, they had the potential to signal what she felt was her real gender performance to her clients, while simultaneously having the potential to ‘out’ her as a sex worker in other contexts as they represented a mark which could be recognised by previous or current clients. Cherry spoke about covering up her tattoos with clothing in the brothel because they did not fit the gender performance that she felt many heterosexual men were attracted to:

I’m definitely not the most tattooed girl that I’ve seen working, but, you know, I’d like to have a few more [tattoos] (chuckles) but then I also know that by doing that it can be cutting off a larger part of the market, per se. Um, a lot of older men don’t really like them. A lot of younger guys and a lot of sort of Greek guys like them. Young guys, you know, because they think it’s cool and whatnot ... Um, sometimes I think, that if it’s a man that’s not born in Australia, sometimes they want that um, they want that Gold-coast girl, you know, the tan and the boobs and the, they want the Ozzie that gets advertised on TV commercials and stuff, probably (Cherry).

Like Melina, Cherry reflected on her gender performance at work and thought about how her tattoos functioned in a sex work context. Cherry believed that men who are born overseas prefer a gender performance that more readily emulates the stereotype of the blonde, tanned, Australian woman. Cherry challenged this stereotype of the ideal sex worker body by drawing on subjugated knowledges of men’s sexual desires and wants. Without the tattoos, or the knowledge of other women who work successfully in sex work with multiple tattoos, the economic—and thus the
(hetero)desirability—of this gender performance may have remained silent for Cherry other than within subcultures and niche markets. In this sense, both Cherry and the other sex workers with multiple tattoos of whom she spoke are possibly helping to change the bounds of what is considered acceptable performances of heterosexual femininity.

At the time of the interviews, Sara was taking a break from working privately by working in a Melbourne brothel. She was in her mid-twenties and had been working in sex work for four years. She was highly educated and enjoyed reading academic and feminist takes on the sex industry:

So it’s always been a very strong interest of mine, you know, the history of feminism and all the various different aspects that have come out of it and yeah trying to understand where my, where my morals and ethics were. And yeah, getting into sex work was something that I did because I was really interested in it (Sara).

Sara’s interest in academic feminist literature about sex work gave her access to alternative understandings of sexual ‘morals and ethics’ (Sara) and this helped her to think about sex work in various ways. Sara became interested academic accounts of sex work before she started working in the sex industry and, as detailed in Chapter 5, this enabled her to avoid taking on negative understandings of sex work by locating the ideology behind the opinions of others.

Out of the nine women who participated in this research, Sara most acutely expressed a ‘manufactured identity’ (Sanders, 2006a). The clarity and conviction with which she approached her sex work gender performance may have come from the knowledges that she attained through her intellectual curiosity of sex work research and theory. Rather than drawing on the image of the ‘blonde babe’ as her inspiration
for her work ‘character’, Sara looked for other ways that she could perform femininity that communicated particular meanings to her clients, especially her private escort clients. Working privately may require ways of performing femininity that are different from working in a brothel, as clients may be more concerned about anonymity and therefore prefer performances of femininity that do not fit with the sex worker stereotype:

I created a character for myself, um, you know, I never looked at magazines and thought, you know, ‘I’m going to try and be as much of a Barbie doll as possible’ ... I decided on a marketing strategy for myself and I think, for me, I look very young and I look very cute and so I decided that my marketing strategy was going to be like girl-next-door kind of thing ... I always dress very like, conservatively and um, wear minimal makeup and um, you know, that’s always been my marketing strategy and it’s worked really, really well. You know I always wear like a dress, you know a lot of the girls wear like stripper shoes and underwear and that kind of thing. You know, I never, ever dress like that. Um, it’s not so, it doesn’t, it’s not so much in the brothel but definitely when I was doing private work, it worked a charm because it created, it creates an illusion that you are not a sex worker and um, but that’s a marketing strategy, that’s not me feeling sexy either, it’s just me feeling like it’s a good way to manipulate men into giving me money, you know (Sara).

Sara told me that she developed a sex work ‘character’ in order to capitalise on social norms of what is considered heterosexually desirable without resorting to the image of the blond, tanned, large-breasted, ‘Barbie doll’, woman. Rather, she drew on the image of the ‘girl-next-door’, enhancing her young looks by wearing minimal makeup, conservative dresses and keeping her hair short. She told me about how she
needed to appear well educated, sweet and engaging. This is congruent with Sanders’ research findings that sex workers appropriate feminine performances that fit with normalised notions of femininity at any given time (2006a). While Sara stated that she was one of the top earners in the brothel where she was working, she also felt that this particular character did not work as well at the brothel. One reason for this, she felt, was that the clients were less educated than her private and escort clients and were therefore looking for more stereotypical representations of sex workers.

The extent to which the women in this research drew on, appropriated and resisted discursive constructions of gender femininity differed between the three women whose narratives are explored in this section. Sara, Melina and Cherry all reflected on their performances of femininity at work and whom this attracted. For Melina, reflecting on her understandings of her heterosexual desirability helped her to challenge understandings of herself and her body as aged and, therefore, unattractive. Sara’s creation of a sex work character was more deliberate than many of the other women and therefore fits with Sanders’ assertion that women do not simply appropriate discourses about heterosexually attractive femininity, but rather play with and manipulate them to their own financial advantage (Sanders, 2006a). Cherry felt a tension between how she performed femininity at work and in other contexts. This caused her to reflect on various gender performances as well as to locate how she could perform femininity at work in a way that decreased this tension for her, while enabling her to earn money.

**Sexual Essentialism**

Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial and tranhistorical. Dominated for over a century by medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, the
academic study of sex has reproduced essentialism. These fields classify sex as a property of individuals. It may reside in their hormones or their psyches. It may be construed as physiological or psychological (Rubin, 1993, p. 149).

This section includes three sub-sections in which the women’s narratives are explored in relation to essentialist understandings of men’s and women sexual desires, needs and motivations. In her research into how women in indoor sex work in the UK understood their sex work, Sanders found that some of the women used ‘rationalisation narratives’ which ‘justified why they were involved in prostitution’ as well as pointing to ‘important functions of prostitution’ (Sanders, 2005, 153). Sanders argued that this was a justification process which the women in her research engaged in to counter anti-sex work sentiment and stigma.

The women in this research also drew on narratives that positioned sex work as beneficial to general society. While Sanders (2005) analysed this as a way that sex workers could justify their work and their choices to other people, this study examines this through the lens of Foucault’s power/knowledge/discourse to see how these narratives are influenced by various discourses about gender. Further, Foucault’s ethics of care of the self provides a way of exploring how discourses about the larger benefits of sex work were challenged or appropriated by some women, pointing to the ways their relationship to these discourses were constructed.

**Discourses about Men and Women’s Sexual Desires**

As explored in Chapter 3, sexualities have historically been given meaning through biological discourses (Bazzul & Sykes, 2010). This has created a binary, with men’s ‘natural’ sexual desire on the one hand, and women’s ‘responsive’ and ‘receptive’ sexual motivations on the other. This binary is still dominant today and perpetuated within broader society even though some biological and evolutionary
scientists argue that within nature this distinction is not so clear-cut (Bazzul & Sykes, 2010). Given this, it was not surprising that there were echoes of this discourse in the women’s narratives, and that for some of the women this provided a comprehensive lens through which they viewed sexual, economic and interpersonal relations between men and women in various aspects of their lives. This section explores how these discourses functioned in the women’s lives.

At the time of her first interview Kate had been working as a private escort for only a few months, while also continuing to work in a caring profession. Kate was in her mid-thirties, was outgoing and talkative and, like Sara, she described her appeal to male clients as a ‘girl-next-door’ type. Her narrative was infused with essentialist notions of gender as well as social/environmental knowledges, which together accumulated to provide a consistent truth about how men and women enact their sexualities in relation to each other. Kate told many stories about her experiences in sex work during the previous three months. One of these stories was about a relationship between a client of hers and his wife:

  my married client, whose wife won’t have sex with him anymore, you know, [because he sees sex workers] it means that he’s not bothering her about it, she
gets left alone, she’s happy. He lets her spend, you know, 3,000 dollars on a
Gucci handbag and so she’s, you know, it’s working for her; it’s working for
him. You know, that’s not a bad thing (Kate).

There is a dominant discourse which positions women as losing interest in sex
during, or after, menopause (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). Kate, who had told me that this
client was an older man, drew on the discourse that women’s sexuality is fragile,
biologically dependent and naturally waning after childbearing years have passed.
Like Baumeister and Vohs (2004), Kate understood heterosexual relationships as
always including economic reciprocity. She understood her client’s wife to be receiving payment for essentially allowing—or turning a blind eye to—her partner’s sexual relationships with sex workers. Kate positioned sex work as a luxury or leisure activity that does not necessary affect the fabric of heterosexual relationships, but rather may sustain these relationships when women no longer desire to have sex with their partners. To tease out Kate’s understanding of gendered sexualities, she was asked what she thought the difference was between men and women’s sexual desires. She responded:

    Look, I think it’s an ongoing issue you know, between men and women, I mean most men you speak to gripe that they are not getting enough sex and most women go, ‘uggh get out of here all the time with the sex’, you know. I [think] Viagra is just the most stupid thing ever invented, it’s like women didn’t want more sex. They want less sex and more housework done. You know, if they should have invented anything, they should have invented something to increase women’s sex drive—that’s what they needed to invent. You know? (laughs) (Kate).

    By drawing on discourses about sexual dysfunction and medical intervention, Kate highlighted the degree to which she understood men and women’s sexual desires as biologically opposing each other. Echoing medical discourses, Kate spoke about what she believed to be appropriate and legitimate sexualities as well as what she considered as abnormal (for research which engages sexual dysfunction discourses see Fishman & Mamo, 2002). Whereas sexual dysfunction is commonly positioned as that which deviates from the normal, such as erectile dysfunction, Kate saw women’s lack of sexual desire as a problem and suggested that the medical community should develop medication to increase women’s sex drive. Kate understood women’s lack of
sexual desire as legitimate, as long as the particular woman is recompensed in some way such as through buying items that she desires in exchange for allowing her male partner to source sex elsewhere. This was complicated for Kate, however, as she also believed that a woman’s lack of sex drive could be disruptive to heterosexual relationships, especially if women preferred their relationships to be monogamous. That worries me for my personal life long term, you know? How am I going to be if I, you know, when I’m menopausal? How am I going to be in um, you know, if I’ve got small children and I’m exhausted? Um, worrying about that, that difference in drive, um because that has been an issue with my relationships in the past, it’s been a big issue (Kate).

Kate spoke about past relationships where she had experienced a lack of sexual desire and how this caused conflict within her heterosexual relationships. Having worked in sex work, however, Kate now wondered whether she would be able to change how she responds to future partners when she does not particularly feel like having sex.

[Differences in sex drive have] been really hard to, sort of, handle. So, I don’t know whether having done the sex work, whether I might, in my personal life, be able to switch off and (pause) cope with having sex more when I’m not particularly feeling like it, um, or whether because I think a big part of that is connected to emotionally, to how you are feeling about somebody in a relationship, whether that would still be the same as it has been in the past (Kate).

Within this quote there are echoes of the radical feminist discourse that women ‘switch off’ during sex work to cope with having unwanted sex (Farley, 2004). Kate repositioned switching off, however, from a damaging act to an act which
may help her to have sex with a partner when she is not ‘particularly feeling like it’.

Through her sex work, Kate accessed a subjugated knowledge that women are able to enjoy sex without feeling an emotional or sexual attraction to their sexual partners. Kate spoke about having the best sex of her life with clients and how she felt that this was because she was able to have sex with strangers without feeling as though she needed to feel emotionally connected to them.

Samantha also drew on essentialist understandings of sexual desire. She argued that not only are women ‘built’ differently to men biologically in terms of sex drive, but that domestic pressures on women in heterosexual relationships can also reduce their sexual desire which, in turn, can lead some men to source sex elsewhere. When Samantha was asked how men and women’s sex drives differed from each other, she responded:

men need sex, they’re built for sex, they’re manufactured for sex, um I just believe it’s, it’s, a normal, it’s ingrained in their psyche and um, mm most women are different, especially once they’re married and have children, and they’re busy and they’re tired um, so sex is the last thing on their mind. Where[as] it is always on a man’s mind (Samantha).

For both Samantha and Kate, the biological discourse which positions men’s and women’s sexual drive and desires as constituted differently were interwoven throughout many aspects of their lives. Discourses not only dictate what can be stated but also foreclose other ways of knowing (Foucault, 1980b). The biological discourse that positions men’s sexualities as stronger, more disorderly and uncontrollable forecloses ways of knowing women’s sexualities as anything other than responsive or receptive to the male sex drive.
In order for Samantha to understand why some women claim to enjoy and desire sex, particularly with multiple partners, she looked towards other dominant discourses about sexual abuse, psychological trauma and low self-esteem, as well as discourses which economise all sexual relations between men and women (explored in Chapter 3):

I believe women mostly want to have sex for reasons too. Um, to make money, to get gifts or um ah move up in career or whatever, or for her own personal security as in, she wants to get married, or have a partner who looks after her. So, if he goes, if, if men look for sex outside of the family unit he’s going to get into strife because that woman will want something from him that he has to provide. I think some women really love sex and they want to go out and get it. Although I think some of them, the ones that really, really want sex, and really go out there and, and want it all the time, are probably insecure (laughs) and really, they’re just trying to be liked and get approval. I do think there’s a huge difference between men and women, sexually (Samantha).

Similar to Kate, Samantha’s narrative echoed the radical feminist discourse which links heterosexual relationships to prostitution (Dworkin, 1987). Radical feminists (Barry, 1995) have placed this within a framework of heterosexual exploitation. Within Samantha’s narrative, however, there was an inversion of this discourse from the women being owned by the men in their life, to gaining emotional and economic recompense by taking advantage of men’s stronger sex drive. Samantha created space within this discourse where she made sense of women who claimed to experience a strong sex drive. She then, however, foreclosed it through the notion of gendered division of domestic labour and the effect that tiredness and overwork can have on women’s libidos. In this sense, the discourses echoed in Samantha’s narrative
positioned women’s sex sexuality as fragile and prone to being easily disrupted by emotional and physiological disturbances. Not only was women’s sexual desire mostly silent (Fine, 1988) in Samantha’s narrative, when it was there it was constructed as transitory and dependent on emotional and environmental pressures.

**The Benefits of Sex Work for Heterosexual Relationships**

Drawing on the biological discourse of gendered sexual desire, some of the women positioned sex work as playing a useful role in society by providing men with sexual alternatives. As mentioned above, Sanders found in her ethnographic research with indoor sex workers in the UK that the women used justification strategies to counteract the stigmatisation of the sex industry (Sanders, 2005). This section explores echoes of various discourses in the women’s narratives about how sex work helps to maintain heterosexual relationships. Below are three excerpts from the women’s narratives that highlight the degree to which some of the women in this research appropriated the discourse that sex work is beneficial in this regard:

But, I think if, if I just refer to husband and wife, if a wife could get her head around the fact that her husband was seeing someone else and it was just financial then, it would be better for the community ... ‘Cause there’s less emotion involved, it’s just a physical thing. So if you are emotional about something, you can affect the community (Cherry).

I think that, to some extent, it helps keep some relationships and marriages together because, if somebody’s needs are being met in all other avenues except, you know, sexually, um they are needing to outsource, um, things, I suppose, um rather than somebody being really frustrated and unhappy with a relationship with someone—could be their best friend and their partner and
everything else is working well um, especially when there is kids and stuff involved, you know, if that makes them happier and more content and more settled in themselves I think that that is really beneficial (Kate).

I think that’s one of the good things about it, really, because you see a lot of married men and in a sense, it’s a good way, I think, for them to have that kind of experience without it becoming complicated. You know, if that’s what they need, sexually, I think it’s good, it is a good way to have uncomplicated sex and just get it over and done with and not have all that emotion, all the emotional issues that come with having affairs and you know, the hurt that is involved, with having affairs. I think, mmm (Melina).

Melina, Kate and Cherry understood sex work as a sexual outlet for heterosexual men that also maintained understandings about heterosexual women desiring emotional commitment over sexual monogamy. This discourse echoes essentialist understandings of men as being driven by sexual desire and women desiring emotional commitment and security. This discourse positions men’s sexual fidelity as less important and desired than women’s (Bazzul & Sykes, 2010).

This is an example of how resistance to discursive power relations also highlights that which is being resisted and can therefore only modify subjectivity (O’Leary, 2002). That is, the alternative discourse to the idea that all infidelities are hurtful for couples in heterosexual relationships challenges this while simultaneously perpetuating the discourse that women are more emotionally dependent on the men that they have sex with.

As the women spoke about various individual married clients, or married clients as a group, this discourse may have served to ease any guilt that the women
may have felt about having sex with married clients. Locating the sex that they have with their clients as ‘financial’ and ‘unemotional’, therefore, positions it as less hurtful for partners and wives. Kate spoke about how, at first, knowing that some of her clients were married jarred with her understandings of herself as being respectful to other people’s relationships.

Um, I hope their wives don’t know, because ... I would hate something that I had done to cause distress to somebody else, that’s one aspect of sex work that, it’s not my responsibility to be faithful in their relationship, but, um in my personal life, I would never, ever, sleep with someone who had a partner. I wouldn’t like someone to do that to me, and you know I wouldn’t like to do that to somebody else ... So, there is a, a, you know, an element of hypocrisy, I suppose in what I’m doing with seeing married clients ... I would be really upset to have one of my clients come to me and say ‘oh my wife found out I’ve been seeing you and she hit the roof and she’s really upset’ and I would feel very upset that she’s distressed (Kate).

Sara, who had explored theoretical and feminist takes on the sex industry so that she could work out her ‘morals and ethics’ before starting sex work, spoke about how she felt that sex workers who felt guilty about having sex with men in relationships did so because they privileged monogamy in their own, personal, lives:

And I think, um, I think that’s where a lot of the fears come from, or yeah that they have partners or husbands and that monogamy is the ideal, whereas I never had those beliefs, I’ve always found that, you know the whole institution of marriage, or whatever, to be a farce. So I never had a problem, um, having sex with people that have life-long partners because I just think that whole thing is so controlling and awful anyway, whereas, I know that people who
have been raised in different ways, or yeah, don’t have those opinions and so they feel really guilty about providing men an opportunity for them to cheat on their wives (Sara).

Disentangling herself from discursively privileging monogamous relationships was not as simple as accessing alternative knowledges to this, but rather, for Sara, involved self-reflection:

But I think I came to the sex industry with a very firm grounding about my ideas and there were times when they were challenged, really, really, challenged. I had a wife call me once, she had found a text message that I had sent to her husband, who was a client of mine, and she picked up the phone and found it and rang me, and she was really upset. And I’ve had moments, so I’ve had moments where I’ve had my beliefs challenged, I think, but yeah, I’ve worked through them, and I’ve always found that, ah, I came back to the same ideas that I’ve always had since the beginning (Sara).

Like Sara, Kate also questioned and reflected on the truths of gender, sex and sexualities that formed the frame through which she understood both her sex work and her personal life. For Kate, the discourse that many men in relationships have sex outside of that relationship caused her to reflect on possible heterosexual relationships that she may have in the future. While Kate did not have a partner when she was interviewed, she had been dating, and even though she did not feel as that she needed to have a relationship to start a family, she often spoke of a future husband during the interview. The discourse that many men have sex outside of monogamous relationships gave Kate moment to pause and think about how she may feel in the future if this was to happen:
I sort of worry with my [future] partner or husband or something, you know, I mean I would much rather my partner be seeing a sex worker than having an affair and getting emotionally involved with, you know, the receptionist at the office or some girl he met ... the deceptiveness I guess, with the married clients is, I would find that really, I mean I couldn’t do it myself, um, I’ve never been unfaithful in any of my personal relationships, um and um, I guess I, it does worry me a little bit how easy it is for some people to sort of lie about where they have been and what they have been doing and stuff. You know, that makes you sort of (pause) makes me sort of, questions things. But on the other hand if I was married and my husband felt the need to go out and do that, would I want to know? I probably wouldn’t. Maybe everyone needs to have a fund, they each need a pleasure fund each year, to be spent however they like. And she can spend hers on fancy shoes and facials and he can spend his on escorts, but the money must be the same (Kate).

