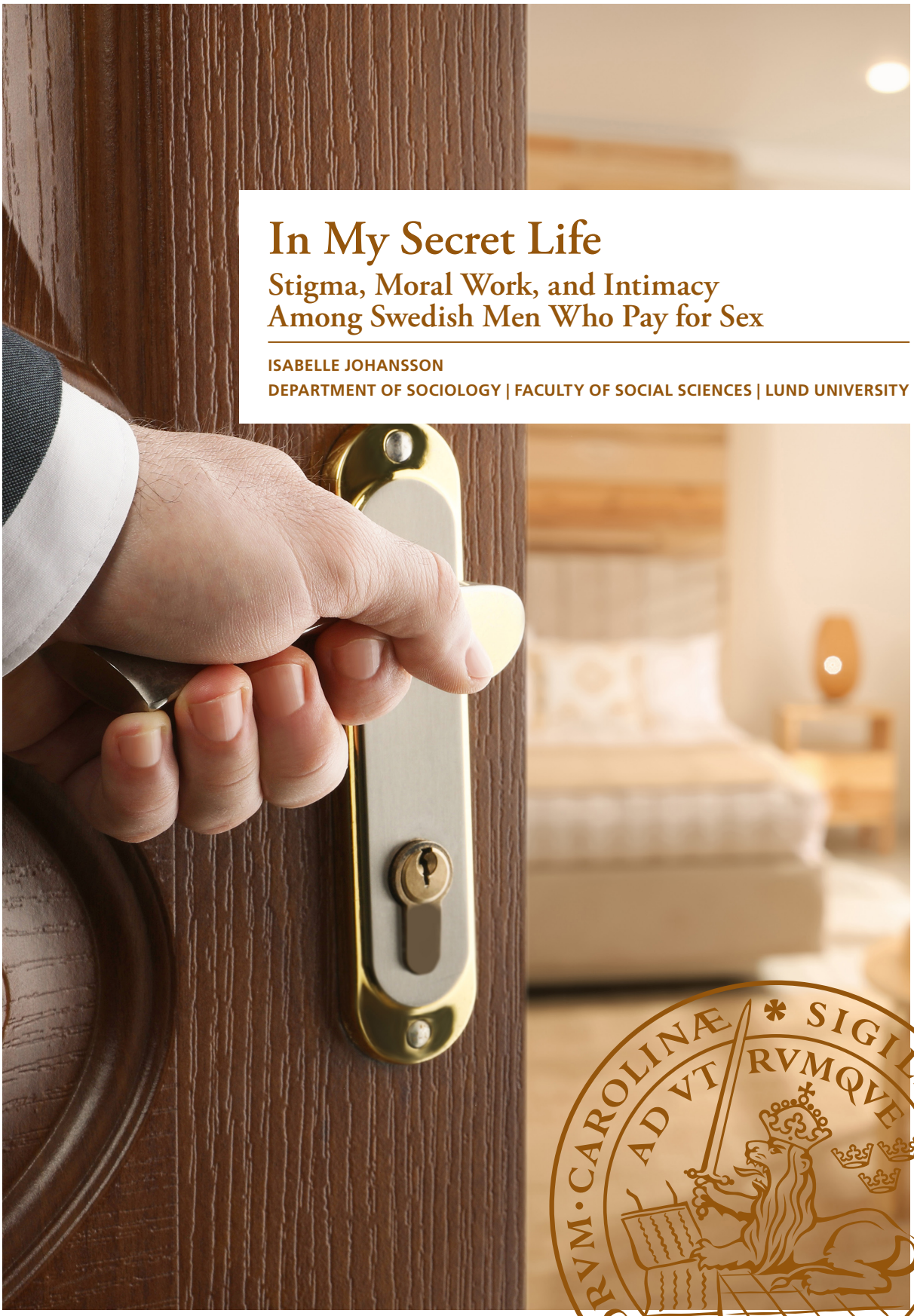

In My Secret Life

Stigma, Moral Work, and Intimacy Among Swedish Men Who Pay for Sex

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LUND
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Abstract:

This dissertation examines how Swedish men who pay for sex make sense of their actions and orient themselves within a moral landscape marked by criminalization, stigma, and public condemnation. Drawing on anthropological approaches to morality, stigma, and secrecy, the study conceptualizes the men's accounts as forms of "moral work": the ongoing, situated labor through which individuals seek to sustain themselves as ethically intelligible persons within worlds that define them as deviant. Following Korsby and Vigh's (2025) call for a "non-moralizing anthropology" of transgression, the dissertation approaches these men not as moral outliers but as actors embedded in shared normative frameworks, revealing how responsibility, care, and legitimacy are negotiated under conditions of secrecy and moral scrutiny.