In her narrative, Kate performed care of her future self by disrupting and questioning the discourse that positions women as emotionally connected to sex while also supporting and perpetuating it. Kate maintained the discourse that women are emotionally connected to sex by identifying sex work as more desirable for married men than affairs due to its commercial and impersonal aspects. Kate, Melina and Cherry all drew on the discourse that sex work provides a benefit to some heterosexual relationships by giving men an outlet for their sexual desire. While Sara also thought that sex work could be beneficial for relationships she had also already challenged the notion that monogamy is the most desired form of relationship by questioning the meaning of marriage and distancing herself from other people’s relationship decisions. The next section continues the discussion about how
essentialist discourses function to support radical feminist notions that all sex work is violence against women as well as how the women questioned and challenged this.

**Sex Work as Violence Against Women**

Sex work has been discursively positioned as sexual violence against women. This has been espoused by radical feminists, academics (Jeffreys, 1997; Sullivan, 2007), some former sex workers and support groups (Breaking Free), is echoed within aspects of the broader community, and is also played out in the ways in which sex work is regulated and criminalised in some Western countries (Scoular & O’Neill, 2007). While some people in sex work do experience violence (Sanders & Campbell, 2007) the discourse that sex work is inherently violence against all women can become a lens through which client motivations and behaviours are viewed. Further, ‘the academic gaze on the street demonises men who buy sex as aggressive, misogynistic deviants rather than ordinary, respectable members of the community (Sanders & Campbell, 2007, p. 2)’ forecloses other understandings of men’s behaviour in sex work contexts. To disengage from the discourse that sex work is inherently violence against women, the women in this research spoke about sharing and receiving advice about techniques that they could perform both conceptually and behaviourally as a way to change how understood their work and their clients.

Sara’s academic interest in sex work gave her access to thinking about her work in ways other than as a site of degradation and exploitation. By accessing a wide range of academic perspectives on sex work, Sara questioned some of the discourses that she had previously held:

I used to take some of the arguments seriously ... I used to feel a lot of it was genuine because ... there was a lot of really serious words used, you know?

People talk about it as being rape and as being all these sexual harassments,
which, it’s really hard to brush all those kinds of things off because it’s so, you
know, those kinds of things are so serious ... I’ve never felt like I’ve been
raped, so I’ve never had, like experienced sexual assault, from what I’ve read
of people’s experiences, I don’t identify with any of that, and my experiences
of work ... I’ve always found it very curious that these comparisons are made
... reading and listening to people talk really helps me to understand, you
know, that it’s not any of those things, and usually the people that talk about
those kinds of things have never actually experienced, have never actually
done sex work themselves (Sara).

Kitty, Natalie and Sara all spoke about learning how to say no as a way to
experience sex work clients in ways other than as demanding and exploitative. This
also included controlling men’s behaviour by communicating clearly and consistently
what was and was not included in their services. Sanders explored sex workers’
bodily exclusion zones as a way that sex workers not only control encounters with
clients but also how they differentiate between sex at work and sex at home (Sanders,
2005). This was supported by some of the women in this research. Sharing advice
about learning to say no also served as a way that the women cared for other women
by communicating other ways of being a sex worker other than drawing on the
discourse that sex workers sell not only their sexual labour, but also the rights to their
body for the duration of the booking:

learn how to say no, first, yeah because, you know ... there are clients who
believe that just because you are getting paid that you have to do everything.
And that they [the women] are yours and you bought them and you [the
women] are absolutely not there for that, that is not the service, unless you
want it to be (laughs) (Kitty).
Kitty challenged the discourse that women sell themselves or their bodies in sex work contexts. Furthermore, by speaking about how clients may consider their rights in sexual commerce, she indicated that sex work is neither inherently damaging, nor inherently good, but rather, sex workers and clients need to actively think about the sexual engagement.

Related to this, Kitty spoke about advice that she would give to other sex workers about how they should think about their work. This advice contrasted with discourses which position sex work as work and that women should/do perform sex worker identities. Instead, Kitty privileged more intimate relationships with her clients. She spoke about how she screens her clients carefully to ensure that she only sees men with whom she can have intimate and respectful relationships (explored further in Chapter 7). Kitty managed the discourse that men’s (hetero) sexualities are aroused mostly by unemotional, objectifying, sex, by claiming that men are conditioned to believe this, and that when taught how to access their emotions, they can gain pleasure from intimate and sensual sexual relations with women. Kitty believed that sex workers were in a position to teach men that they can enjoy and desire this type of sexual encounter.

[Don’t] make yourself feel like it’s a job ... because clients won’t like that. Also, like you’re not there to just get them off. I mean they don’t like it (laughs). I mean, maybe in their head, intellectually, they think they like that, and I’m sure some people do. However, most guys really are looking for connection [with] a woman and they want that, so, you know (Kitty).

Drawing on discourses about control and gender, Kitty spoke about how women are more inclined towards intimacy in their sexual encounters because they are better able to allow themselves to lose control. Kitty explained that through the
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generations, women have experienced and watched others experience the loss of control that comes with childbirth and physical experiences such as menstruation. When Kitty was asked what it was that she meant when she referred to women as ‘goddesses’, she responded:

why I say woman are goddesses is because woman are naturally more in tune with the mystery ... we don’t have control because [of] our bodies, we get pregnant and we give birth and we bleed and we get hormonal and emotional and you know we can’t just will it and use our strength to, you know, overcome things ... so we surrender and we understand about that and surrendering is about death and ego-death is about being in touch with the mystery you know? And men don’t have to do that (laughs) (Kitty).

When Kitty was asked why she felt that men are unable to surrender to a loss of control, she explained that she believed that this changes as men became older and the loss of their physical strength allows them to get ‘in touch with the mystery and learn how to surrender’. Kitty drew together various discourses about masculinity, femininity, spirituality, psychology and ageing to inform her understandings of gender and sexuality. She appeared to privilege discourses about women’s sexuality as emotional, intimate and involving less control over the engagement for not only women but also for men. These discourses meshed together for Kitty and provided a coherent understanding of spirituality, sexualities, gender and a role that sex workers could play in speeding up the process of men learning how to surrender to their spirituality and their sexualities. The discourses that Kitty drew from in her construction and understanding of gendered relations provided a way that she could care for not only herself, but also for other people.
Kitty did this by challenging understandings of men’s sexuality as being devoid of emotion and always objectifying. Instead, she positioned it as on the one hand a condition of their physical strength, and on the other, something that can be changed as they learn to let go of their control over their lives and to become less goal-oriented. Kitty spoke about how sex workers could help men to access this other (albeit still essentialist) aspect of sexuality.

In contrast to Kitty’s advice that women should practise their sex work in ways that they enjoy, Natalie spoke about learning to say no as a way that women are able to (re)gain control over their clients’ behaviours. Despite this difference, Natalie was also caring for others by challenging the discourse that women’s bodies are sold in sex work and that they are required to meet every clients’ every desires.

don’t do what you are not comfortable with, you don’t have to. Yeah. Some girls do; they put up with it. They come in the back room (the girl’s room) and they go, ‘oh that client was shit, he made me do this and that,’ and it’s like, ‘you don’t have to do that, why do you let them do that to you?’ (Natalie).

Natalie also spoke about how this can change how sex workers experience their work. Drawing on essentialist understandings of men’s sexuality as being all-consuming and beyond their control, Natalie positioned men as children and drew on the metaphor of a child desiring a toy. She spoke about how women could use their bodies as a way to manage clients’ behaviours in this regard, as their bodies were the ‘toy’ desired by clients.

Boys are like kids, you’ve taken the toy away. No, you don’t play with the toy now. That is it. I try and keep it so simple, not many words, ‘cause they’re not interested ‘cause I talk a lot. They hear gibberish, too many words. You go,
‘No!’ and you move, you’ve got to move yourself physically because guys don’t listen to what you say, they only listen to what you do (Natalie).

Foucault’s ethics of care of the self involves appropriating discourses that help individuals to apply meanings and understandings to their social worlds. These discourses provided Natalie with a way of thinking about heterosexual men’s sexual behaviours and desires while also positioning herself as able to control this, rather than feeling used or controlled by her clients’ behaviours in the way that she understood the women in her quote above do. Further, Natalie was adamant about her right to control each booking and to choose whom she would see as a client. She explained how she is clear about this expectation when she is looking for new establishments to work in. Natalie was aware of both the boundaries that she set for her sex work practice as well as the attitude and policies of the brothel management that would allow her to work in the way that she wanted, with the explicit ability to reject clients without repercussions:

if I go to a place and say ‘look do you have an issue with clients? I don’t do these, these and these’ and they’re like ‘yeah that’s fine, that’s how you work, that’s fine, just let us know at the desk so they don’t try and book you’. Um, they’re the places you want to work in. Yeah, some places try and make you and you don’t want to work in those. Some girls do because they don’t know, that’s the advice thing you try and give them, yeah (Natalie).

Sara, who had worked both privately and in brothels, also spoke about being very clear with clients about what was and what was not part of her sex work service. Sara also cared for other women by communicating the discourse that sex workers should set boundaries around their sexual services and that all parties should be clear about what these boundaries are.
be really clear about what, what your service is, so not letting clients get away with stuff. Like not letting them get away with either more than they paid for, or what you are comfortable with. So just setting really clear boundaries and not letting clients do stuff (Sara).

Sara spoke about how placing explicit bounds around what she will and will not do in bookings was a learned experience and that she felt that it was ‘really sad that new workers don’t get given much support’ in terms of negotiating boundaries with clients. Sara drew on discourses about product and client management while simultaneously rejecting discourses about women’s bodies being bought in the transaction. Out of all of the women, Sara most acutely described her sex work in business terms. While boundary setting and bodily exclusion zones (Sanders 2005) have been theorised elsewhere as psychological strategies, Sara appears to have taken this idea and interconnected it with understandings of best business practice. As mentioned previously, Sara had researched academic and feminist understandings of sex work. It may be that she no longer needed to think about boundary setting as a way to keep her personal self and work self separate, or to manage her psychological wellbeing, but rather, had appropriated this as best practice for sex work. This can be seen in her opinion that new sex workers should be taught about this as well as her opinion that clients need to be made fully aware of what is and what is not part of a particular sex worker’s service and price.

One scenario in the vignette focused on the character, Catherine, seeing a client who was a ‘bit rough’. Samantha, April and Lillith all resisted the use of the term ‘a bit rough’. Rather than seeing it as intentional, or through the lens of violence or abuse, they resituated it as clients being clumsy or inexperienced. Challenging the words of the vignette was a way that the women resisted being positioned as victims
and reconstituted their subject positions as sexual educators for inexperienced clients. The vignette asked, ‘a little while later, when Catherine is at work, her third booking is with a client who’s a bit rough. How might Catherine handle this client?’ Responses included:

The only experiences that I’ve had that I would say is a bit rough, is usually clients um can be a bit clumsy or, um un um not enough experience, so they can be clumsy or over um over anxious and they grope and whatever (Samantha).

Often clients who are a bit rough are simply nervous or unskilled (April, email response).

I had a particularly ... I wouldn’t call him rough but he was uncomfortable (long pause) and to be honest, ah yeah, just uncomfortable (Lillith).

Like Sara, Lillith also spoke about boundary setting with her clients as a learned behaviour. Rather than feeling manipulated by the client mentioned in her quote above, Lillith practised her agency by refusing to see him again and thus changed how she practised her sex work from then on.

It was not enough for the women to gain access to ways of understanding their subject positions as sex workers in ways that allowed them to resist and reconfigure their sex work from violence against women to highly negotiated contexts, they also took on the task of giving male clients access to knowledges about the sex work contract. In relation to managing how clients understood the meanings and boundaries of the sex work contract, many of the women actively informed them of what was and was not allowed in a booking. For Sara, giving men access to knowledges which
allowed room for understanding sex work as highly contractual and consensual—and thus helping them to resist discourses that positioned them as buying women’s bodies rather than certain sexual services—started from when potential clients first accessed her website and continued right through the booking:

Like when I was working independently I had a description on my website and then I would tell them on the phone, or in emails and then, just when you enter the room, so, ‘you have paid for this, this, this and this, da, da, da, do you know that you can’t do this, and you can’t do that?’ And then they go ‘yes, yes, yes’, and then you go into it and then if they do one of those things, ‘I told you at the beginning of the booking that you were not allowed to do that, if you do it again I’m leaving and you are not getting your money back, yeah’ (Sara).

Learning to say no to clients was an important aspect of sex work for the women and one that they felt new sex workers needed to learn. Saying no was not only identified as an effective way to avoid situations that may leave the sex worker feeling as though her needs have not been respected, but, was how the women could resist positioning themselves, and being positioned by others, as victims.

The victim discourse is steeped in notions of men as sexual predators who are responding to their sexual and economic privilege in Western societies. By practising these techniques and appropriating a discourse about men being sexually inept (in relation to women) the women to positioned themselves less as victims to men’s overpowering sexual needs and desires and more as sexual agents who are responding to, and trying to change, the ways that both men and other sex workers understand sex work.
Reducing Sexual Violence Against Women and Children

While some of the women understood men’s sexual desires and needs as within the biological-imperative discourse that positions men’s sexual desires as overwhelming, this did not necessarily extend to the discourse that sex work reduces sexual violence against women and children by providing an alternative sexual outlet. The vignette did not include a question about sex work reducing sexual assault/violence statistics but rather asked, ‘in what ways might Catherine think that sex work has a community benefit?’ In response to this question, six of the nine women mentioned the discourse that sex work reduces sexual violence, with five of them doing so in order to challenge and critique it. As already established, Sanders’ ethnographic study with indoor sex workers in the UK found that some of the women drew on rationalisation narratives in order to justify their work, including that sex work reduces rape and sexual violence statistics in the broader community (Sanders, 2005). The findings in this current research suggest that while this discourse was indeed apparent in the women’s narratives, this was more in relation to critiquing it rather than supporting it, often through the appropriation of other discourses pertaining to men’s sexuality, and discourses about motivations for sexual violence and seeing sex workers.

Natalie was the only woman who appropriated the discourse that sex work reduces incidents of rape and sexual assault. In response to the vignette question about community benefits, Natalie responded, ‘Holy crap, man, it keeps predators off the street’. For Natalie, this discourse was heavily interwoven with the biological imperative discourse about men’s sexual needs. In order to communicate the degree to
which she understood men to be controlled by their sexual urges, she told me a hypothetical story about a group of men:

If there are say, ten guys who are really horny and they’re hanging around some place on the street, and there’s nowhere for them to have sex, there’s going to be pent up energy and they’re going to go looking for it and if a girl, a couple of girls are walking down the street and [there’s] this whole bunch of guys, it’s not going to be pretty (Natalie).

While there is sexual violence against women in many contexts, including sex work (Sanders & Campbell, 2007), what is of interest here is the way that for Natalie the biological imperative discourse of men’s uncontrollable sexual drive illuminated sex work as a sexual outlet that curbs other non-consensual ways of meeting that need. Another example that Natalie gave also drew on the discourse of essential understandings of gender in relation to the length of time that men can go without sex before turning to rape as a way to meet their sexual needs. Natalie used examples of the behaviours of some Australian convicts to illustrate her point:

It’s like in the convict days, when they came over for the settlements [to] start the new colonies, they were only men and then the women would come—separately—and all of a sudden they would just madly ... rape the women, because they need it (Natalie).

Natalie’s narrative is an example of the ways that various discourses, which all claim to speak the truth, compete, meld and clash against each other as individuals try to make meaning of the world and their place in it. Natalie drew various discourses together to give meaning to her work, while also providing a rationalisation for it (Sanders, 2005). In this sense, Natalie’s understandings of rape and sex work were
both related to men’s natural sexual desires. For Natalie, these discourses also gave meaning to one particular experience that she had had with a client:

He was pretending that I was really young ... he started saying stuff like, ‘oh, we can go up to your room’. He’s like ‘oh I could put it in a little bit’, I go, ‘oh is that what you do? What else do you do?’ and he’s like, ‘oh I can do this, and I can do that, you know, while your parents aren’t home’, I’m like, ‘my god, is that what they do?’ So it sort of gives you an insight of what they actually do, yeah really weird (Natalie).

Drawing on the discourse of men’s overwhelming sexual needs not only provided Natalie with a rationalisation narrative (Sanders, 2005), but also provided her with a discursive frame for understanding experiences like the one described above in a way that was congruent with her understandings of men in general. This is not to say that Natalie positioned all men as potential child molesters, but rather, it provided her with a discursive context to give meaning to some men’s sexual desires and behaviours.

Further to this, drawing on essentialist biological discourses also allowed Natalie to position her work as an educational experience for herself, providing her with insight into men’s sexual behaviours. The discourse that sex workers split off from themselves as a coping mechanism for their work (Sanders, 2005) enabled Natalie to understand this experience as educational rather than over-identifying with the character that her client was potentially imagining:

It doesn’t bother my head—it is disturbing to hear what they say—but, you can detach yourself from it. Obviously (Natalie).

For Natalie, this discourse also interacted with other knowledges about men’s innate sexuality, male bonding discourses and discourses pertaining to the ways that
women cope with sex work by detaching their emotional self from their professional self (Hochschild, 1979; Sanders, 2006a). Fitting herself out with discursive understandings, rules and practices (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987) helped Natalie to care for herself by providing a complex web of truths that meshed together to provide a seemingly coherent understanding of sex, sexualities, gender, sex work and sexual violence.

The other five women who mentioned the discourse that sex work reduces sexual violence against women and children did so by challenging its truth-status. In order to critique this discourse these women drew on various other discourses to furnish their meaning making. Sara, Cherry and April all drew on radical feminist notions of rape being about power rather than sex, sexuality, or desire to differentiate between their work and sexual violence. However, they did so to differing degrees. The discourse that rape and other sex crimes are motivated by power and control, rather than sexual feelings or urges, was dominant in the late 1970s and 1980s and was espoused by feminists at this time who were working towards changing certain rape-supporting myths such as victim blaming (Palmer, 1988). It was widely accepted by ‘criminologists, psychologists, and other professionals working with rapists and rape victims that rape [was] not primarily a sexual crime [but rather] a crime of violence’ (Warner, 1980, p. 94). Sara and Cherry both drew on this discourse as a way to differentiate between the sexual engagements that they have at work and sexual violence and rape. At the time of the interview, Sara spoke about recently reading an autobiography within which the author expressed that she was saving other women from violent or rough men by providing a service where they could act out their desires and fantasies within the consensual sex work context:
I read a book recently actually, called ah, *Confessions of a Call Girl*, where the author was a sex worker, and she ... used to go and see this client who was very, very rough and um ... she thought that what she was doing was really good, letting this client be rough with her because she thought it prevented, you know, she thought, just like this, that it was like a community benefit because it stopped him from going out raping women (Sara).

Unlike Natalie, Sara had previously challenged the discourse that men have overwhelming sexual needs and did not see her sex work as providing a community service but rather as a luxurious thing that some people chose to spend money on: ‘I see what I’m doing as something that is luxurious ... I think it’s a luxury–leisure thing, you know?’ In contrast to Natalie, the discourse that sex work reduces rape and sexual violence statistics clashed with Sara’s other understandings of sex work. Further, her understandings of what sexual violence and rape constitute, and are motivated by, conflicted with her understanding of what sex work constitutes.

[It] is ridiculous because rape isn’t ... about sex, it’s about power, having power over someone, it’s a very violent thing, you know? And that really irks me, really, really irks me because I think that it somehow suggests that men have this natural entitlement to sex ... they don’t rape because they have this *natural* thing inside them that they have to, you know, have sex (Sara).

Like Sara, Cherry also pointed to the differences, as she saw them, between the motivations of the men who see sex workers and those who commit rape and sexual violence; locating the act of seeing sex workers as influenced by sexual feelings and rape stemming from other issues:

I don’t necessarily think that it affects statistics like rape and stuff like that, um, like if we didn’t have brothels, just say there actually was no hookers I
don’t think rape would be higher. That’s not my opinion ... People who do
that, there’s other issues other than the sex; whereas the clients that come in,
it’s the sex that they want not the other thing that comes with rape (Cherry).

April also distinguished between sex work and sexual assault in her email
response to the vignette. Like Sara and Cherry, she positioned sexual violence against
women as more an abuse of power and control rather than sexual desire, which she
argued, ‘buys into the idea that men’s sex drive is uncontrollable and if they don’t get
sex they will turn into rabid rapists!’ (April). For April, sex work was a space where
sexual assault may occur ‘less frequently due to the highly negotiated context and the
empowering framework that the worker sets and implements the terms of
engagement, including the disengagement’. April’s discursive understanding of sex
work allowed her to critique the discourse that sex work prevents rape while
simultaneously positioning it as potentially transforming sexual relations between
men and women through the negotiations that some sex workers maintain with their
clients.

Samantha, who drew on essentialist discourses about men’s sexual drives, and
women’s lack of sex drive, was conflicted when it came to the discourse that sex work
reduces sexual violence against women and children. Rather than either supporting or
refuting this discourse, Samantha drew on other knowledges about sexual deviants in
order to differentiate between sexual abusers and sex work clients. She first answered
the vignette question about potential community benefits by stating that it may ‘keep
sex crime down, to an extent’. However, after saying this Samantha wondered if she
was ‘sure about’ this and speculated that sex offenders may be more ‘criminal’ than
average men with average sexual needs:
if someone’s some kind of fiend and going to do something sexually harmful to someone, um, are they going to do that regardless, and would a guy that sees a sex worker and then hasn’t got access to one, turn his mind to criminal ways to [meet] his need? (Samantha).

Given that essentialist discourses had provided Samantha with a seemingly coherent understanding of gender and gendered relations, rather than refuting this discourse she drew on discourses of criminality and who the sexual criminal is to challenge the discourse that sex work reduces rape. This enabled her to differentiate between her clients and the men who commit rape and sexual violence while still maintaining a consistent understanding of men’s natural sex drives and sex workers’ roles in these gendered relations:

But it certainly helps the community in, in um the nicer sense I think. Helping keep frustration out of family life and for the disabled and [the] lonely and the shy (Samantha).

Melina challenged the discourse that asserts that schoolgirl fantasies in sex work help to reduce some men’s desire to sexually abuse children:

I don’t know about the whole paedophile thing, I think that [is] dubious.

People dress up and do the schoolgirl thing [and] people say that that stops people going to do the paedophile thing. I think it’s ... dubious (Melina).

Unfortunately at the time of the interview, Melina was not asked to elaborate on why she felt that this was a dubious claim. She did, however, speak about sex work as providing a service where men could get other fantasies met: ‘maybe some of the other fantasies that men get to do and that’s you know, that’s kind of nice for them to you know, in a secure kind of environment’. Like Samantha’s narrative, this for Melina, was met with ambivalence where she wanted to challenge the discourse that
positions men as sexual predators and women sex workers as providing an outlet while maintaining the discourse that sex work provides for ‘nicer’ types of sexual fantasies that may not be met in other parts of the men’s lives.

An unwelcomed (by the women) extension of this discourse was that women in sex work are ‘rape substitutes’. This buys into radical feminist discourses which positions prostitution as always ‘paid rape’ (Farley, 2004). By challenging this discourse the women were also challenging discursive constructions of sex work as the commercialisation of their bodies and selves, rather than their sexual services, as well as the radical feminist discourse which positions clients as using sex workers’ bodies for their own sexual gain.

This section has explored the complex interplays of discursive power relations as they work together, and against each other, to produce knowledges as well as to provide alternative understandings of the women’s lives and subject positions. These five women may have drawn from discourses that seek to tell the truth of rape in order to help them challenge the discourse that sex work prevents rape and thus care for themselves. Challenging the discourse that rape is about sexual desires helped some of the women to sustain their understandings of their work as being about sexual enjoyment but not sexual need. For Samantha, challenging this discourse helped her to differentiate clients from sexual criminals as well as the sex she has at work and that which occurs in rape and sexual violence. Dismantling this discourse helped the women to sustain understandings of the sex worker subject as an agent rather than as a victim.

**Alternative Knowledges about Heterosexual Desirability**

So far this chapter has focused on the ways that discursive power networks function to produce gendered subjectivities. Exploring the ways that the women in
this research performed gender as well as gave meaning to men’s sexuality(ies) is only one aspect of the ways that they interacted with these discursive power networks which claimed to speak the truth of gender. Foucault’s work on ethics of care of the self allows the conceptual space for exploring how these discursive power relations of who we are ‘meets its breaking point, the moment of its discontinuities, and the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility it promises’ (Butler, 2004b, p. 216). As Butler wrote:

it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalised, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable (Butler, 2004b, p. 216).

This section seeks to explore moments in the women’s narratives where they spoke of challenging and moulding the limits of productive power networks of ‘woman’ and ‘man’. The binary discourses about gender with which some of the women engaged, and also sought to actively confront and change, included discourses about women’s lack of sexual desire and interest; and men’s natural and overwhelming sexual needs. Apart from these broader discourses pertaining to biological discourses were smaller techniques and practices that the women performed on their own thoughts and behaviours in order to reconfigure how they positioned themselves as (hetero) sexually desirable—and desiring—women and sex workers.

One the ways that some of the women disrupted essentialist notions of gender was through sexual pleasure at work with clients. The essentialist discourse that
espouses that women’s sexual desire and pleasure is linked to feeling emotionally connected to the person that they are having sex with was complicated and disrupted by some of the women. However, discourses are not smoothly critiqued and replaced by another, but instead are rather nudged, resisted and challenged in haphazard ways, with individuals yo-yoing, appropriating and resisting them at different times and in different contexts.

Some of the women spoke about the sexual pleasure that they gained through their sex work. They did this by accessing other ways of thinking about their sexualities and, rather than as only receptive and desired, positioned their sexual selves as active and desiring. Some of the women’s knowledges about sexual pleasure clashed with binary understandings of heterosexual relations. By resisting discourses about gender individuals are able to ‘distort and destabilise relations of power’ (Mills, 2000, p. 271). Resisting gender norms, however, can also cite that which is being resisted. In this sense, gender performances can be simultaneously cited and resisted.

Kate, who had been working as a private sex worker for only a few months when she was interviewed, spoke about reconfiguring the way that she understood the place of her own sexual enjoyment within heterosexual relations. In response to Kate’s narrative about sexual enjoyment at work, she was asked if she had thought about what sexual pleasure at work might mean for her. She responded:

In my personal relationships I have had times when the relationship hasn’t been right, or I’ve been emotionally not quite happy, I’ve had a dreadful time with sex and feeling that I have to force myself to do it because, you know, I don’t want to let my partner down and it’s not their fault I’m not feeling right. And [I] have, you know, endured sex where I have just thought ‘hurry up, if you are not off me in ten seconds I’m going to hit you, oh my god, get off’
me!’ Um, and had anticipated that I would spend a lot more time feeling like that about [sex work]. But in actual fact, the approach is very different, because when you are working you are going in there and you are not thinking about what’s good for you and what works and whether you romantically feel like doing this. Um, I don’t know, so because you are not expecting to necessarily feel good about it, it actually [has] been much easier, my sex drive is now much higher. It’s not that the other people I’ve been with in the past haven’t been good at it, that’s not the problem, maybe the fact that I’m having a whole lot of emotional attachment and I guess, I’m a little bit detached from that person emotionally, maybe that makes it easier to sort of let go (Kate).

Kate reconfigured her gender performance in relation to the binary discourse that positions women as connected to the degree of emotional attachment and men as (mostly) independent of emotions when it comes to sexual desire. Kate brought this discourse of gendered sexual differences with her to her work and, by extension, positioned sex work as a place where she would not feel emotions for her clients like she might in a personal sexual relationship. In this sense, Kate reiterated the discourse that women need to be emotionally engaged in order to enjoy sex with men, which, paradoxically, resulted in a loosening of this gendered discourse. In explaining her newfound sexual enjoyment, however, Kate continued to locate it within the discursive gender bounds of sexual desire and pleasure. In this sense, Butler’s (Butler, 2004a) notion of small reconfigurations within discursive power networks is played out through Kate’s conceptualisation of herself and the location and restraints around her sexual pleasure.

For Kate, the ethical substance, or the aspect of her behaviour that she thought of as problematic, was that negative emotions about her romantic relationships created
a barrier to her sexual desire and pleasure. When she began sex work, Kate drew on
the discourse that sex work does not require emotions or feelings in order to have sex
with clients. As Kate had located the involvement of emotions in her personal sexual
relationships as the cause of her lack of sexual desire and pleasure, then practising sex
within contexts where it was not deemed necessary resulted in increased sexual
pleasure for Kate:

I’ve had a lot of trouble with orgasm and having never really, still not entirely
quite sure whether I’ve got there, but with one of my clients, I have probably
gotten closer to that than with any personal partner that I’ve had and that has
really shocked me (Kate).

Natalie also spoke about sexual pleasure at work. Similar to Kate, she also
resisted the discourse that women’s sexual pleasure is linked to emotional connection.
Natalie stated that ‘sometimes the dorkiest looking guy can get you off’ (Natalie). She
prefaced this comment with, ‘I don’t have a boyfriend at the moment, so I get it at
work’, which may suggest that without a boyfriend having sexual pleasure at work is
permissible but that if she were in a relationship then she may not allow herself to
have sexual enjoyment at work as this may feel more like an infidelity. Experiencing
sexual pleasure at work may also be complicated by the privileged status of
monogamy in Western societies. While Natalie spoke of enjoying sexual pleasure at
work that was not mediated by either her emotions or her attraction to the client, this
might be mediated by her relationship status.

Melina also spoke about experiencing sexual pleasure at work. For Melina,
this was framed around discourses about women enjoying more sensual sexuality than
objectifying sexual encounters. Melina positioned her clients as also wanting sensual
sexual experiences:
I feel that they, um, most of my clients are very, sort of, it’s quite a sensual sort of experience, my kind of pleasure as well, it’s not so much just about getting off, or you know, release, it’s really, it’s about, it’s about intimacy and sensuality (Melina).

While essentialist discourses about women’s ageing bodies and (hetero)sexual desire and desirability denote that women lose interest in sex once they have begun menopause, some of the women in this research were able to gain access to alternative discourses which allowed the space to reconstitute this for themselves (For research which explores the ways that women resist this discourse see Loe, 2004; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). The way that Melina was able to disrupt the discursive understanding of her body as ‘too old’ for sex work spilled over into her knowledge of herself as a sexually desirable woman in other contexts. In this sense, it was Melina’s sex work that allowed her to disrupt this discourse. As explored above, Melina first tried to compensate what she saw as a deficit to heterosexual desirability—her ageing body—by overplaying an image of what is dominantly discursively presented as the ideal (hetero) sexually attractive woman. Disrupting this with the new discourses that became available to her through the brothel owner and her clients, Melina accessed the conceptual space to rethink her gender performance in other contexts:

[Sex work] made a big difference actually, to my life ... I don’t know, maybe I didn’t feel that attractive, or whatever, but I think when this all started and I did start to get pretty popular at work, it did have a spill-over effect into my personal life and, I think, I, I kind of did start to take care of myself a bit more, like with dressing and ah, you know, took a bit more interest in clothes and yeah, things that I was bit, sort of [did not care] much about before ... Um, and also, you know, the realisation that you probably are kind of attractive and, I
mean without sort of sounding, you know, sort of fabulous or anything (laughs), you know what I mean? You kind of think, ‘oh okay there are people that still think that you’re alright’. And that was, it did have that kind of spillover effect into my personal life I think, yeah. Mmm. It gave me a bit more confidence I think, mmm, but probably only in that physical sense I think (Melina).

While Cherry’s tattoos functioned as a crossover between her gender performance at work and the way that she wore gender in other contexts (explored above), there were performances of femininity that she felt were necessary, and expected, in sex work—such as wearing makeup and ‘girly shoes’. Cherry spoke about techniques that she performed on her body as a way to transition from aspects of her gender performance at work to her gender performance in other contexts. Cherry’s narrative supports other researchers’ (McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Sanders, 2006a) assertions that some women in sex work perform rituals to aid the transition from a manufactured sexual identity to other gender performances that they feel are more embodied. These rituals consist of activities such as showering and makeup removal. Cherry spoke about performing these rituals—including taking hot showers and sleeping in her own bed under the covers—as a way to help her feel as though ‘whatever happened at work is all gone now; I just feel nice’ (Cherry). One of the photos that Cherry took for the photo elicitation interview depicted her motorbike helmet and jacket, positioned on the floor as if someone was wearing them. Utilising her motorbike as a way to reassert her preferred gender performance after a shift at work supports the assertion that some women perform acts on their bodies and thoughts as a way to transition from one gender performance to another:
Um, I like the jacket because it’s a bit like, ‘fuck off, man’ (laughs). Um, and I just think it suits me, and my personality. And, it’s you know, like most of the stuff here (in the photo) is the complete opposite to how I am at work, I guess you have got to be a little bit girly at work but, you know, ‘I’m going to ride on a Harley home, man, I’m no fucking girl!’ (laughs). So, yeah. No high heels on that thing, no high heels at work, but no high heels on that thing either (Cherry).

As well as riding a Harley Davidson motorbike, Cherry spoke about other aspects of her life that could be considered disruptions to feminine gender norms, such as owning a Ute (utility vehicle) and rejecting ‘girly’ clothes. In this sense, Cherry may have already critiqued the feminine/masculine binary prior to her sex work, which would provide a frame for her apparent discontent at the need to perform gender in a way that is ‘the complete opposite’ (Cherry) to her everyday gender performance. However, this is not to say, that Cherry’s sexual gender performance at work is inherently damaging to her, but rather, that she reflected on these differences and devised strategies and techniques for helping her to reassert the gender performance that she feels is more herself to help her be the person that she wants to be.

Like Cherry, Kitty also had many tattoos; however she did not speak about covering them up or changing the way that she performed her gender as a way to attract clients. When I met her, Kitty had been working in private sex work, as well as in various other aspects of the sex industry for over 15 years—since she was 17. Over the years that she had been in sex work, Kitty had developed a philosophy about sex work including what it could offer both men and women in regard to changing their ideas and understandings about sex and sexualities. Rather than trying to conform to
gender norms of femininity, Kitty sought to change the ways that other people embodied and desired gender representations. She expressed that working privately allowed her the space to create and perform gender in alternative ways, rather than being influenced (or pressured) into performing a sexual gender identity from brothel owners and managers:

the government and the policies and lawmakers are not helping at all in the situation. They force the girls, especially in Victoria, to work in brothel[s] [by requiring private workers to register with the state]—which enforces a, ah, only one stereotype ideal of what a sex worker is. Ah, which is, you know, certain range in age and you have to look a certain way and you have provide a service ... that makes everybody [the same] and a lot of the girls are young and they haven’t thought about these issues. They just think, you know, ‘sex is fun and I can make money and I need to go to college’ and so then they they’re forced into a situation where they feel that they have to see every client and they have to look a certain way and they have to behave a certain way and um and they don’t, you know? (Kitty).

By working privately, Kitty felt that she was able to perform gender in alternative ways and that this helped her to disrupt notions of feminine beauty that her clients may have prior to engaging with her.

you just gotta, you know, offer what you offer (giggles), you know, and not have to confine with, you know, just too narrow, you know, definition of what feminine and beauty is or what, you know, sexy is. Quite frankly, I don’t think the current, you know, model, sexy woman is very sexy ... usually it depicts a very plastic almost bitchy, kind of. It’s not real, you know? I want to see the
person, you know, and for woman I want to see softness come through, you know, and it doesn’t (Kitty).

While Kitty critiqued narrow definitions of feminine beauty she also drew on discourses from Eastern spirituality about women and sexuality to produce an alternative image of femininity that was linked to ‘goddessy softness’ (Kitty). This is an example of the complex ways that individuals draw on discourses that they have available to them to give meaning to their lives, their subjectivities and their gender performances. In this sense, Kitty critiqued how ideal/stereotypical images of femininity are communicated to women in general and sex workers in particular. She saw private sex work in particular as a space where understandings and beliefs about sex, sexualities and what is (hetero) sexually attractive could be disrupted:

I think that’s a lot of what prostitution and sex work should be, you know, is to teach men how to experience themselves more fully, in their sexuality, you know, but it would be difficult if the whole industry and the whole society is so, you know, problematic that even the woman aren’t really empowered or you know, in touch (Kitty).

Further to this, Kitty sought to disrupt the ways that women performed their gender by presenting an alternative performance of femininity. When I met Kitty, she was nearing the completion of a fashion course and her fashion creations were one way that Kitty hoped to present women with an alternative way of performing their gender:

with my clothing [that Kitty creates] I really want to make um, really feminine, really goddessy, flowing outfits for woman and um create an archetype of that goddess, that very feminine and um, have people embody it, you know, and even if they don’t feel like it (laughs) you know, the imagery
more, more imagery of that archetype will be there and I will somehow contribute to, to that process of that ... [I'm] trying to create that in my world, in my reality, I guess. And if not, if nobody buys it then I will make it and I’ll (laughs) be the goddess damn it, for myself (laughs) (Kitty).

Furthermore, Kitty sought intimacy with her clients, and selected her clients according to criteria that she felt was compatible with her personal sexuality (as explored above). Sexual and emotional engagement—known mostly as ‘authentic intimacy’ or the ‘girlfriend experience’ (Sanders, 2008)—in sex work contexts has recently been explored in the literature and located as a reconfiguration of the ways that some women and men engage with their sex work (Bernstein, 2007b). It has been argued that this more intimate way of engaging with clients is an effect of the increase in middle class sex workers who have brought with them ways of engaging and attracting clients on an emotional level (Bernstein, 2007a). Further, authentic intimacy has been posited to involve more emotion work than ‘manufacturing a sex worker identity’ (O’Connell Davidson, 1995).

In contrast to Sanders’ participants, who used a manufactured sexual identity as a way to both manage the psychological impact of sex work as well as to capitalise on gender stereotypes (Sanders, 2006a), Kitty approached her gender performance in sex work and other contexts as a way to educate others (both clients and women in general) about possible alternative ways of performing femininity, rather than as a way to capitalise on the image of male heterosexual desire that is currently dominant.

Kitty, Cherry, Melina, Natalie and Kate challenged various discourses about femininity and female sexual desire and enjoyment. In order to do so, they drew on a variety of competing discourses that allowed them to think about themselves in new ways. For Kate, this resulted in experiencing sexual pleasure that was disengaged
from her previous understandings of her sexual self as tied to feelings of romance.
Melina was able to draw on discourses men’s sexual attraction that allowed her to
position her own body as desirable, not only at work but in other contexts as well.
Kitty saw sex work as a forum where she could educate men on their sexual desires,
helping them to challenge the belief that men are mostly attracted to unemotional,
objectifying sex. For these women, sex work was a place where mainstream,
dominant, discourses could be critiqued and challenged.

Conclusion

Sex workers have various discourses about sex, gender and sexuality available
to them. These discourses influence the meanings that they give to their work and
their relations with their male clients. They also influence how women think about
femininity and their (hetero) sexual desirability as women. Women in sex work
negotiate these various discourses in order to arrive at their truth of sex work. This
negotiation can include drawing on other discourses about sex, sexuality, intimacy,
desirability and gender to develop seemingly consistent narratives. For example, some
women understand sex work to be the result of distinct evolutionary and biological
roles while at the same time resisting the discourse that sex work reduces sexual
violence.