Empirically, the dissertation consists of four interrelated studies. The first introduces the "stigma engagement strategy," an interview approach that brings condemning media portrayals of paid sex into the interview encounter, rendering processes of stigma negotiation visible in real time. The second study analyzes how men classify paid sexual encounters as "good" or "bad," showing how moral work unfolds through affective attunement, uncertainty, and self-scrutiny. The third examines how men narrate intimacy, using the concept of "relational authenticity" to capture how closeness in paid sex is achieved, maintained, or undone from the men's perspectives. The fourth study broadens the analysis through a comparative examination of public attitudes toward paid sex across the Nordic countries, demonstrating Sweden's distinctive moral consensus against the practice.

Methodologically, the project combines in-depth interviews and long-term ethnographic engagement with a quantitative analysis of survey data from the European Values Study (2017) and the World Values Survey (2020). This mixed-methods design traces moral reasoning across intimate and collective domains, linking individual accounts of lived practice to broader Nordic societal climates.

The dissertation argues that Sweden's criminalization of paid sex operates not only as a legal prohibition but as a powerful moral condition that reshapes intimate life. A pronounced tension between public moral representations of paid sex and the men's experiences renders moral work particularly visible. Within this space, the men engage in secrecy, boundary-work, and repair to defend integrity, articulate care, and sustain coherent selves under condemnation. By foregrounding these everyday ethical negotiations, the dissertation contributes to the anthropology of morality by showing how moral life is maintained and negotiated under regimes of public condemnation, illuminating the entanglements of intimacy, law, and ethical self-formation in contemporary Sweden.

Key words: moral work; criminalization; stigma; intimacy; paid sex/sex purchase/commercial sex; mixed-methods ethnography

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Popular Summary

In Sweden, paying for sex is illegal under the so-called "sex purchase ban," widely framed as a moral achievement that protects women and advances gender equality by targeting the men who pay for sex. What distinguishes the Swedish approach is not criminalization itself, but its fusion with an explicitly moralizing discourse that symbolically positions paid sex as incompatible with responsible citizenship. In this way, the law does not merely prohibit an act; it positions men who pay for sex as morally disqualified subjects. They rarely speak in public, and when they do, their voices are often dismissed or treated with suspicion.

This dissertation takes a different approach. Instead of judging these men, the author listens to them. Over several years, I spoke with men from across Sweden who had paid for sex – some occasionally, some regularly, and often in different countries. Many had never told anyone about these experiences before, out of shame or fear of how they would be seen, or of jeopardizing relationships, families, or careers. All lived under the shadow of a law that defines them as criminals and a public debate that portrays them as morally tainted exploiters.

Within this context, the men's narratives reveal "moral work" – a concept used by researchers to describe the ongoing efforts people make to understand themselves, justify their actions, and maintain a sense of moral worth. The men I interviewed were people trying to make sense of their own actions, manage secrecy, and preserve a feeling of being decent in complicated life circumstances.

By listening to their stories, I examine how these men understand and portray their actions in a society that condemns them. They spoke about guilt, loneliness, excitement, care, confusion, and sometimes emotional closeness with the women they met. Some described long-term relationships that felt meaningful; others recounted encounters that felt wrong or unsettling. Many described how they had developed personal strategies to feel responsible: meeting only women they perceived as independent, avoiding situations that felt unsafe, or limiting encounters with sex workers to trips abroad. They also described the heavy burden of secrecy – deleting messages, hiding travel, or lying to family and friends. Several expressed a sense of relief after being able to talk about experiences they had carried alone for many years.

The men did not simply justify an illegal act; they actively worked to make their practices intelligible and ethically defensible within a hostile moral climate. One prominent strategy was to emphasize emotional intimacy, care, and relational meaning. By foregrounding connection, mutual recognition, or a sense of responsibility toward sex workers, the men sought to reframe an act publicly defined as exploitative into something closer to morally acceptable intimacy. This emphasis on intimacy may be understood as a consequence of the way criminalization and stigma render such moral interpretations particularly important and charged in

Sweden. When paid sex is surrounded by secrecy, fear of exposure, and moral condemnation, experiences of closeness, trust, or being seen by another person can take on heightened significance. This form of intimacy is not taken for granted or normalized, but experienced as fragile, exceptional, and morally charged.

To place these personal stories in a broader context, I developed an interview method in which I brought condemning media portrayals of so-called "sex buyers" inviting the men to respond to how they were publicly depicted. The dissertation also includes a large comparative study of public attitudes toward paid sex across the Nordic countries. This analysis shows that Sweden stands out: both men and women in Sweden express more negative views than their Nordic counterparts. This moral climate shapes not only public debate but also how men who pay for sex think and feel about themselves.