Discourses about sex, gender and sexuality all contribute to the ways that sex
work is known. While sex work may challenge some discourses—particularly about
monogamy and good/bad women—it may also sustain other discourses about
femininity and heterosexual desirability (Scoular, 2004b). Some of the women drew
on discourses and stereotypes of ‘femininity’ as part of their sex work while other
women transferred their gender performance across both contexts and in either
direction. This resulted in some of the women feeling better about their sexual desirability.

The women in this chapter were also able to challenge discourses that they had previously believed to be truth, including discourses about, monogamy, essentialist understandings of sex and gender and notions of femininity. Gaining access to alternative knowledges of what it means to be a (sexual) woman and a sex worker was paramount for these women to be the authors of their own lives within these discursive networks, or as April eloquently summed up:

Sex work is not inherently reinforcing of gender inequalities, and in my experience, can actually contribute positively (both individually and socially) to redressing such equalities. It is a site, like any, in which a myriad of meanings come together and emerge in a range of ways that may either challenge or reinforce existing discriminatory views and experiences (April, email response).
7. A Myriad of Meanings

Sex workers have multiple understandings of sex work available to them. The previous chapter explored how some of the women engaged with various understandings about gender, sex and sexuality in relation to their lives, selves and work. This chapter continues this discussion and focuses on how the women drew on a variety of understandings about sex, sexuality and sex work to give meaning to their work and their lives. Foucault’s ethics of care of the self (detailed in Chapter 3) provides a theory for exploring how the women both drew on and challenged discourses about sex work. Ethics of care of the self is ethical in that it allows individuals to choose from a field of possible understandings when giving meaning to their lives (O’Leary, 2002).

Accessing alternative understandings, however, is not all that is required for individuals to practise the ethics of care of the self. Individuals also need to work on their relationship to themselves to change the meanings that they give to their lives and themselves. This involves thinking about who they would like to be as well as what aspects of their self-understanding they need to change in order to move towards becoming that person. This is a reflexive project where individuals step back and think about their lives and their sense of self as a developing piece of art that can be changed and moulded into various configurations (Foucault, 1984b). To do this, they also need to think about how their current understandings have been communicated to them.

the multiplicity of available discourses and their often contradictory content may resemble more a menu of sensitising self-schemas than a regime of social control (Green, 2010, p.318, original emphasis).
Changing how they think about the ways they have been constructed can also give individuals access to a myriad of new discourses. Green argued (2010) that individuals who construct their identity in relation to new subject positions simultaneously gain access to new discourses about what it means to hold that subject position. This has been explored in relation to men who have sex with men in Turkey and who identify as gay in contrast with men who have sex with men who do not identify with the gay subject position and the different notions of sex and love between these men (Bereket & Adam, 2008). It has also been explored in relation to women playing competitive tennis as they negotiate new subject positions and conflicts between discourses of femininity and athleticism (Stevenson, 2002).

This chapter explores how the women in this research practised ethics of care of the self by looking at the discourses they drew as well as how they reflected on and changed the meanings that they gave to their work and self. It explores how the women gained access to alternative understandings of sex work and how this helped them to work on their relationships with themselves in order to move towards being the woman, lover, mother, friend and sex worker that they wanted to be. The first section of this chapter investigates previous meanings about sex work and how these were challenged and changed by three of the women. The second section explores how and where some of the women gained access to alternative understandings of sex work. Reflecting on one’s self-understanding is a key factor in Foucault’s ethics of care of the self. The third section addresses this in relation to various discourses that the women drew on to give meaning to their work and their lives. The fourth, and final, section looks at tensions created between the imperative to become economic citizens and the stigmatisation of sex work; it explores how the women negotiated this while moving towards economic citizenship.
**Previous Meanings of Sex Work**

Melina and Kate both talked about how their understandings of sex work had changed while they had been working in sex work. During this time, both Melina and Kate gained access to alternative understandings of sex work and this was one way that they were able to care for themselves as sex workers. As explored in the Introduction and Chapter 3, stigmatising discourses about sex work can make individuals feel either divided and alienated from other people, or from themselves. These divisions can leave women isolated and alienated not only from other people but also from themselves.

Both Melina and Kate spoke about their understandings of sex work prior to working in the sex industry. Their knowledges of sex work at the time were derived from the same places that many people gain their understanding of sex work—from the media, including negative news stories, and from popular culture. Both women spoke about deciding to engage in sex work out of financial desperation and that this made them feel as though sex work was something that they would need to endure in order to change their financial situations.

I came to it, sort of from a sense of slight financial desperation and when I went into it, I kind of thought, ‘It’s going to be disgusting, it’s going to be, you know, there are going to be dirty disgusting people’, you know? (Melina).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there is a long history of discourses about sex work that position it, and sex workers, as dirty. Before Melina began working in a Melbourne brothel she drew on this popular image of sex work, including that clients would be ‘disgusting’ and that the other sex workers would be unclean and/or drug addicts. Melina explained that while ‘there ha[d] been elements of that’, she had been
surprised at her experiences with clients and with the other women with whom she worked:

and I think that once I had done it, it sort of hasn’t been that ... I feel actually like it is actually a valid thing to do actually (laughs). Um, I actually feel like it’s um, like I sort of make people feel quite happy, when they come. I don’t really ever feel disgusting, yeah (Melina).

While Melina drew on discourses about sex work as being dirty and disgusting before beginning sex work, Kate was more concerned about violence in the sex industry, especially because she had decided to work privately rather than in a brothel where she would be surrounded other sex workers, clients and management. Like Melina, Kate felt that she would need to endure some undesirable aspects of sex work in order to change her financial situation, ‘even if that meant that I might get assaulted occasionally’ (Kate).

Um, so going into it, I sort of thought, ‘well, okay, I might get beaten up occasionally, some awful things might happen, but you know, that’s the decision that I’m making and at the end of this, once I get myself debt-free, I’m able to then look at starting a family and um, if getting a bit of a rough [experience] was the price that I have to pay for that, okay it’s not nice, but that’s what I’m prepared to do’ (Kate).

Despite Kate’s insistence that she was prepared to experience a level of violence to ease her financial difficulties, this does not necessarily mean that Kate really would endure being ‘beaten up occasionally’ and at the time of the interview she had not experienced any violence in her sex work. This aspect of Kate’s narrative, however, illuminates the discourses that Kate was drawing from before starting sex work as well as the new knowledges that she gained access to once she had started
working in sex work: ‘and that’s been one of the really nice surprises about getting into this industry, is that my clients have just been lovely’ (Kate).

Kate had other concerns about sex work and these were related to discourses about sex, gender, and sexuality. Biological and evolutionary discourses about gendered sexuality claim that women need to feel emotionally connected to the men that they have sex with. Whereas men are positioned as being ready for sex with any woman at any time, women are constructed as sexually fragile and dependent on certain factors such as commitment, security and emotional and sexual attraction (Bazzul & Sykes, 2010). Because of these dominant discourses, Kate worried that she would have difficulty engaging in sex with men whom she did not find attractive or was not emotionally connected to. A booking with a much older man changed this for Kate and gave her access to other ways of thinking about what she could gain from her meetings with clients.

I went out and saw this guy and it was really funny, cause he was this very short little grandpa, and was so cute, and he still had like doilies in his house and you know, pink velvet arm chairs ... Their house reminded me so much of my Nan and Pa’s house and it was really surreal, like it was really bizarre. And I thought (takes deep breath in) ‘suck it, you can do, you can just do it, it’s only an hour, you know, if you are not comfortable with it afterwards, you know you don’t have to do it again’. And he was so cute and it was actually really nice, like it was a little bit odd, but it was, he got such a buzz out of it. Um, his wife died three years ago and he’s been on his own. He had never called an escort before, um so he didn’t really know what to expect either. Um, and um, it was great, I came away sort of chuckling a little bit and going (chuckles) ‘oh, I can’t believe I just had sex with someone who was so old’.
But, (chuckles) but I didn’t think I would be doing that until I was 80 either. But it was, you know, he was really stoked, he was really thrilled and that made me feel really good, you know? He made me a cup of tea afterwards and he talked about his wife and, and it was, it was just, it was really nice (Kate).

Kate spoke about how this experience helped her to challenge the discourse that she needed to be sexually attracted to someone in order to have sex with them: ‘you know it doesn’t have to be about what’s sexy for me’. Further, she also spoke about how giving this client pleasure helped her to feel good about herself and her ability to pleasure other people, ‘and it’s just such a nice thing, for me that he really enjoyed [it], but that to me was really important and it didn’t feel sleazy or yucky’.

Different from Melina and Kate, Cherry spoke about discourses that positioned sex work as glamorous, including how these conflicted with her own understandings of sex work. She expressed that how sex work was portrayed in television shows contradicted with how she understood her sex work and her clients. At the end of the second interview each woman was asked about her experiences of participating in the research. It was during this discussion that Cherry spoke about different representations of sex work along with her changing understandings of herself as a sex worker:

Cherry: I guess when I started it first last year, like they had a lot of stuff on TV, um, not showing negative things, I can’t remember the names of the shows, bits and pieces on Underbelly [an Australian television show about gang-related deaths in Melbourne and Sydney], but um, what’s that show called? There’s another TV series at the moment and it’s all about a brothel.

Researcher: Satisfaction?
Cherry: that’s the one, you know and that’s nothing like that, man, that is a fucking crock of shit.

Cherry explained differences between this television show and her experiences of working in a Melbourne brothel:

Um, [on the television show] the girls get along, the customers are like gentlemen—they all come in their suits ... like the girls’ room out the back has just got like this big rack of clothes and they all come in and they all look so elegant, there’s no—the only thing that I thought was real about it was that there was like twenty-year-olds and there was like, the mature woman, so like they kind of got the variety in girls right, but in saying that, they were all slim and good looking, whereas that’s not what everybody’s in the market for, but then it’s TV, they have to ham it up a bit (Cherry).

Cherry’s disquiet about this representation of brothel work was that it was asserting a ‘truth’ of sex work that all of the sex workers are conventionally good looking, of one body type, that all of the clients are ‘gentlemen’, and that there was not any representation of the messiness and complexity that is relations between people no matter what the context. Cherry said that she felt that this kind of representation of the sex industry could promote sex work to people who may not be suited to it:

But, I guess if you go from watching that to thinking like, I could easily think, ‘oh I could do that’, but then the reality is like fat, old, ugly, sometimes stinky men, you’re thinking, ‘what am I doing, how can I feel smart about this? Maybe this is a bad decision’, you know? (Cherry).

Cherry spoke about how she was working on strategies that could help her to make sense of her sex work, including her various reactions to her clients. She
expressed that the meanings that she had given sex work had changed over the previous two years and that she imagined that they would continue to do so. She spoke about practices that she used to understand, and respond to, her sex work in ways that helped her to change the meanings that she gave to her work. In this way, she constituted herself over and over again rather than being confined to one way of knowing herself and her sex work (Butler, 1995):

I guess when I first started it was like, ‘oh, what’s going on?’ and ‘this is fun’ and then the reality sets in and I guess if you’d done photos [for the research] when reality was setting in, like I would have found it really hard, but now I’m learning about myself and not—I guess like going back to the first interview—like these are some of the things that I use to cope with doing what I do, so, I guess if you did it again [ask Cherry to take photos for the research] in a year or ten years, like if I was doing the same in ten years, I would just have a lot better handle on knowing myself, so the photos would be different again. Yep. (Cherry).

Cherry understood sex work as fluid and changeable, rather than fixed and stable. In this way she was undertaking a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens, 1991) as she reflected on different representations of the sex industry, weighing them against her own experiences and understandings, as well acknowledging that how she thought about her work at the time of the interviews may change in the future.

This section explored some of the ways that the women in this research have thought about their work in the past and how they thought about sex work at the time of the interviews. Melina and Kate both drew on negative discourses about sex work being physically dangerous and dirty. Once they began sex work these discourses were challenged for them and they began to understand their work in new ways.
Cherry, on the other hand, expressed that representations of sex work in popular culture portrayed a glamorous industry that did not represent the array of clients and performances of femininity of women working in brothels. While there were these differences, all three of these women practised reflexivity as they questioned and challenged various discourses about sex work.

**Accessing Alternative Knowledges**

Accessing alternative ways of viewing the social and physical world increases the breadth of the ‘field of possibilities’ (O’Leary, 2002) from which sex workers can draw when applying meaning to their work. Increasing the array of alternative knowledges is paramount for sex workers as it enables them to challenge and change how they previously understood their work. The women in this research accessed alternative discourses about sex work in various ways. Some of the women actively sought new knowledges, particularly when first starting sex work. Often, the women sought knowledges that were related to specific techniques and strategies and these supported their broader discursive understandings of sex work.

Before Kate started working in the sex industry, she looked for information about how she could stay safe, which was congruent with her previously held knowledge of sex work as violent (as explored above). Meeting other sex workers through a peer support group, Kate shifted how she understood sex work before she began. Other sex workers were also a source of support and information for Melina. Like Kate, Melina began sex work without previously knowing other people in the sex industry and as a woman in her forties she felt that she was coming to it at a late stage in her life. For Melina, it was younger women at first who spent time with her explaining many aspects of sex work:
I had some young girls go through the whole thing with me, you know, show me the ropes, which was really fantastic, you know, how to do the beds, you know how to, you know, swap the condoms, you know, all that. Um, you know, they were just fantastic, really, really helpful, yeah, it was just like workplace training. Two girls spent a couple of hours with me, taking me through everything and, um, how to do a health check, and all of that, all that really practical stuff—because that’s what I really needed because I really, I had never been inside a brothel before in my life and just the whole process.

So, that real practical advice was really valuable for me in the beginning, and I think it has just been kind of ongoing, for me, I think that the women there have just been wonderful (Melina).

Kitty, who had worked in sex work overseas as well as in Australia, spoke about learning about various ways of understanding sex work through her friendship circles, which included individuals who were pushing the bounds of what it meant to be a sex worker with their activism and performance art. While Kitty began sex work when she was 17, it was later through meeting other women who challenged dominant discourses of sex work as dangerous and degrading that she felt better able to articulate how she experienced her own sex work. In this sense, she gained access to alternative ways of speaking about her sex work including through her own sex work performance art.

all my friends were the likes of [well-known sex work performance artist and writer] Annie Sprinkle and all of them, so um, so gradually, you know, I kind of took notice to these things (Kitty).

Similarly, April valued speaking with, and being around, women who were comfortable with their own sex work, sexualities, and bodies. For April, this not only
gave her access to ways of being confident and comfortable about her work but also helped her to sustain a similar understanding of herself and her work:

Most of the older workers I have received support from have shared such a helpful array of work-related strategies. Older workers tend to be highly experienced, comfortable and confident in their sexuality, selves and bodies, and reveal an enormous repertoire of skills and knowledge and support. In my experience, older workers are often more relaxed and sure about their capacity as sex workers (April, email response).

April resisted the discourse that sex workers are uncomfortable about their sex work because of external moral codes, so-called psychological impacts, and the notion that they are buying into a patriarchal model which privileges men’s sexualities. She saw these women as embodying ways of being a sex worker that positioned them as not only in control, but also relaxed and comfortable.

For Sara, the ‘seriousness’ of negative discourses about sex work contrasted with her personal experiences. Sara was unable to make sense of this contradiction until she had learned about alternative understandings of sex work and women’s experiences of sex work. While Sara maintained silence about her sex work with her friends and family, she found that online communities with other sex workers helped her to feel like she could share her understandings of sex work:

going online and using, like going into forums, like international sex worker communities and like, having friends online, and participating in discussion and like meeting other sex workers online and communicating with them [on] blogs. Like that’s been a really big thing for me, like, reading other people’s blogs—and my own blog. I have a sex worker blog that I write my own things about and people email me, like email me responses to my blog, so it’s like,
yeah, social kind of, like I get a social element from the internet because it’s a, you know, it’s anonymous (Sara).

For Sara, an online community of sex workers allowed her to both gain access to, and share knowledges about, sex work while also being a safe space to share her knowledges about sex work. That this sharing of discursive understandings could occur without Sara disclosing or being exposed was a way that she could contribute to the conversation and meaning making of sex work. Sara spoke about how she was unable to participate in sex worker rights activities that involved marches, protests, and other activities where there may be media attention, for fear of being recognised.

This is what Foucault referred to as struggles against the effects of power/discourse/knowledge (Foucault, 1982). These struggles locate the enemy as immediate rather than as a force that needs to be overturned (detailed in Chapter 3). By communicating with other sex workers (and possibly non-sex workers) Sara’s online activity contributed to the struggle against being positioned by medical, psychological, and Judeo-Christian discourses while simultaneously arguing for the ‘right to be different’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Like Sara, Kate also explored information on the Internet, however, unlike Sara, Kate’s use of the Internet as a source of information on sex work was not as fruitful as she had hoped:

I initially tried to do some research online, looking at blogs and things like that, I did find it hard to get um, hard to find sources of information that wasn’t, you know, sleazy men making comments about what makes a good escort, or um ah, I guess very, fluffy sort of stuff about grooming and, (in a comedic, sensual voice), ‘lingerie and where to buy shoes’, and things like
that. Whereas I really wanted to get some good educational information and I felt it was a very important thing going into this (Kate).

Kate looked for specific information about private sex work in Victoria, Australia that detailed strategies about staying safe in sex work:

I thought that this could be quite a dangerous thing to do and I want to go in with my eyes open and if I can get some information from people who have been doing this for a while, particularly in Melbourne, who know, what the scene is like, um you know? I’m sure there are some very obvious dos and don’ts that, you know, new people must go in and do and anyone who had been experienced in doing it for a while would go, ‘uhh you know, you just don’t do that’ (Kate).

Kate’s general Internet searches uncovered more information pertaining to other aspects of the sex industry, such as forums where clients rate sex workers, or where shoes and lingerie were sold. She did, however, find a book online, which provided information and strategies about working in the sex industry:

I did end up buying a book online; I forget what it was called. But that [book], I actually found quite helpful, it was quite realistic, it talks about different forms of sex work, whether it be phone sex, escort, brothel work, street work, the legalities, um health I guess, concerns, um I guess what, what some of the things people might ask for, what they might mean, um assessing clients, what is reasonable for you to expect from your clients and would be reasonable for them to expect from you (Kate).

Given the difficulty that the women in this research faced around speaking about their sex work to friends and family members, the Internet provided a forum where they could both share, and seek alternative understandings and meanings, about
sex work. The Internet has arguably had an important impact on the organisation of sex work; including facilitating the emergence of so-called ‘middle class sex workers’ who are able to apply marketing and computer skills to their work in a safe and anonymous way (Bernstein, 2007a).

Other people not only provided new ways of understanding sex work but also helped the women to sustain their current understandings of sex work. For example, Sara had previously worked as a private escort and did not have a lot of contact with other sex workers. While there were many reasons for why Sara chose to work in a brothel for a while—including different kinds of interpersonal relations with clients—one reason was to share her working life with other sex workers. Sara worked in a brothel with women whom she felt shared many of her understandings about sex work as well as her personal sexual preferences. She explained that while she may make more money in other, busier, brothels she was happy where she was mainly because of the other women:

One of the hostesses is a lesbian and there’s two other queer women there and that’s really important to me; being a queer person. Um, yeah, so it was just the work, yeah it’s just the work environment, the women are there when you go to work; it’s just like socialising and hanging out with nice people. So yeah it’s just nice having other queer folk around, you’re not the only one (laughs). It makes the workplace more enjoyable, talking about that kind of stuff (Sara).

Being around other women who shared her understandings enabled Sara to more easily sustain her meanings of sex work. When a sex worker support organisation came to the brothel where Sara worked and asked her and the other women to fill out a survey about their sex work, Sara found solidarity with the other women who also felt that the survey did not reflect their experiences of the sex work.
industry as it mainly focused on trafficking and exploitation in the sex industry; for example, asking questions about childhood sexual abuse. In contrast to this negative experience, Sara spoke about a sex worker conference that was coming up and how this would be the first time that she would be at an event where everyone else either was, or had been, a sex worker. She spoke about this with excitement:

I’m going to a conference only for sex workers, like you have to have been a sex worker or are one to go to the conference ... so they are having a big party, like a big social event on one of the nights, I think it’s going to be strange being in a room with so many sex workers (laughs). It’s going to be nothing like I’ve ever been to before. It would be nice if there were more social events like that for sex workers (Sara).

There is no formal training for sex workers. Other sex workers are, therefore, highly valuable for new sex workers. The alternative discourses that the women in this research gained access to helped them to move towards positioning themselves as professional and successful sex workers. Gaining access to these techniques was one way that they cared for themselves and helped them to practise their sex work in ethical ways. They looked for, found and shared ways of doing sex work that enabled them to know themselves as engaged and successful sex workers. April eloquently summed this up in her written response to the vignette interview:

Being around others who share a sex positive, feminist, radical and socio-political analysis of sex work helps sustain and celebrate my identity and choices in a way that is not available outside of our sex work communities. It is harder to sustain my own sense of identity and meanings and to keep internalised whorephobia in check when I am more isolated from sex worker communities (April, email response).
Exploring Various Meanings of Self, Sexuality, and Sex Work

A key aspect of the ethics of care of the self is the imperative to know thyself. Foucault argued that one way that individuals can come to know who they are and who they would like to be is through self-reflection on personal behaviours, desires, and thoughts (Foucault, 1984b). The women spoke about reflecting on the meanings that they gave to their sex work.

The vignette interview asked about moods that the vignette character might be experiencing when she thought about her sex work, including what factors might change this. Like most of the women, Cherry responded to this question by listing different feelings that the vignette character may be experiencing. She then, however, spoke about how sex work can make her feel angry with men in general and with her clients in particular:

Um, it could be happy, or sad, or angry, or upset, depends um. For me, outside of work I’m like, I’m pretty happy and, but sometimes when I do, or the feelings that I get around work mostly is anger. Like I can get really angry, yeah, so if it was me, if I’m outside of work, how I am, like the change that I notice most is when I think about work, I get angry. Yeah. But I guess for Catherine it could be anything ... yeah, there’s lots of different emotions (Cherry).

During her response to this question Cherry shifted between talking about the many different moods that the vignette character may experience and her own feelings. She then decided that the vignette character’s ‘got her own problems, everyone’s different I’ll just talk about me for that question’. As Cherry spoke, it appeared as if she was considering why she feels angry towards some of her clients:
I guess I get really annoyed, or, I get really annoyed with some clients and like I don’t have that experience of men outside of work. So, that could just be why it’s when I think about work because it’s when I experience men outside of work, I don’t experience them the same way that I do when inside of work. So that would just be the factor that influences myself, and work (Cherry).

When asked to explain the different ways that she experienced men outside of work and compared to sex work contexts Cherry spoke about some of the tensions around the notion of choice in a sex work setting:

Sometimes [at] work I might have to see a client, I might not necessarily want to see him or do the type of service that he wants but I might have to, um, more often than not for financial reasons. Um, and even though, even though it’s a consensual service and I can still say yes and no to everything that happens in the room, I still do have to provide, um, I’m not really worried about massage, but sex and oral. And depending on the guy, like, you know, and their attitude towards you; I think it’s the attitude more than the physical thing because the physical thing you can change in terms of like changing positions or stuff like that. But, their attitude towards you, that’s like something that really gets me. Like I just think ‘I wouldn’t fucking look at you twice buddy’ like sometimes, or the way they speak to you, if that was my experience with a male outside of work I’d just walk away or whatever, but you can’t necessarily do that there. Even though you can, you can walk out of the room at any time, but you, you also can’t—in a way. So, I think sometimes that’s why I get angry because I want to walk away, or I wouldn’t let myself be treated like that outside of work, so therefore when I’m outside of work I’m
not going to get angry because I can just walk off or whatever and inside of work that’s not always the case (Cherry).

Cherry pointed out the similarities between customer service in sex work and other service type jobs, ‘but I also feel that that is the same for a lot of jobs. There’s going to be customers that you do or don’t like and you can’t walk away from them’. As the above quote demonstrates, she shifted between stating that she could walk away from a client whose attitude she did not like and feeling restrained in her choice to walk away. Cherry drew from differing discursive understandings of the structure and work rules of sex work in the brothel where she worked to try to understand her responses to some of her clients. In this way, understandings about the nature of customer service appeared to conflict somewhat for Cherry with other understandings about her body as the site of selfhood:

But I guess, because it’s such a personal thing, [clients] are right in your personal space, not only are they in your personal space, they’re in your body, it, it leaves more of an effect than say if you were working for Telstra (an Australian telecommunications company) and someone just called you up and yelled at you. You know, so, I guess that that’s why I get angry because I can’t necessarily walk away or—and they’ve been in my personal space (Cherry).

As detailed in Chapter 3, there is a long history of discursive tensions around the position of sense of self as located corporally, in the mind, or both. Radical feminists argue that the effects of sex work manifest in poor mental health including PTSD (Farley et al., 1998). Cherry appeared to have struggled with these discourses including what it meant for her to have clients in her personal space and in her body. While she did not talk about feeling as though she should split her mind from her body during these interactions, she did talk about how she felt that she needed to
allow clients—whom she felt were not very nice to her—into her body and that this made her feel angry. For Cherry the discourse that one’s body and soul are entwined and that sex work clients pay to access this was very real. By appropriating this—rather than the sex work discourse that it is the sexual labour which is sold—suggests that Cherry is not caring for herself through the knowledges that she takes on, but rather, may be doing herself harm and adding to her anger and discontent.

April, on the other hand, spoke about using her body as a work tool, which did not lead to feeling as though she, herself, was being invaded. Rather, she drew on the analogy of the Western custom of shaking hands—an act that is not only considered benign but professional and respectful:

> It is difficult to convey to people the experience of using the body, particularly our sensual areas, as a tool—I sometimes describe the experience of sex work as a ‘vulva handshake!’ That to engage my genitals, body, and sexuality within a work context does not inherently cause harm, feels intrusive or damaging, and can feel as casual and easy as shaking hands. I struggle to convey to others who do not relate to their bodies and selves in this way that utilising my body and my mind in a professional setting of sex work is markedly different than engaging them in a personal setting—even if some actions are the same. Sometimes I draw a parallel with the intimacy that is fostered between counsellors and their clients, and that sex workers engage a different, but also entirely professional, intimacy with our clients (April, email response).

April resisted two discourses about sex work in this aspect of her narrative. First, she resisted situating the use of her body in sex work contexts as degrading and harmful to her self. Second, she resisted the discourse that she needed to dissociate or
split herself from her body during sex work. Coupled with the notion of ‘dissociation’ is the discourse about keeping one’s work life and personal life separate.

‘Dissociation’ refers to an outer body experience due to trauma such as sexual abuse and has often been used to explain coping skills of people who have experienced child sexual abuse. April was not the only woman in this research who resisted the discourse that sex workers need to split or dissociate during sex work in order to cope with selling a part of themselves. Resistance to this discourse illustrates its prevalence in representations of the sex industry. Foucault wrote that ‘in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). In this sense, April’s resistance of this discourse (without it being a part of the vignette) signifies that it is still prevalent in sex work discourse and that other women—like Cherry—may experience their sex work in this way.

While April’s resistance to the discourse of dissociation was overt, Sara resisted this discourse in another way. She did this by speaking about how she had created a sex work character as a way to capitalise on her sex work rather than as a coping skill.

I don’t try to be myself for work, with clients, no, no, yeah, I try and not be, I try and be as far away from myself as possible (laughs). ‘Cause I created a character, you know, so I go into character when I’m with clients. I never, ever, am really much of myself. Oh, unless I am talking about, you know particular topics or something. I don’t dumb myself down, or anything like that (Sara).

Sara spoke about this separation in terms of monetary gain rather than a psychological coping mechanism. Her understanding of her sex work identity
supports Sanders’ (2006a) argument that sex workers perform normalised notions of femininity to increase their earning capacity. It should also be noted, however, that Sara had educated herself on the different academic understandings of sex work and that this may be a strategy that she has learnt—in contrast to Melina who had experienced more of a spill-over effect on her understandings of her femininity and attractiveness between sex work and non-sex work contexts.

When I was doing private work and working for, like, high-class escorting agencies, one of my big promotional features was ‘educated, well-spoken’, um, you know, so I actually put [in] a lot of effort. All the clients were, you know, really educated people from, you know, a certain calibre, or whatever, so I had to put a lot of effort into being really articulate, and knowing a lot of information and being able to engage in, you know, in lengthy conversations (Sara).

At the time of the interviews, Sara had recently moved from working privately and in escort agencies to working in a Melbourne brothel. This was so that she could have a change in the types of clients that she saw. As Sara explained, the character that she played while with clients when she was working privately, and through the escort agency, required a lot of intellectual effort. In contrast, Sara positioned herself as smarter and better educated than brothel clients and that this new clientele provided her with a break from being intellectually engaging along with sexually desirable:

A lot of brothel clients are really, really stupid, like they are really stupid people. Yeah, it’s interesting, yeah, you can tell when you talk to them, that they don’t have a lot of understanding about anything, you know? I mean, knowledge is something that’s accessed, you know, and it has to do with privilege and stuff like that, but you can tell when someone has the ability to
understand things, or not, but a lot of the brothel clients [are] pretty stupid people (laughs). That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But it’s good, it’s good sometimes ... the reason I chose to work in a brothel is because I don’t want to have those engaging relationships anymore (Sara).

This supports the argument that services such as ‘the girlfriend experience’ can be more intellectually and emotionally tiring than sex work services where the conversations and engagement is more superficial or more focused on the sexual exchange then the emotional or intellectual engagement (Weitzer, 2009). Compared to working privately and through so-called ‘high class’ escort agencies, Sara found this refreshing and easier.

While Sara found brothel clients easy to negotiate because she could ‘just talk shit’, Cherry on the other hand struggled with how she felt positioned by some clients. In order to negotiate being positioned as sexually available, she performed rituals and acts as a way to repositioned herself. One photo that Cherry took for the research was an image depicting an array of BDSM gear as well as lube and condoms. In relation to this photo, Cherry listed many of the statements from the sheet of notes for taking photos (Appendix II):

Um, how you feel sexy, um, how you feel engaged, how you feel calm, how you feel loved, how you feel happy, um how I feel good, um, how I calm others down, how I stop feeling angry (Cherry).

Cherry explained that she did not engage in BDSM at work and that it was only for personal enjoyment, with both women and men, in non-sex work contexts. As explored earlier, Cherry sometimes felt angry with her clients because of their attitudes towards her and the ways that they positioned her. One way that Cherry responded to this was by wearing a chastity belt, ‘I like to go home and um, just not
have to, that’s a very basic chastity belt (points to chastity belt in picture), sometimes I like to sleep in it’. Cherry explained the effect of this:

it just um, it makes me feel good. Because I know that um, work is finished, nobody can touch me (giggles), so, yeah. I just like it, like to wear it, like to walk around [in it] (Cherry).

Foucault explored the productive power of knowledge to ‘operate not by ignoring individuals but by claiming to have arrived at the “truth” of the individual’ (McNay, 1992, p. 86). This is useful for looking at Cherry’s practice of wearing the chastity belt after work. Cherry understood many of her male clients as positioning her in a way that was contrary to her self-understanding. Wearing the chastity belt was, therefore, a way that Cherry could reassert her own understanding of herself. As well as at home after work, Cherry had also worn the belt while managing a brothel. Even though it became uncomfortable and so she took it off, while she was wearing it she felt that she was sending a message to brothel clients that she was not available for sex simply by having the knowledge herself that it was under her clothes.

I tried to walk around, as a manager, I tried to wear it to work once, but it was very uncomfortable (giggles). I just thought, ‘I’ll know underneath’. Because sometimes as a manager they’ll [clients] ask you as well, like ‘do you?’ and I’m like ‘no’ (laughs). No, because we are not allowed to, anyway ... quite often the clients will come in and ask you because they genuinely want to, and sometimes they are just asking. Like I said before, they just want to know if you do or you don’t, and they are not really asking because they want to, they just want to know if you do. The answer is always no with me. And even if you say no, they will try and offer you money anyway, try and negotiate a price for you, but, yeah. I think they like to feel special too, you know. If I do
it with them, but I’m not doing it with anyone else, then they feel special, you know? But they are not going to get very far if I was wearing that. Not that you can see that I’d be wearing it (Cherry).

Wearing the chastity belt under her clothes was a way that Cherry could resist being positioned as always available for purchase. Despite saying that the clients could not get far if she was wearing the chastity belt, it appears that this was more about having the knowledge herself rather than fearing being sexually assaulted while working as a manager in a brothel. In this way, wearing the chastity belt in this context was symbolic of her desire to not be positioned as a sex worker in this context.

Another photo that Cherry took for the research was of her shower recess and this appears to be another symbolic way of negotiating dominant discourses about sex work:

even though like, I shower between clients, and if you get ten clients then, you know, you are going ten showers. When I get home I like to take that, a good fifteen minutes shower, I like to cause in the mornings, um, I like to get home and like, work is finished, so, the work stuff is, the clothes and whatever, I have left at work, or if it has to come home it does, but I like to get in the shower and just wash for like ten or fifteen minutes. Not necessarily washing like with soap. I do that but the, it only takes like three minutes, then the rest of the time the other twelve minutes I like to stand in there ... Everything is okay. Whatever happened at work is, it’s all gone now I just feel nice and yeah (Cherry).

As explored in Chapter 3, there is a history of locating women’s bodies as sinful, dirty, and diseased. These discursive knowledges about women’s bodies—
particularly sex workers’ bodies—as being somehow contaminated by multiple sexual partners may function as feelings of being dirty or desiring cleansing.

I’ll start the shower like lukewarm because my body will be hot but when I get in the shower I keep turning the heat up just a little bit because I like, it’s just like eh, stigma, you know the hot water is more sanitising than cold water, so even if it ends up being a hot morning, I’ll still end up having a hot shower ...

I’m in my personal space now so I definitely don’t want anything from that to come there—and not that there is anything like physically to come from there, but just more, mentally—and I don’t like soap myself any longer than I do there, but it’s just more that um, the ritual of everything just washing away (Cherry).

This is one possible function of discourses which position sex workers in this way. It is not, however, an indication that there is anything particular to the nature of sex work that may result in some individuals desiring a cleansing ritual after sex work. Rather, it is indicative of the ways that stigmatising discourses, such as this one, can have effects on sex workers and their sense of themselves. It may be that Cherry, for a variety of reasons, had not challenged this discourse before participating in the interviews.

Lillith’s narrative highlighted the degree to which some other women in sex work challenge this notion. In contrast to Cherry, she resisted the discourse that sex workers engage in activities such as hot showers and bathing in order to cleanse any psychological effects of their work. Lillith was keen to assure me that showering or bathing after work was not symbolic of feeling dirty but more about relaxation for her.
I have a really nice shower or a really nice bath, I put on my PJs and I don’t smell like perfume, I smell just like myself ... my little calming moment, um, I know that I shower, like, after every client but to have that final shower after the ah, um, the shift—it’s, you may say it’s a symbol or symbolic washing away or whatever like that, but it’s just relaxing (Lillith).

Lillith was the only other woman who spoke about feeling angry with her clients. Similar to Cherry, she understood her anger to be about some clients’ attitudes towards her rather than being about sex work in general. Lillith spoke about two recent experiences. She identified what it was about the interactions with two men that she objected to, how she responded at the time, and then how she had reflected on the situations and her reactions to them.

I have two particular examples very recently—in the last week. Umm, by two men, I have been accused of racism because I have given them attitude. Both gentlemen were just asking for extras that they hadn’t paid for and they were getting narky and I just wouldn’t do it for them—even though other girls apparently do. I explained to them, ‘no’, in a calm voice. I have always explained to any customer who does do that to me, that, ah, well I always make a laugh, ‘oh that’s another girl, unfortunately that’s not my service’. By continually asking [for] what I have said ‘no’ to, I find that disrespectful, so my tone has a disrespectful, well, tone to it (Lillith).

This discussion was elicited from a photo that Lillith took for the research. This photo was of a small pool of water, surrounded by rocks and trees. The photo symbolised calmly reflecting back other people’s anger. Drawing on this metaphor, Lillith continued on to say that once she felt that they ‘got it through their heads’ she ‘put that smile back on [her] face to return to still pool kind of, reflection, and um,
keep going’. Lillith felt that this was an aspect of customer service in general, and a strategy that she had acquired while working in a bakery.

Even though we don’t like the clients that we get [in sex work], it is our job to make them feel welcome as it affects my business as well as the establishment’s [brothel’s] business. I lump it all under customer service, or in any business, it’s the customer service that will get the customers back and I learnt this whilst working in a bakery. Because they don’t have to come back to you, especially in prostitution, the whole purpose is to shop around for a woman, so the whole purpose is to try and get any customer back (Lillith).

Not only does Lillith’s quote speak about the ways that she manages client anger or discontent, it also highlights the distinction between not particularly liking her clients and getting professional satisfaction from her work. For Lillith at least (and possibly in contrast to Cherry) the two are not conflated and she can both feel competent and capable in her work capacity while also finding some of her client’s demands and attitudes disrespectful.

Samantha also had strategies for responding to clients who asked for particular types of services, which she framed around notions of customer loyalty and good business sense. As well as this, however, she considered her arrangements with some of her long-term private clients as a ‘girlfriend experience’.

In my entire working career (over 20 years) I have had one STI ... With some of my long-term clients, I have been um, ah, I have had what I guess, [is] unsafe sex—I will forgo the condoms and which is probably one of the reasons they have also stayed with me for twenty years (chuckles). I become like a girlfriend or you know an extra wife, um they’ve been with me through...
divorces, wives dying, lots of things, I’ve become, you know very, like family to them (Samantha).

Samantha spoke about how when a regular, or long-term, client asked her for sex without a condom, she would give them a ‘little spiel’ about the risks involved. Samantha used an example of a time when she did acquire an STI in order to illustrate the risk that they would be taking as well as indicating how she would respond if this was to occur. For Samantha, this was an ethical issue that she felt her clients needed to make an informed decision about.

I have a set of clients that I, that I do see condom-free, when that does come into the picture, I always have a little spiel, which is that, that um they are taking a risk, I am taking a risk, um because I see other clients condom-free and I have a boyfriend that I see condom-free. My boyfriend also knows that I do that with a handful of clients and it’s up to them to decide whether they feel comfortable, whether they want to take that risk and I always tell them the story about the one episode where I did get an STDI and I had to tell probably five or six clients that time, and they just went off and did what they had to do and, and, that was, probably 12 years ago now and no problems since (Samantha).

Whether or not Samantha should, legally or ethically, engage in unsafe sex with her clients is not important to this analysis. What is important, however, is the reflection and strategies that Samantha had undertaken to give meaning to this aspect of her sex work and to situate herself ethically in relation to her personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around her. Samantha continued to situate this practice as one of personal choice, stating that she did not normally talk to other people about this and that she would not advise other sex workers to do the same.
It’s a calculated risk; for me. Um any other escort I would say ‘don’t do it’, cause I would never want it on my head if they got something. But I do take a calculated risk so, because this [research is] an educational thing, I’ll put my hand up for it. I don’t admit it to anybody else. It’s just a personal thing (Samantha).

When asked whether or not she had asked these clients to also undergo sexual health checks she replied that she had not thought of this before, but that she might start asking other clients, whom she is considering engaging in sex without condoms, to do so.