From an anthropological perspective, it is essential to emphasize that these men live within a moral regime in which law, gender-equality politics, and public discourse converge to produce unusually high stakes around paid intimacy. The gap between how paid sex is publicly portrayed in Sweden – as violence, exploitation, or moral decline – and how the men themselves experience and narrate their encounters creates a productive tension. It is within this tension that moral work becomes visible. This tension also helps explain why some men describe these encounters as deeply significant, despite – or precisely because of – the risks associated with them.

In conclusion, the dissertation argues that if we want to understand why people do what they do – and how laws shape their lives – we must listen. Listening does not mean agreeing or approving. It means recognizing that people's lives are more complex than the stories we usually hear. By attending to these hidden voices and secret lives, we gain a clearer picture of how morality is practiced and how intimacy, money, and law are intertwined in contemporary Sweden.

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

I Sverige är det olagligt att betala för sex enligt den så kallade "sexköpslagen," som ofta framställs som en moralisk framgång: ett sätt att skydda kvinnor och främja jämställdhet genom att rikta in sig på männen som betalar för sex. Det som utmärker Sveriges hållning är inte kriminaliseringen i sig, utan hur den sammanvävs med en starkt moraliserande diskurs som symboliskt placerar sexköp i termer av ett icke ansvarstagande medborgarskap. På så sätt förbjuder lagen inte bara en handling; den positionerar män som betalar för sex som moraliskt klandervärda subjekt. Dessa män hörs sällan i offentligheten, och när de väl gör det avfärdas deras röster eller bemöts med misstänksamhet.

Denna avhandling tar ett annat grepp. I stället för att döma dessa män lyssnar författaren till dem. Under flera års tid har jag talat med män från olika delar av Sverige som har betalat för sex – vissa vid enstaka tillfällen, andra mer regelbundet, och ofta i andra länder. De flesta hade aldrig tidigare berättat om dessa erfarenheter, av skam eller rädsla för hur de skulle uppfattas, eller för att inte riskera relationer, familjeliv eller yrkeskarriär. Samtliga levde i skuggan av en lag som definierar dem som brottslingar och av en offentlig debatt som framställer dem som moraliskt besudlade exploatörer.

I detta sammanhang visar männens berättelser på ett "moraliskt arbete" – ett begrepp som använts av forskare för att beskriva de ansträngningar människor gör för att förstå sig själva, rättfärdiga sina handlingar och upprätthålla en känsla av moraliskt värde. Männen jag intervjuade var människor som försökte skapa mening kring sina egna handlingar, hantera hemlighetsmakeri och bevara en känsla av att vara anständiga och ansvarstagande i komplexa livssituationer.

Genom att lyssna till männens berättelser undersöker jag hur de själva försöker förstå och framställa sina handlingar i ett samhälle som fördömer dem. De talade om skuld, ensamhet, upphetsning, omsorg, förvirring och ibland emotionell närhet till de kvinnor de mötte. Vissa beskrev långvariga relationer som upplevdes som meningsfulla; andra berättade om möten som kändes fel eller obehagliga. Många beskriv hur de hade utvecklat personliga strategier för att känna sig som ansvarstagande: att endast träffa kvinnor de uppfattade som självständiga, att undvika situationer som kändes osäkra eller tvivelaktiga, eller att begränsa möten med sexarbetare till resor utomlands. De beskrev också den tunga bördan av hemlighetsmakeri – att radera meddelanden, dölja resor eller ljuga för familj och vänner. Flera uttryckte en känsla av lättnad efter att fått tala om erfarenheter som de burit på ensamma i många år.

Männen nöjde sig inte med att rättfärdiga en olaglig handling; de arbetade aktivt med att göra sina praktiker begripliga och etiskt försvarbara i ett fientligt moraliskt klimat. En framträdande strategi var att betona emotionell intimitet, omsorg och relationell betydelse. Genom att lyfta fram närhet, ömsesidigt erkännande eller en

känsla av ansvar gentemot sexarbetare försökte männen omtolka en handling som offentligt definieras som exploaterande till något som låg närmare moraliskt acceptabel intimitet. Denna betoning av intimitet kan tänkas handla om att kriminalisering och stigmatisering gör sådana moraliska tolkningar särskilt viktiga och laddade i Sverige. När betalt sex omges av hemlighetsmakeri, rädsla för avslöjande och moralisk fördömelse kan upplevelser av närhet, tillit eller att bli sedd av en annan människa få en särskilt stark laddning. Denna form av intimitet tas inte för given eller normaliseras, utan upplevs som skör, exceptionell och moraliskt laddad.