Samantha’s decision to ‘forgo condoms’ with some of her long-term clients poses difficult theoretical questions. While it may be argued that Samantha’s decision is the result of ignorance about maintaining sexual health, it is also plausible that Samantha’s perceived relationships with some of her long term clients has relegated them more to friends or lovers rather than clients and that by doing so, Samantha has drawn on other knowledges about sex and sexual health. Previous research (Pyett and Warr, 1999) suggests that while sex workers are highly likely to practice safe sex in sex work contexts they are less likely to in personal relationships. Samantha engaged in friendship-type activities with some of her long-term clients, such as going to the movies or to dinner. Samantha did charge for these engagements but would still be paid for sex with the same men. This blurring of the line between client and lover/friend may have influenced Samantha’s decisions about using condoms with these long-term clients.

In contrast to Samantha, Sara did not position her clients in terms of friendships; rather, she spoke about them only in economic terms. This was one difference between the meanings that Sara attributed to her clients compared to the
ways that some of the other women in this research positioned their relationships with
their clients. Sara illustrated her feelings towards one particular long-term client:

We [would] spend the night together and [go] out and stuff and it’s so boring.
I’m just sick of it (laughs). Just sick of him (laughs), it’s been three years since
we have been seeing each other. But I made a lot of money out of him, so, so
it was worth it (Sara).

April, who had worked in sex work on and off over 12 years, wrote about how
her sex work provided a forum where she could explore her own and other people’s
sexualities. Not only did April write about how she explored her own pleasures and
desires, but also how she understood sex work as a space where men could learn
about women’s bodies and different sexual ethics.

sex work can provide a context for people to explore and learn about sexuality,
that is, it is a powerful forum in which men learn about women’s bodies, that
we are constantly educating clients about ways to pleasure and respect
sexualities (April, email response).

April positioned sex work as an opportunity for women to make sense of
gender and sexuality knowledges. The following quote highlights the ways that
engaging in sex work had helped April to challenge prior understandings of gendered
and personal sexualities in order to attach new meanings to these aspects of her life:

Sex work is where not only have I made more peace with men, [but] it has
helped me understand them much more and be much more accepting of their
ways of being in the world ... Sex work has provided a healing forum from
experiences of rape and sexual assault ... Sex work provides a context in which
I can be freed up from shame, and freed up from emotional responsibility and
at times passive and receptive sexual behaviour that is often expected of
women within the context of intimate relationships ... The consequences of saying ‘no’ in a sex work booking are at times much more respected than in forums external to a sex work context! (April).

April wrote about how she had challenged understandings of women’s responses to sexual assault—shame and ‘emotional responsibility’—and instead, had located sex work as a space where she could create new meanings for these experiences. Furthermore, she located sex work as a site where she could disengage from discourses which position women’s sexualities as responsive to men’s. Kitty also spoke about how sex work could contribute to an understanding of personal sexuality. She spoke about her life philosophy during both interviews, which she applied to many aspects of her life, including sex work. This was in relation to not only sex work, but gender discourses and Judeo-Christian traditions of restrictive moral codes:

Western society in general adopted the Judeo-Christian view of what’s right and wrong and about punishment and all that, so, you know, obviously the sexuality becomes kind of like that, more moralistic and, and, sometimes very negative towards sexuality. So I think Tantra and Neo Tantra is a great thing because it opens people up to the fact that, you know, it’s a healthy part of people’s lives; sexuality (Kitty).

When the researcher met her, Kitty practised Tantric sex in her private escort business, the philosophies of which provided an alternative to Judeo-Christian discourses in relation to sex, sexualities, shame, sin and pleasure. Kitty also challenged the privilege that is often discursively given to men’s sexualities over women’s; she expressed that Neo-Tantric practice could help to subvert this:
The good thing about the Tantric sexuality is that it does put more emphasis on pleasing the woman and being nicer—intimacy and emotional—you know, things which, um, Western sexuality completely forgot about (Kitty).

While Kitty understood her sex work as a space where both men and women could learn about each other’s sexualities, as well as their own—‘learn with your clients what you love about the sex and sexuality’—she also challenged some of the claims that she felt that some other Tantric sex practitioners made about the value of their work. In doing so she placed her sex work within a sex work frame, rather than, for instance, offering enlightenment or emotional healing:

but in the questions and answers sections [of Kitty’s business website] I specifically say that Tantra is an authentic spirituality based on meditation. It is not a sexual technique (laughs) and I do not, ah, do counselling or any, um, type of, eh therapeutic modalities in that way um ... I am not the type of person to come to with your issues, you know, to get over something or your sexual issues or whatever, um, those type of issues should be better handled by a qualified sex counsellor or something like that ... Transformational work and um, spiritual enlightenment and um, I don’t promise any of those things. Sexual technique is a sexual technique it is not a means to spirituality and I make it very straight that that’s the case and try to keep it um, as authentic as possible, you know? (Kitty).

Kitty spoke at length throughout both interviews about the integrated role that sex work played in her life. This included how she positioned the sexual services that she offered. While she resisted the term ‘girlfriend experience’—she felt that this would be promising more than she was offering—she did speak of her sex work as a
kind of dating, and that she too expected to enjoy the sex that she had with her clients and screened her clients accordingly.

it’s not a judgement against people who do [assume a sex work character] it’s just myself, because of my sexuality and the way I am, in what I’m looking for and um it really does take a place for me, um, kind of very in between work and pleasure and personal life, so it gets very, very intimate for me (Kitty).

In order to make an informed decision about the clients that she would see she avoided potential clients who asked questions on the phone like, ‘how do you look?’, ‘can you take it hard?’, or ‘how old are you?’ and instead embraced clients who asked questions such as ‘do you kiss?’, ‘do you like to be touched?’, ‘can I spend some nice intimate time with you?’ or ‘are you into meditation?’ (Kitty).

Kitty resisted the discourse which positions ‘good’ sex work as devoid of sexual enjoyment for the sex worker and was instead explicit about her desire to also gain sexual pleasure and enjoyment with her clients. Being a private worker, Kitty was better able to practise self-selection—compared to Cherry’s ambiguous relationship with the idea that she can choose and reject clients—and this enabled her to have better control over which clients she would see and which she would not. Clients who asked questions which were in line with current dominant discourses about men’s sexuality—unemotional, impersonal and concerned primarily with physical appearance (detailed above)—were told by Kitty that she did not offer the service that they were looking for and that they should look elsewhere. On the other hand, clients who requested services that are more in line with current dominant discourses about women’s sexualities—such as emotional, intimate and personal—were preferred by Kitty, who felt that men who desired sexual engagement in this way were more compatible with the experiences of her work which she enjoyed.
This section explored how the women in this research gave meaning to their work, their sense of self and their clients, which were interwoven with other discourses, such as customer service models, safe sex, dissociation, choice and gendered sexualities. Each woman understood sex work in different ways as they were not simply choosing which discourses about sex work to draw from to create their own understanding, but was also drawing on a variety of other discourses. This meshing of various discourses resulted in a variety and complexity of meanings of sex work. The women reflected on the meanings that they gave to their work and the ways that they jarred with, or were compatible with, medical, psychological and various feminist understandings of sex work. The following section looks at a specific tension that arose for some of the women between discourses about working legally and paying taxes with secrecy and stigma.

**Money and Sex Work**

In Australia, as in any democratic Westernised country, a crucial aspect of citizenship is economic rights and responsibilities. While this ethical imperative is as discursive as any other, it provides an interesting angle for exploring the discursive place of sex work within notions of citizenship. As detailed in the Introduction, sex work in Victoria, Australia is either legal (regulated) or illegal (unregulated). This produces a two-tiered system of sex work, where some women are still criminalised. Furthermore, as mentioned in the Introduction, this system also creates situations where women may not be working on the streets (where sex work is arguably more dangerous) but because they have not registered with the state they are still working illegally.

Sex workers who work in legal contexts, such as brothels or being registered as a private worker, or in an exempt brothel (where there are four or more registered
sex workers working together) may have different discourses available to them than women working in illegal contexts. For example, being required to pay tax on sex work income, and therefore disclose their sex work to financial professionals such as accountants, may be difficult to consolidate with the continued stigmatisation of their sex work, despite its legality.

In order to explore the ways that the women thought about their sex work the final question in the vignette interview asked, ‘in what ways might Catherine feel like a business woman?’ This question yielded responses pertaining to sex workers running their own businesses, paying tax and saving their money. Some of the women talked about advice that they had given and received about paying taxes and money management. As explored in Chapter 3, expert discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries competed as to whether there was something ‘natural’ and innately ‘immoral’ that influenced women to engage in prostitution or if it was ‘insufficient wages’ and/or love of idleness and luxury (Ellis, 1906). Radical feminists took up the former discourse.

The ‘economic imperative’ discourse gained dominance in the 1970s. Feminists attempted to disentangle prostitution from women’s ‘immorality’ and place it within notions of men’s structural privilege, coupled with women’s disadvantaged economic position in Western societies (Barry, 1995). This ‘economic imperative’ discourse has been disrupted. For example, Bernstein’s research into middle class sex workers in the USA challenged this discourse by investigating the narratives of women who were well educated and had other financial options available to them but who made the choice to engage in sex work (Bernstein, 2007a; Bernstein, 2007b). Drawing from Green’s (2010) assertion that individuals gain access to new discourses through shifting subject positions, this section explores discourses that women in legal
sex work have gained access to about economic citizenship and the ways in which this conflicted with the continuing stigmatisation for some of the women.

The vignette question, ‘How might Catherine feel like a business woman?’ elicited responses in enthusiastic concurrence by some of the women:

She is financially independent! She sets her own financial goals ... She develops her own professional work approaches, kit, personas, etc. She has to manage all her overheads, including negotiations with clients and with managers/co-workers/related staff (April).

She’s in the job of sales (laughs). She has to present herself so the way she gets dressed, um, she has to negotiate with her clients, um, she has to make her own roster, so forth (Cherry).

It is a business, um, (pause). I think most people pay tax on it from what I know. Like most people I know have you know, declare most of it, or, you know, what they earn. Um, most people this is their primary source of income. Um, and most people are doing really well (Melina).

She’s earning lots of money. Um, she has, you know she’s set herself up a business. She’s got an accountant who does her tax, she you know, keeps books with her earnings and her expenses and everything she puts into her business (Sara).

At the time of the interviews, Lillith was in the process of sorting out her sex work finances, was about to start paying tax on her sex work income and about to cease claiming income support from the government. While she had been working in
sex work for four years she had only recently sought advice from a sex workers’
organisation about managing her sex work income. Lillith spoke about how potential
discrimination and/or stigma were barriers for her. She received a list of sex worker-
friendly accountants from the sex worker organisation that she had approached. While
Lillith felt more confident with this list she still spoke about feeling anxious about
telling an accountant about her sex work:

[I feel] very apprehensive cause it’s like coming out and telling a friend um
(laughs) I work in the sex industry (laughs). So I’m quite I’m confident that I
have this list of accountants that they’re um, that they’re not going to be so
shocked or it’s like ‘oh gosh I don’t know what to do’ kind of react[jion]. I’m
not going to get that kind of negative reaction and so I feel okay about that
(Lillith).

Sara also spoke about how she had previously felt anxious about her growing
cash savings and her financial legitimacy. At first, she contacted a sex worker support
organisation in New Zealand, but felt that they were unable to accept that she had
saved tens of thousands of dollars. Sara expressed that sex workers had a difficult
time gaining financial advice because of stigma:

Um, but it’s really hard to get financial advice, when you are a sex worker. It’s
pretty much impossible, like you can’t go into the bank and tell them that you
are a sex worker because they discriminate against you, apparently. From what
I’ve heard they have discrimination laws which say that they won’t give you a
home loan if they know you are a sex worker. Um, because it’s not guaranteed
income, and that kind of thing. Yeah, it’s really hard to get financial advice,
it’s really hard. Or, those are the times when I’ve felt really shit about what I
do (Sara).
Sara spoke about the effect that seeking financial advice made her feel about herself and her choice of work. Rather than risk feeling this way, she decided to present her bank with a fake story about her income source:

I was really losing sleep for a while there, over what to do, how to handle my finances, and um, what to do about the tax department and how, how do tax returns and all that kind of thing. But I worked it all, yeah. I worked it all out and um it took me about two years to slowly feed all that, all that money into an account. And now, all my, all my, finances are legitimate (Sara).

In order to present a convincing scenario, Sara drew on language, jargon and terminology about business management while working on her website for her private sex work business. In doing so Sara built her finances, making them legitimate while maintaining silence about her sex work. This resulted in a paper trail of income and savings which Sara planned to use to apply for a home loan.

You have to slowly start putting it in and you have to have a cover story, you have to have a story to tell to the bank—if anyone asks questions—that you’ve got a job that deals with cash, you know, that you run a business where it is cash only and um, which is, now, really simple advice, but at the time, you know I had no idea (Sara).

Money and financial independence were important to Samantha, Cherry and Melina who each took a photo of money, spread out in a fan on the floor or a bedspread, for the second interview. The bank notes in Cherry’s photo were all one hundred dollar notes. She explained the significance this denomination:

I think that probably the thing that I like most about the money—that particular money, the hundred dollar bills—is when you go somewhere and you pull one out, you feel really good. Go to the supermarket, pull one out,
feel really good, go to a restaurant, makes me feel really good. Yep. Um, yeah probably that, relating to my food, and just um, like supporting myself … I guess I do like, er, kind of like a shitty job—it’s not really, it’s a job like it’s not a career path, you know? So, I feel a bit better about myself when I can do that, rather than like pulling out a five-dollar bill. It’s a little bit like, um, I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain it exactly but, I feel, or I feel like I’m worth more or other people think that I’m worth more because I can do that (Cherry).

As already mentioned, out of all of the women, Cherry appeared to be struggling most with how she felt about sex work and herself as a sex worker. The significance that Cherry gave to the one hundred dollar bill was a way that she cared for herself at the intersection of discourses that positioned her work as invaluable or ‘shitty’ and discourses that equate self-worth with financial capacity. Using the one hundred dollar bills at the supermarket or a restaurant was a way that Cherry could attempt to shift how other people may position her (despite not knowing that she works in sex work) as well as shifting the way that she positioned herself in relation to her work.

For Melina, the money she received from her sex work was financially liberating in that it allowed her to keep paying the mortgage on the home where she had raised her teenage son. As well as taking a photo of money, Melina also took photos around her home, of her garden and a sun-filled spot where she read the paper and drank her coffee. Melina had recently finished a long-term relationship and was studying a Master’s degree. Sex work enabled her to gain access to money, which she used to help her family, pay for her son’s private school fees and provide relief for herself from financial struggle. The money was a way that Melina could maintain the
subject position of ‘good’ mother, daughter and friend, as well as reducing her financial stress.

I don’t know it just seems so basic, or something. But I don’t know, it’s just a fact of life. If I don’t have money I feel very unsafe, I feel very worried, very anxious. Yeah. Even while I was fanning (the money) out, taking that photo, I thought, ‘this is pathetic’ (laughs). But, I don’t know, that’s just the way it goes, you’ve got to pay for stuff and um, when we can’t it’s um, pretty awful, isn’t it? ... the sex work, it ha, it has enabled me to, um, have a kind of life style, you know, live an easier life style. Like I can pay the mortgage and you know, do my studies and give money to my son, and you know, pay for everything pretty easily and, and, um, you know help out my family if they need it. I sort of um, well it has enabled me to, to get by without, sort of as much worry as I had before, and so it has been, sort of liberating, in a way (Melina).

Economic citizenship was complicated for the women in this research. This was because of the stigma and discrimination around sex work. Despite this, however, advice, self-reflection and creative solutions helped the women to move towards economic citizenship while also maintaining silence about their work. While the absence of stigma and discrimination would undoubtedly make economic participation simpler for women in sex work, there were many creative ways that the women resisted economic marginalisation and moved toward economic participation. Economic citizenship was how the women cared for themselves by reconstituting an aspect of their ethical substance in line with broader discourses that link economic participation as good self-governance.
Because the women in this research were primarily engaged with legal sex work, they also had discourses available to them around being ethical economic citizens—for example, paying taxes—which also allowed them to participate economically through for example, obtaining home loans. However, this discourse often clashed for many of the women with discourses around shame and secrecy and caused a conflict for some of the women as they sought information on how to legitimise their finances while also making decisions about maintaining silence about their sex work. At the intersection of these discourses, many of the women found creative ways to hold both the subject position of sex worker as well as that of economic citizen.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored not only the multiple meanings and truths that the individual women in this research attributed to their sex work and their lives in general, but also how they challenged and disrupted certain discursive understandings of sex work in order to practise a freedom of self-formation. Gaining access to alternative ways of being a sex worker can be liberating. Sex work has been positioned as not requiring any skill by some feminists (Jeffreys, 1997), however research with sex workers has shown that sex work does require skill (Sanders, 2005), not only in terms of the ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1979; Hochschild, 1983) that the women perform to present a different emotion to what they may be feeling, but also in terms of specific sexual and business techniques that sex workers learn and perform (Lucas, 2005; Bernstein, 2007a).

Discourses do not shift seamlessly from one to another, but rather constitute messy and overlapping fields of knowledges which often compete and clash with each other. Within these clashing discourses about what it means to be a sex worker, a
good economic citizen, a woman and a sexual health gatekeeper were spaces where the women practised certain techniques on their lives, bodies and thoughts which enabled them to disrupt discursively positioning themselves in certain ways. For example, the clashing discourses of economic citizenship and sex worker subject position (as irresponsible with money, underground and having illegitimate finances) provided spaces where the women practised techniques on their lives as a way to position themselves as ethical economic citizens. Another example is the way that Melina and Kate gained access to alternative ways of thinking about sex work which positioned their sex work as safe and caring for both themselves and their clients.

This chapter looked at the tensions that some of the women experienced when trying to negotiate competing discursive constructions of sex work. This was most palpable in Cherry’s narrative around practices that she performed on her body, such as showering, as a way to negate the effects of discourses about sex, self, and sex work. Samantha’s narrative spoke of tensions caused by competing discourses in relation to understandings of safe sex practices, commercial sex and clients’ desires. Despite these tensions all of the women, in their own ways, spoke not only of personal strategies for managing the multiple meanings of sex work but also the making of new meanings as they traversed the productive power of truth in order to give their life its own meaning.
8. Conclusion: Sex, Self, and Sex Work

This research asked two questions of the women’s narratives. First, how did the women in this research negotiate community understandings of their work, including negative and stigmatising meanings? Second, how did the same women think about their sex work in positive ways by accessing alternative understandings of sex, gender and sex work? Researchers have found that sex workers are continually stigmatised despite a possible mainstreaming of the sex industry (Brents & Sanders, 2010) and that it is the stigma that creates problems for sex workers rather than the sex; this is supported by the findings presented in this thesis. Further, sex worker stigma is continually related to understandings about women’s bodies and sexualities, and is conflated with understandings of sin, dirt, and disease (Phoenix, 2000).

The episode of *How I Met Your Mother* (Thomas & Bays, 2005), with which this thesis began, highlighted not only the visibility of stigmatising discourses about sex workers, but also how these knowledges are so embedded in common discourse that they become taken for granted to the point where they no longer need explanation. This was only one example of the ways that discourses about sex workers are communicated, not only to sex workers, but to the general public. The genealogy of this thesis explored some of these discourses including how they are given legitimacy through expert knowledges.

Understandings and meanings about sex work sit within broader knowledges about sex, sexuality and gender, along with discourses about deviance, monogamy, disease, heterosexual relations, desire, patriarchy, lust and gender. Research with sex workers has found that these discourses affect the ways that sex workers give meaning to their lives—how they are constituted in discourse (Zatz, 1997; Brewis &
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Linstead, 2000a; Phoenix, 2000). This thesis has expanded on this body of work to include an exploration of how sex workers interact with these discourses in ways that enable them to challenge and change how they understand themselves and their work.

The conclusions presented here draw on the findings of this research to argue that sex workers can construct their work in positive ways and that this is not about denial, but rather about appropriating discourses that affect their experiences and meanings of sex work in positive, or ambiguous, ways. It begins with an examination of the usefulness of Foucault’s middle and later works to this end. Following this, it draws together the main results of the research. It details the limitations of this research and suggests possible future research directions, and explores the significance of reflexivity for sex work researchers. This chapter concludes with remarks about the importance of this research and what can be gained from this work at a broader level.

Using Foucault

This thesis sought to explore the ways that sex workers have been ‘made subject’ both through productive power relations as well as through resistance, choice and agency. Foucault’s work on power/knowledge/discourse (detailed in Chapter 3) was useful for exploring which discourses the women in this research appropriated and the effects that these discourses had on their self-understandings and self-monitoring. Foucault’s notion of power was useful for looking at the ways that the discourses functioned in the women’s lives, including how they resisted and subverted some discourses. Further, it enabled readings of power relations as multidirectional rather than consisting of one group or individual exerting power over another. In this way, the women’s narratives were read as consisting of multiple power relations
where they were actors in each and every situation, rather than simply seen as
exploited or dominated by clients or brothel managers.

The inter-relationship of power, knowledge and discourse was also useful for
looking at how certain discourses functioned in the women’s lives and self-
understandings. When the women appropriated knowledges they functioned as self-
evident truths. For example, the women who drew on expert essentialist knowledges
about gender saw men and women as having distinct sexual desires and motivations.
Because discourses produce certain acts, behaviours and understandings, these
particular women may actually experience their own sexualities through this
dichotomous lens.

Foucault’s power/knowledge/discourse also allowed readings of the ways that
the women resisted discourses. For Foucault, moments of resistance also signify that
which is being resisted. For example, the women in this research who resisted
positioning themselves as dirty were also citing the dominance of this discourse
(explored in Chapter 3 and in Chapter 7). Resistance is therefore cyclic, always
reiterating that which is being resisted. While useful for this research, Foucault’s
power/knowledge/discourse does not allow for the ways that the women came to
appropriate some discourses, while rejecting others. Foucault’s later work on ethics of
care of the self provided a way of exploring this (explored in Chapter 3).

Exploring the ways that the women identified and disrupted how they are
positioned, and particularly how they position themselves, through Foucault’s work
on ethics allowed readings to occur in those spaces caused by conflicting and clashing
discourses (O’Leary, 2002, p. 170). In this sense, and as McNay (1992, p. 84)
eloquently summarised, Foucault’s ‘modern ethics of the self is infused with an
emancipatory potential which Foucault links to the individual’s capacity for self-
determination and autonomy”.

Foucault’s ethics has wider implications. Exploring how individuals draw
from a field of possible discourses to give meaning and understanding to their lives
and life in general illustrates that it is possible for individuals to engage some freedom
in their relationships to themselves and others, albeit restrained by the discourses that
they have available to them. It has been argued that research that explores how
individuals engage with various discourses in order to practise a degree of freedom
can help health promotion experts to communicate positive messages to the wider
community (Carmody, 2003). In relation to sexuality discourses in general Carmody
argued:

Foucault’s ideas about constituting an ethical self can broaden debates about
sexual behaviour that are pleasurable, non-exploitative and have the potential
for an erotic’s of consent (Carmody, 2003, p. 201).

Foucault’s work on ethics enabled an exploration of the ways that the women
traversed dominant discourses in order to constitute themselves and their work
ethically. In doing so, this research not only challenged the taken for granted truth of
these discourses but also detailed subjugated knowledges that may be transferrable to
other women working in legal sex work contexts.

To my knowledge, the women in this research were not familiar with
Foucault’s works and there is no reason why they should have been. For this research,
the women’s narratives were overlaid with a Foucauldian reading. According to
Foucault’s predecessor, Nietzsche, philosophy is better practised than taught
(O’Leary, 2002) and this is evident in the women’s narratives. While none of the
women used Foucault’s terminology to explain how they resisted appropriating
negative understandings of their work, their narratives were easily read through this lens because of the work that they had done on their relationships to themselves. Using Foucault’s work on ethics enabled readings of these differences that were not simply reduced to a determination of truth but rather explored the ways that the women appropriated some discourses while challenging others and the effects that this had on their lives.

In this way, coupling Foucault’s middle and later works enabled readings of the women’s narratives that allowed their agency to be heard. The ways that the women challenged and changed the discourses that they used provided examples of how sex workers can practise their sex work in ways that are ethical for themselves and others.

**Main Findings**

To create oneself through an art of freedom ... involves both the task of identifying those aspects of our lives where we are more free than we thought ... and the task of creating new forms of life within those newly opened spaces of freedom (O’Leary, 2002, p. 170).

This research documented how nine women thought about talking about, or maintaining silence about, their sex work to friends and loved ones; made sense of gender discourses; and accessed a variety of discourses about sex, sexuality, self and sex work. It found that these women intricately managed these discourses by working on their relationships to themselves. This included Foucault’s four aspects of ethics of care of the self (detailed in Chapter 3). The four aspects of care of the self are all reliant on an individual’s ability to look at their life, how they are living it, and who they would like to be. This includes identifying how they have come to apply particular meanings to different aspects of their lives and subject positions. The
women looked for what they wanted to change about themselves, including identifying how they had come to understand themselves in certain ways.

In doing so, the women appropriated some discourses and rejected others; they shared understandings with other sex workers, and with the broader community. Often new knowledges were ones that had been subjugated by dominant understandings of sex work and gender. Some of the women gained access to these subjugated knowledges through their sex work, while others learnt about various discourses about sex, gender, sexualities, and sex work by reading academic and activist theories and understandings of these categories.

The women challenged many different stigmatising discourses. These included that sex workers are dirty and diseased, that they are psychologically damaged by their work, that they feel oppressed and victimised by their clients or men in general, and that men are sexually attracted to restrictive notions of femininity. Despite the dominance of these discourses in psychology, medicine, popular culture and radical feminism, some of the women reflected on how these understandings could affect their lives if they appropriated them as their own self-understandings.

Many of the women resisted positioning themselves as dirty or diseased by highlighting STI check regulations in Victoria for sex workers in the regulated legal sex industry. Other women resisted positioning themselves in this way by pointing out to me, as the interviewer, that while certain rituals may be read as indicative of feeling (internally) dirty, that they were more motivated by other knowledges—such as a bath signifying relaxation rather than purification.

While stigma is difficult to negotiate, it is encouraging to find that the nine women in this research were able to reflect on how they were positioned in the broader community as well as how they positioned themselves in relation to
stigmatising discourses. Carefully choosing who to speak to about their sex work, and who to maintain silence with, was a way that many of the women managed how those around them position them. These women were aware of the difficulty in communicating their beliefs about sex work to people outside of the sex industry. They noted that popular cultural images of sex work may cause loved ones to see sex work as only ever dangerous or populated by women with drug habits. While on the one hand, these stigmatising images of sex work and sex workers in the media and popular culture made speaking about sex work difficult, on the other, it also helped the women to think through how individuals may react to their sex work. In this way, staying silent or telling people about their sex work was a thoughtful and considered act for all of the women in this research.

Without arguing that all women in sex work experience their work in positive ways, all of the time, this research found that these nine women were all able to practise care of the self by reflecting on the various understandings of sex work, sex workers, gender and sexualities. While Cherry stands out as someone who struggled with her relationships with her clients, and the ways that she felt treated by some of them, she was still reflective about her responses to her clients and the many messages about sex work that she received. In this way, Cherry did not simply appropriate negative understandings of her work as her own self-understanding, but engaged in a dialogue with herself about her sex work, men and gender performances. Further, she reflected on discourses about sex work that position it as glamorous and empowering and compared them to the ways that she experienced her work.

Considering that the recruitment drive called for women who sustained positive understandings about their work, it is interesting that Cherry volunteered, given the ambivalent relationship that she had with her clients. Part of the difficulty
that Cherry experienced was around her sense of herself as someone who stands up for herself compared to the compliance that she felt was necessary in brothels. Cherry’s narrative illustrates the ambiguity that some sex workers may feel about the gender performances that are expected in sex work, which supports Scoular’s (2004b) argument that sex work may be a space where gender norms and discourses are sustained for some sex workers while also being a space where these are challenged for others.

All of the other women were mostly positive about their sex work, which is likely due to the research questions that informed this project and the subsequent recruitment drive and research tools. However, not all of the women started sex work with the belief that it would be fine, even enjoyable; rather, some of the women—namely Kate and Melina—drew on negative understandings of sex work as either dangerous or disgusting before they started. However, once they began sex work they both gained access to new ways of thinking about it and themselves as sex workers. Other women in this research reflected on gendered discourses and found ways that they could resist them through their sex work. Sexual pleasure is one example of how some of the women challenged discourses about feminine desire through their sex work. This is not to say that sex work is the antidote for women who feel sexually restricted by the discourse which positions their sexual desire and pleasure as only linked to emotion. Rather, it suggests that sex work is one possible site where these discourses are challenged for women.

The imperative to confess is a powerful discourse that denotes that individuals need to cleanse themselves of their secret desires, pleasures and acts. This discourse positions sex workers who confess their work as ‘good sex workers’ who can ‘unburden’ themselves, while sex workers who maintain silence about their work are
positioned as deceptive, secretive and potentially causing harm to themselves. This discourse interacts with radical feminist understandings of sex work as inherently damaging to women. Through this feminist lens, women who confess their ‘exploitation’ are considered to be a step closer to being saved, while women who speak of sex work meanings other than exploitation are positioned as being in denial, or colluding with women’s oppression. In this way, sex workers are not only discursively urged to confess their work, but to confess it using a narrative that positions them as innocent victims. This was felt by some of the women in this research, which complicated speaking about their sex work further as they felt that speaking about positive understandings of sex work would increase their stigmatisation while positioning it in negative ways would be more acceptable to other people.

Speaking about their work to loved ones was a positive experience for some of the women. This involved ‘sussing out’ how the other person may understand sex work and how they may be able to challenge other people’s meanings of sexual commerce without damaging relationships. Locating the various meanings that other people may apply to sex work and sex workers also helped some of the women to resist taking on negative understandings as their own self-truths. Sara’s act of locating certain understandings as the ‘victimisation response’ is one example of how gaining knowledge about community understandings may help some sex workers to resist appropriating them. April also spoke about this in relation to questioning her own understandings and sense of self in the past when confronted by negative responses from other people.

Maintaining silence was also an act of self-care for the women who chose this. Understanding the different ways that sex work and sex workers are positioned
enabled these women to think about how other people may react and what effect this may have on their relationships. Some of the women talked about how difficult it can be to change how other people think about sex work and that this also influenced their decisions.

While the women mentioned Judeo-Christian discourses about women, sin, and sex, radical feminist discourses were more pertinent for them as they sought to challenge notions such as victimisation, psychological disorders, and violence against women in sex work. The victimisation discourse is not only espoused by radical feminists but is also communicated to the general community through public policies in Western countries such as Britain, Sweden, and more recently, France; an intense academic and political focus on ‘trafficking’, and the special place afforded to women’s sexuality and fidelity. While the dominance of this discourse made it difficult for some of the women to speak about other non-exploitative meanings of their work, they resisted appropriating it by reflecting on its relevance for their own lives as well as drawing on other knowledges which provided alternative ways of giving meaning to their work.

This research documented that other sex workers played an important role in communicating subjugated knowledges for some of the women. Sharing alternative ways of understanding sex work, femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality, gendered relations and gendered sexualities increased the array of knowledges from which the women drew. They shared these alternative knowledges with other women in various ways, including interpersonally in the work place, anonymously on blogs and sex worker Internet forums, and publicly through activism and sex worker performance art. Having access to non-stigmatising discourses about sex work possibly allowed some of the women to construct their self-understandings in more positive ways, thus
enabling them to have more freedom over the meanings that they gave to their lives and understandings of self.

In order to resist positioning clients as sexual predators some of the women challenged the discourse that client behaviour stems from a desire to control, own or manipulate women. In the place of this discourse, they positioned undesirable behaviour a result of nerves, inexperience or clumsiness. Appropriating these alternative discourses possibly enabled them to feel more in control of sex work encounters as rather than feeling used or manipulated by clients they were able to help clients to change their behaviours by gently suggesting alternative ways of expressing sexual desire.

Speaking about sex work to people in the financial services was complicated by stigma for some of the women in this research. These women expressed a desire to legitimise their income by paying tax and growing their wealth. The stigmatisation of sex workers, coupled with an emerging discourse about working in legal and legitimate ways, possibly created a tension for the women who desired this. Information about money management is essential for women in the sex industry.

The women who had mentor-like relationships with other sex workers were supported in challenging negative constructions for sex work and sex workers. These relationships also gave them easy access to subjugated sex worker knowledges. Sex workers who had been working for longer were also positioned by some of the women as being valuable sources of information, not only for sex work strategies, but also as role models for sustaining confident and strong understandings of their own sexualities and where they fit in the social world.

Gendered discourses played an integral part in how the individual women understood their sex work, themselves as women and the motivations and desires of
their male clients. Disrupting essentialist notions of gender was valuable for some of
the women, as they were able to resist discursively constructing their subject positions
as oppressed, exploited, and victimised. The women who drew on essentialist notions
of gender, however, were also able to draw on other knowledges as a way to resist
victimisation discourses. In this regard, essentialist understandings of gender did not
necessarily prevent the women from understanding their work in ways other than
victimisation. Rather, they drew on a variety of discourses, together with essentialist
notions of gender, in order to position themselves in positive ways.

Some of the women spoke about the benefits of sex work for the broader
community, including that it may help some heterosexual couples. Essentialist notions
about men’s sexuality as overwhelming and driven by evolution were more useful for
the women to understand their work as keeping hetero-normative societies afloat
rather than as positioning their work as a substitute for rape or sexual violence against
children. The women in this research who understood men’s sexuality in terms of an
evolutionary imperative did not necessarily construct their own sexual desires and
pleasures as only related to emotional connection. This suggests that despite
biological discourses capturing the imagination of the populace (Weeks, 2005) there
is still space within this where women can draw on other knowledges in order to
understand their own sexualities in less restrictive ways.

This research found that there was a subjugated knowledge about the
performances of femininity that heterosexual men are attracted to. Through their sex
work, some of the women were able to reposition how they thought about the
attractiveness of their own bodies and how men desire various shapes, sizes, ages and
performances of femininity. This supports Bernstein’s (2007b) finding that sex
workers can gain a new appreciation of their sexual attractiveness through their
interactions with their clients. While Bernstein looked at this more in relation to the
effect of being told how attractive one is this research suggests that this is more about
gaining access to the discourse that men are attracted to many and various
performances of femininity and that this alternative spilled over into other parts of the
women’s lives.

Dominant discourses that position women’s sexual desire as dependent upon
emotional commitment or romance were also challenged by some of the women in
this research. This was disrupted for them through their sex work, as they were able to
experience sex in ways that were outside of monogamous heterosexual relationships.
A few of the women talked about how sex work has enabled them to experience
sexual pleasure. Heterosexual relations come with their own set of discursive
understandings with which individuals engage. These include biological discourses
about men’s sexual desires and wants as being greater, more visual and less
emotionally dependent than women’s (Allen, 2003). For some of the women, sex
work allowed them to appropriate a new sexual subject position that enabled them to
experience their own sexual desire and pleasure in ways that were not mediated by
these discourses. Rather, the sex worker subject position gave them access to thinking
about themselves as desiring actors, who enjoy sex that is not necessarily connected to
romantic love.

Given the visibility of stigmatising discourses about sex work, it is not only
sex workers who are subjected to these meanings but also the community in general.
This impacts sex workers in various ways, from appropriating these discourses as
their own self-truths to affecting the ways that other people perceive them. Because
sex work is a highly gendered occupation, consisting of mostly female workers and
male clients, sex workers are also subjected to discourses about femininity,
masculinity and gendered sexual relations. The women in this research were not only put in a position where they needed to negotiate stigmatising understandings about their bodies, motivations and sexualities, but also discourses about heterosexuality and gender norms. Reflecting and challenging certain discourses enabled the women in this research to practise a greater level of freedom over the meanings that they applied to their work, themselves, their clients and their lives in general.

The Importance of Researcher Reflexivity

This research highlighted the need for sex work researchers to be reflective about the discourses that they attribute to sex, gender, sexuality and sex work. Foucault’s work on ethics has the potential to help individual researchers to interrogate the discourses that they apply to these categories and how they can challenge and confront these in their own self-understandings. As Agustín (2010) noted, sex work researchers should put aside their assumptions about these categories in order to hear the narratives and stories of sex workers without reading them through personal beliefs. Throughout this research process, I have tried to be aware of the meanings that I have applied to sex work, including how their meanings have been communicated to me. In this way, I attempted to resist simply reiterating dominant understandings of sex work by looking for the multiple, and complex, ways that sex work is practised and given meaning. As a researcher with personal experience in sex work, this was an important aspect of my researcher practice, however, given the pervasiveness of discourses about sex, gender, sex work and sex workers, this is an important practice for all sex work researchers so that they can hear understandings that conflict with the discourses that they have appropriated themselves.
Further Research

Further research into the ways that sex workers in other areas of the sex industry practise ethics of care of the self would provide valuable understanding of the various discourses that they are subjected to and the alternative discourses that they appropriate in order to maintain positive understandings of themselves and their work. This could include research into the particular stigmatising discourses that sex workers in illegal outdoor contexts are subjected to and the subjugated knowledges that they draw on to give meaning to their work. Research with trans-people and men in sex work may also provide information as to how they negotiate particular understandings about sex, sexuality, gender and sex work. Research into these areas may provide other sex workers with discourses that aid them in resisting taking on stigma as their own self-understanding.

One of the findings of this research was that some sex workers in legal contexts find negotiating a desire to legitimise their income difficult in the face of the stigmatisation that surrounds them. Comparative research between women in legal (or decriminalised) sex work contexts and women working in other countries or states where sex work is illegal may provide understanding as to whether discourses about legal sex work—including responsibility to pay tax—affects sex workers’ desire to legitimise their income, build their wealth, and/or think of their work as professional rather than transitory.

Research that explores the sex work discourses appropriated by individuals in the general public, including how they resist and challenge such meanings, may provide insight into not only the stigmatisation of sex work but also the ways that individuals can challenge this in themselves. Given that Foucault’s ethics of care of
the self includes gaining access to alternative discourses, exploring which positive alternative discourses about sex work are appropriated by individuals in the broader community would provide a better understanding about how these can be communicated in general, leading to the goal of reduced, or eliminated, stigmatisation of sex work.

**Limitations of this Research**

The findings should be read with awareness of the limitations of this research. The women in this research were of limited cultural and linguistic diversity. Further, due to the research questions, recruitment drive and research tools, experiences of violence, coercion or trafficking in the sex industry were not present in the women’s narratives. Due to the dominance of negative discourses about sex work, the research was designed in this way to access alternative discourses and so actively sought participants who thought about their work in positive ways. As already mentioned, Cherry was one woman who also sometimes had negative feelings and understandings about her sex work and her clients. This may suggest that the ways that discourses are appropriated is not as clear-cut as the sex work binary may suggest. Rather, all of the women engaged with these various discourses at different times and to different degrees. Further, all of the women were engaged (or had been at some stage) in legal sex work in Victoria. Some sectors of the Victorian sex industry have been legalised for almost a decade and this has possibly affected the discourses that women in Victoria have available to them. The findings in this research may only be relevant for women working in similar contexts and political climates, although women working in private contexts but who have not registered with the state may also have similar understandings of their work despite not technically working in a legal context.
A limitation of the research method was that not all of the women chose to attend the second interview and of the six who did, one chose not to take photos. While this interview was still valid and fruitful, the burden that some of the women felt about being asked to take photos should be taken into consideration by other researchers considering using a similar method. The women who chose not to attend the second interview gave many reasons, and not all of them were related to the research method but rather to the burden of time involved in participating in two interviews.

Some of the women who chose to take the photos spoke about how at first they found it difficult to decide what to photograph and a few of them spoke about how they procrastinated at first and then took the photos the night before the interview. One reason for this may have been that the information given verbally and on paper may have needed to be clearer. Some of the women also spoke about how they did not feel that taking photos was something that they felt good at or comfortable about. Giving them alternatives to the photos, such as bringing in an object or simply reflecting on the list of statements (Appendix III), may have been easier for some of the participants. Many of the women who did take photos for the research spoke about how once they started they enjoyed taking them. Kitty was surprised at how much she enjoyed taking the photos and had since decided to buy a camera for her own use. As detailed in Chapter 4, the photos elicited rich and diverse narratives about a wide range of ways that the women thought about themselves, their sex work, and their lives.

Three of the women identified themselves as lesbian or queer to the researcher at different stages. While it would be interesting to explore the effect that having a queer or lesbian identity had on the women’s relationship with their work and their
clients, this did not emerge through the interviews and the researcher failed to explore this specifically with the women. Further research may address this, particularly research that explores what, if any, tensions there may be between queer and lesbian discourses and sex work discourses and if queer or lesbian women feel stigmatised in either context.

**Concluding Remarks**

It has been well documented that sex workers are subjected to stigma even in contexts of legalised or indoor sex work (Pheterson, 1993; Scambler, 2007; Sanders et al., 2009; Scoular, 2010). This can cause women to feel shame if they incorporate this stigma into their self-understandings, impacting on their health and general wellbeing (Sanders, 2005; Sanders, 2007a; Scambler, 2007). There has been research that has looked into various strategies that sex worker employ to manage stigma including the use of humour (Sanders, 2004). There has also been research into the ways that sex workers take on discourses about self, sex, sex work and femininity (Phoenix, 2000). This research sought to fill a gap in the literature. It drew on these and other previous research to look for the ways that sex workers are not only made subject to certain, often stigmatising discourses, but to explore the ways that sex workers work on their relationships to these discourses and themselves.

In doing so, this research found that the women who participated had various, and differing, relationships with discourses that positioned them as, dirty, diseased and psychologically damaged. Foucault’s work on power, knowledge and discourse and ethics of care of the self proved to be a useful tool for looking at the ways that the women negotiated their relationships to stigmatising discourses.

It was critical for some of the women to have positive ways of understanding sex work available to them, from which they not only chose from when deciding how
they would like to know their sex work, but also to arm them with ways to speak about their work to other people. It was not the sex in sex work that caused the most problems for the women in this research, but the meanings that are applied to sex workers. An aspect of Foucault’s ethics of care of the self involves working on one’s relationship to oneself by reflecting on discourses that have been taken on and alternative ones that may replace them. By drawing on alternative discourses the women in this research were better able to resist appropriating negative understandings of sex work as their own self-truths. Rather, some of the women drew on discourses which positioned their work in ways that allowed personal fulfilment, enjoyment and professional satisfaction.

It is not only sex workers who can benefit from having an array of discourses available to them about sex, sexuality and gender. Other individuals may gain from reflecting on how they have come to know themselves through the dominant discourses that they have available to them. Like Carmody’s (2003) work on prevention of violence against women, challenging dominant understandings of masculinity, femininity, sexuality and sex may help individuals to practise a greater degree of freedom in their construction of themselves, leading to more ethical behaviour in regards to self and other people. Practising Foucault’s ethics of care of the self is one way that individuals can navigate their lives in ways that enable them to be freer than they otherwise may feel.
9. Appendices

Appendix I: Recruitment

Flyer.
Recruitment advertisement.

Letter for brothel and escort agency management.

(Brothel name and address)

To (name of manager, or ‘whom it may concern’),

I am writing on behalf of a PhD student under my supervision at La Trobe University, to ask if you could please make the included flyer available to the women working in your establishment. The flyer asks for interested women to participate in PhD research at La Trobe University.

The research looks at how women in the legal sex industry manage the many meanings of sex work in order to care for themselves.

The research will be conducted by a PhD student who has previously worked as a sex worker. If any of the women working in your establishment are interested in participating they can contact her on 1800 219 121 and leave contact details on which
she can get back to them, or they can email her at swresearch@latrobe.edu.au. This information is also on the flyer.

Thank you in advance for your help.

Regards,

(Supervisor contact details)
Appendix II: Information for Participants

Participant Information Sheet

Managing Meanings

Participant Information sheet

My name is Lizzie Smith and I am a PhD student in Health Sciences at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University. I am also an ex sex worker. Dr Lynne Hillier and Dr Sue Dyson are my PhD supervisors.

You have volunteered to participate in research that seeks to explore the ways that women in the legal sex industry (sex work/prostitution) create their personal ethics. You have volunteered to partake because you have identified yourself as a woman aged at least 18 years of age who is currently engaged in legal sex work in Victoria.

What is involved in the study? You will be asked to attend two face-to-face interviews, with the possibility of a third. The interviews are approximately 1½ hours in length.

The first interview involves a demographic sheet which asks your age, how long you have been involved in sex work/prostitution, and in what area of sex work you currently work, such as a brothel, escort agency, privately or exempt brothel. It also asks you to nominate a first name (a pseudonym) that is not the same as any name that you go by, including work names. The demographic information will be used to add context to your responses and may appear next to your pseudonym in published material: for example (Sasha, 34, brothel). The length of time that you have worked in sex work/prostitution and the age that you first started will go toward exploring the different and similar ways that women in the sex industry create their personal ethics. Your personal details may be changed slightly (by a year or two) so that they can not identify you to people in your personal life who know these details.

The first interview will also involve reading through, with the interviewer, scenarios about a fictional character. You will be asked questions about how you think that the character would respond to certain situations. You will also be asked about any personal experiences that you may have had relating to these situations or how

email: arcsh@latrobe.edu.au
web: www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs
you have never been in a similar situation. At the end of this interview you will be lent a digital camera and asked to take photos representing thoughts/feelings/actions/responses/practices to any of a list of feelings and actions.

The second interview involves you bringing the camera back with you and the photos being uploaded onto a laptop computer. You may delete any photos that you do not wish to explore before/during the interview – the photos that are explored are entirely up to you. You will be given a sheet containing a list that you can draw on to take the photos. This sheet asks you to take photos that represent any of a list containing questions including 'how you feel sexy', and 'how you feel smart' etc.

You can take photos of almost anything, including: inanimate objects, spaces or places that have meaning for you (that could not reasonably identify you). You may use any of the functions on the digital camera if you feel that it adds to the meaning such as black and white, sepia and vivid colour etc. While you may let your imagination run, no photos of other people should be taken, including your own children or incidental people in scenery such a street. If you would like to talk about relationships that you have with other people then try to think of something that represents them.

In the interview you will be asked about the meanings behind the images that you have chosen to talk about, including the thoughts that led you to take the photo and how it represents your personal ethics and how you care of yourself. You can request copies of the photos and these will be burned onto a CD for you at the time of the second interview or at a later date if this is not possible and posted to you.

Photos that you have taken, that may appear in any published material, will require your separate consent. If there is a non-identifying photo that could add to the communication of the results then I will ask you for your separate consent. You can refuse and do not need to give any reason.

The third interview (if you are asked to attend or if you request to attend) will be for clarification purposes or to follow-up on points that were not fully covered in the previous two interviews. You are not required to attend this interview if you do not wish to and the results from your previous interviews can still be included in the project.

All interviews will be conducted by me (Lizzie Smith). I am a student researcher who is a PhD student at La Trobe University’s Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS). The PhD supervisors, Dr Lynne Hillier and Dr Sue Dyson will oversee the project and will also have access to your transcripts.

All interviews will be voice recorded using a digital voice recorder. The voice recordings will then be transcribed either by me (Lizzie Smith), or if time restraints
CARE OF THE SELF IN SEX WORK

occur, then by a transcription company who has signed a confidentiality agreement with La Trobe University.

Your interview data and personal details will be kept confidential unless as authorised by law, or where public health or safety necessitates disclosure.

Your transcripts will be de-identified with only the pseudonym being used. Other identifying details such as town or suburb names will be changed.

Your personal contact details, a list that links your real first name to your pseudonym, and your transcripts will all be kept separately from each other and in locked filing cabinets, or in separate files on a password protected computer. After completion of the project your interview transcripts (on CD) and photos (on CD) and contact details (on CD) and voice recordings (on CD) will be kept in a locked data storage room for 5 years, after which they will be securely destroyed. Your consent and withdrawal forms (in paper copy) will also be kept in a locked data storage room and will be destroyed after 5 years.

You will be asked to either sign a written consent form or give oral consent to indicate that you have read and understood this information sheet and that you have had any questions answered to your satisfaction. The written consent form requires your full name and your signature. The written consent form will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the La Trobe University City Campus during the project and long term for 5 years in a locked data storage room after which it will be securely destroyed.

If you choose to give oral consent then I will read aloud a statement of informed consent to which I will ask you to either agree or disagree. This will be digitally recorded before the interview and will be included in the transcription of the interview. You will not be asked for your name and as such your name will not appear on the transcript of your interview. However, the pseudonym that you nominate at the beginning of the interview will be stated. This will enable the researchers to link your real name to your transcript in the case that you choose to withdraw your data from the project (see below).

Your interview data will be used in a PhD thesis which will be made publicly available through La Trobe University’s library, possible book (which will be publicly available) and academic articles (which may be in both paper copy and electronic form) and academic conferences and conference papers (both paper copy and electronic form). In none of these will you be reasonably identifiable in any way.

You may request a copy of your personal transcript and any personal details which will be yours to keep. You may also offer feedback on your transcripts. A copy of

email: arcs@latrobe.edu.au
web: www.latrobe.edu.au/arcs
your transcripts will either be mailed to you in hard copy (paper) or emailed to an account that you have nominated, depending on what format you would prefer, around two weeks after each interview.

You may request a summary of the results which will be yours to keep. This will be either emailed to your chosen account or sent in paper copy to your chosen address. The summary of results, if you request a copy will be sent to you before completion of the thesis. You may also offer your comments on the results.

You may not receive any benefit from participating in this research, however participation may provide opportunities for you to reflect on your own need for self care and how you practice it in your day to day life.

The results may contribute to informing support services about the ways in which women care for themselves which may, in turn help to improve these services.

At the second interview you will be offered a $50 Coles/Myer gift voucher to thank you for your participation. This has been funded through the student research allowance at ARCSHS. You will still be offered this ‘thank you’ if you withdraw from the research process after the first interview.

You may feel negative emotions during or after the interviews. If this occurs you can pause or stop the interview and the researcher will give you a list of supports that you can contact if you so wish.

You have the right to withdraw from active participation in the project at any time, further, you have the right to request that your data be removed from the project within four weeks after the completion of your final interview. You are asked to contact the investigator by email or phone or to complete the withdrawal of consent form which you can either take with you or download at anytime during the research process from the ARCSHS' website. Notification that you would like your data removed from the project needs to be completed within four weeks after your last interview. While your data will be destroyed your signed consent form, or verbal consent form, and withdrawal form will be kept in a locked data storage room as proof of your involvement in the project and securely destroyed after 5 years.

You do not need to give a reason for withdrawing from either the interview or the project and there will be no consequences or adverse effects for either withdrawing or not participating in this research.

This information sheet along with the withdrawal of consent form will be available on the ARCSHS' website for the duration of the project. This will only be

e-mail: arcs@latrobe.edu.au

web: www.latrobe.edu.au/arcs

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY
assessable to the research team and participants, you will be given the specific web address for this.

If you have any complaints or queries that the investigator has not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact:

The research supervisors:

Dr Lynne Hillier  
Tel: 03 92855360  
Email: l.hillier@latrobe.edu.au

Dr Sue Dyson  
Tel: 03 92855125  
Email: s.dyson@latrobe.edu.au

Or if they are unable to answer to your satisfaction:

The Secretary  
Faculty Human Ethics Committee  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
La Trobe University  
Bundoora, VIC 3083  
Tel: 03 9479 3583
Consent form and withdrawal of data form.

Research Investigators:
Lizzie Smith
Dr Lynne Hillier
Dr Sue Dyson

I ________________________________________________________

have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the project, realising that I may physically withdraw from the study at any time and may request that no data arising from my participation are used, up to four weeks following the completion of my participation in the research. I agree that research data provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, a book, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT: ______________________________________________________

DATE: ________________________________

NAME OF INVESTIGATOR: ______________________________________________________

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR: _________________________________________________

DATE: ________________________________
Withdrawal of Consent for Use of Data Form

This form is to be used by participants who wish to withdraw consent for the use of unprocessed research data.

Research Investigators:
Lizzie Smith
Dr Lynne Hillier
Dr Sue Dyson

I ________________________________.

wish to WITHDRAW my consent to the use of data arising from my participation. Data arising from my participation must NOT be used in this research project as described in the Information and Consent Form. I understand that data arising from my participation will be destroyed provided this request is received within four weeks of the completion of my participation in this project. I understand that this notification will be retained together with my consent form as evidence of the withdrawal of my consent to use the data I have provided specifically for this research project.

Signature of participant: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

email: arcs@latrobe.edu.au
web: www.latrobe.edu.au/arcsa
Supports for participants.

Participating in research that asks about personal experiences can sometimes lead to uncomfortable or distressing feelings. If you feel that you would like to talk to someone about any thoughts or feelings that have been raised for you during the research process then you may contact one of the two organisations listed below to arrange one counselling or debriefing session with a counsellor or psychologist. This one-off session will be paid for by the researchers and will be funded through the student allowance at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society. Due to budget requirements we ask that you contact the service provider of your choice within two months of your last interview if you would like a counselling/debriefing session.

Here is a little about each organisation to assist you with your decision:

**About RhED**

Resourcing Health & Education (RhED) is a service for the sex industry in Victoria. The service operates from 10 Inkerman Street, St Kilda and provides site based and outreach services in collaboration with relevant programs and agencies. RhED is committed to respecting and reflecting the needs of the sex industry, and actively promoting the rights of sex workers. As a program of the Inner South Community Health Service, RhED operates from a harm minimisation approach providing practical and realistic health information and supports. We aim to provide a service that recognises that health is not only a physical dimension but includes a person’s emotional and social wellbeing.

This information has been sourced from [www.sexworker.org.au](http://www.sexworker.org.au)

**About Project Respect**

Project Respect is a non-profit community-based organisation that aims to empower and support women in the sex industry including women trafficked to Australia. Our mission is to support women in the sex industry of Australia and to help prevent the exploitation and enslavement of women by the industry.

A world where there is no longer demand for prostitution and trafficking in persons Project Respect works towards:

- Adequate support given to women in the sex industry, including trafficked women, such as access to shelter, health care, legal support, compensation, and alternative employment pathways
- Eradication of the abuse and inequalities, including between men and women, different cultures and different classes, which underpin and are strengthened by the sex industry
- Individuals, organisations and communities informed and mobilised to support women in the sex industry

This information has been sourced from [http://projectrespect.org.au](http://projectrespect.org.au)
Contact details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Respect</th>
<th>Rhed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PO Box 1323</td>
<td>10 Inkerman Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collingwood VIC 3066</td>
<td>St Kilda Vic 3182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph: (03) 9416 3401</td>
<td>Ph: (03) 9533 8166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax: (03) 9417 0833</td>
<td>Fax: (03) 9525 4492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can send an email from Project Respect’s website:</td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:sexworker@sexworker.org.au">sexworker@sexworker.org.au</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix III: Research Tools

Demographic information.

Age:

Age that you first started sex work:

Years spent in sex work:

Please choose a first name that you would like me to use to represent your narrative:

Vignette.

Together we will look at a scenario about a fictional woman whom I have given the name Kate. This scenario highlights different decisions that Kate is faced with about aspects both at work and away from work. Each section includes a few questions about how you think that Kate might respond. While this scenario is about a fictional character I would like to hear how you have thought or acted in similar situations, or even how you have never had a similar experience. Because of this I will ask you to reflect on the answers that you have given to Kate’s situation, in terms of your own experiences. However, if you feel that you would prefer not to go into any personal experience at any time, you can just say pass and we will move on.

1. Kate has been working in sex work for some time.
   • Do you think that Kate would tell people who are not involved in the sex industry that she is a sex worker?
   • If Kate did tell people, who do you think that she would tell and why?

2. Kate decides to tell 2 separate friends, Nicole and Grace.
   • How might Kate describe sex work to her friends?
If you had to explain sex work how would you do it?

3. Nicole tells Kate that she feels that she can’t be friends with Kate if she is going to continue working
   - Why do you think that Nicole would say this?
   - How might Kate feel about what Nicole has said?
   - What might Kate do for herself, given Nicole’s reaction?

4. Grace is happy that Kate told her and says that it makes no difference to their friendship
   - Why do you think that Grace would say this?
   - How might Kate feel about what Grace has said?
   - In your opinion or experience which response is more common or likely? Why do you think that it is?

5. A little while later, when Kate is at work, her third booking is with a client who is a bit rough.
   - How might Kate handle this client?
   - What might Kate do for herself to manage this situation while meeting her client’s needs?
   - What might Kate tell herself so that she can do the next booking?

6. Kate has a regular client who has started asking her to see him romantically away from work
   - What might Kate consider, for herself and for the client, when she responds to this client?

7. Kate seeks some advice about sex work from an older, more experienced sex worker
• What kind of advice do you think that this sex worker would give to Kate?
• What advice (if any) have you received from other sex workers about sex work?

8. The sex worker tells Kate about why some men see sex workers.
• Why do you think that some men see sex workers?
• Have you had other sex workers tell you why some men see sex workers? What are the reasons that they have given?

9. Kate has a partner.
• Do you think that Kate has told her partner that she works in the sex industry?
• If she has told them, how would she explain it so that they feel okay about her working?
• If she hasn’t told them, why do you think this could be?

10. Kate has noticed a change in her mood when she thinks about work lately
• What emotions do you think that Kate could be feeling?
• What factors might influence her mood?

11. For Kate, being sexual is important
• Do you think that Kate feels sexy with her partner?
• What factors might change this?
• Do you think that Kate feels sexy at work?
• What factors might change this?

12. Kate feels as though her sex work is helping people.
• In what ways does Kate feel that sex work has a community benefit?

13. Kate feels like a business woman.
• How might Kate feel like a business woman?
• What advice have you been given on being a business woman?

14. What are your thoughts on this scenario?

**Notes for taking photos.**

The photos that you take for the second interview can be of an object(s), image, place or space that represents any, all or some of:

- How you look after yourself
- How you look after other people
- How you think about yourself
- How you feel good
- How you keep safe
- How you feel happy
- How you feel better
- How you feel loved
- How you feel worth while
- How you feel calm
- How you feel useful
- How you feel engaged
- How you feel smart
- How you feel sexy
- How you feel creative
- How you feel when at home
- How you feel when at work
- How you feel like you at home
- How you feel like you at work
- How you stop feeling angry
- How you stick up for yourself
- How you calm others down
- How you care for your loved ones

You may use any of the features on the camera that you like, you can make them artistic, or raw – what matters most is the meaning behind the choices that you make, whether they be special effects or photos of inanimate objects. You may delete any photo from the camera that you would not like to use, or to show me. The photos that we look at are entirely up to you. Try to take photos of things that can’t
reasonably identify you or others. Please do not take photos of other people because they cannot be used. If there are people who make you feel any of the above and you would like to talk about it then try to think of a non-identifying place or object that represents them.
References


Callot, J. (Artist). (1612-21). *Lust* [Etching].


Hubbard, P., Matthews, R., & Scoular, J. (2008). Regulating Sex Work in the EU: Prostitute women and the new spaces of exclusion. *Gender, Place & Culture:


Quadara, A. (2008) Sex workers and sexual assault in Australia: prevalence, risk and safety,

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault Issues Paper No. 8, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, Commonwealth of Australia