För att sätta dessa personliga berättelser i ett bredare sammanhang utvecklade jag en intervjumetod där jag tog med fördömande mediebilder av så kallade "sexköpare" och lät männen reagera på hur de framställs offentligt. Avhandlingen innehåller också en omfattande jämförande studie av allmänhetens attityder till betalt sex i de nordiska länderna. Analysen visar att Sverige sticker ut: både män och kvinnor i Sverige uttrycker mer negativa attityder än sina motsvarigheter i andra nordiska länder. Detta moraliska klimat präglar inte bara den offentliga debatten utan också hur män som betalar för sex tänker och känner om sig själva.

Antropologiskt sett är det väsentligt att betona att dessa män lever i en moralisk regim där juridik, jämställdhetspolitik och offentlig diskurs samverkar och skapar ovanligt höga insatser kring betald intimitet. Glappet mellan hur betalt sex framställs offentligt i Sverige – som våld, exploatering eller moraliskt förfall – och hur männen själva upplever och berättar om sina möten skapar en produktiv spänning. Det är i denna spänning som det moraliska arbetet blir synligt. Denna spänning bidrar också till att förklara varför vissa män beskriver dessa möten som djupt betydelsefulla, trots – eller just på grund av – de risker som är förknippade med dem.

Avslutningsvis argumenterar avhandlingen för att om vi vill förstå varför människor gör som de gör – och hur lagar formar deras liv – måste vi lyssna. Att lyssna innebär inte att hålla med eller godkänna. Det innebär att erkänna att människors liv är mer komplexa än de berättelser vi oftast hör. Genom att uppmärksamma dessa dolda röster och hemliga liv får vi en tydligare bild av hur moral praktiseras och hur intimitet, pengar och lag vävs samman i det samtida Sverige.

List of Studies

Study I — Johansson, I. (2025). Using the stigma engagement strategy in interviews with men who pay for sex. *Sexualities, 28*(8), 2305-2327. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607251324790

Study II — Johansson, I. Moral Work in the Shadows of Criminalization: Moral Work in the Shadows of Criminalization: Narrating "Good" and "Bad" Paid Sex in Sweden. Unpublished manuscript.

Study III — Johansson, I. Relational Authenticity: An Anthropological Reconsideration of Intimacy in Commercial Sex. Unpublished manuscript.

Study IV — Johansson, I., Hansen, M.A. (2024). Predicting Attitudes Towards the Exchange of Sexual Services for Payment: Variance in Gender Gaps Across the Nordic Countries. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy 21*, 559–577. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-00940-5

Introduction: Listening to the Morally Condemned

"I've never told anyone this before." I heard this phrase again and again – typed in encrypted messages, stated nervously during phone interviews, and shared over a cup of coffee in intimate face-to-face encounters. Over several years of ethnographic research, Swedish men who had paid for sex repeated these words to me, signaling a rare and risky form of disclosure. In Sweden, where their actions are both criminalized and heavily stigmatized, the voices of these men are often cast as morally tainted. Speaking openly exposes them not only to the threat of legal sanctions but also to significant social and reputational consequences. At the start of my fieldwork, paying for sex was punishable by a fine; today, it carries a minimum penalty of one year in prison or a conditional sentence. Men who have been caught paying for sex have therefore not only faced legal punishment but have lost jobs, families, and friends. Unsurprisingly, many of the men I came across were hesitant – fearful of being exposed, judged, or condemned. Those who nevertheless chose to participate did so out of a desire to be understood: to explain what they did, why they did it, and how it felt to them. Many described a sense of relief once they had shared their stories and expressed a hope of adding "nuance" to public portrayals of paid sex by showing their experiences to be more complex than popular narratives suggest.

Across Swedish public discourse, men who pay for sex are consistently condemned and cast as predatory, irresponsible, or morally deficient. Media outlets routinely dramatize the figure of the so-called "sex buyer," portraying him as someone to be exposed and intercepted (SVT Nyheter, 2021). Some coverage describes police officers listening outside hotel rooms for "distinctive intercourse sounds" before making arrests (Upsala Nya Tidning, 2021), an image that reinforces the trope of catching these men "with their pants down" (Björkman, 2015; Ölander, 2016). Statements from police and public officials extend this moral characterization, asserting that men who pay for sex have a "despicable view of women" and a particular moral defect that enables them to "cross the line" into sex purchase (Skogberg, 2023), which makes them unfit parents (Bengtsson, 2020; Liljeström, 2020).

These narratives are amplified through entertainment media and public campaigns. Television programs invite viewers to follow police as they apprehend suspected

clients, and journalists have staged "honey traps," posing as sex workers to lure and expose men seeking to purchase sex (Erlandsson, 2019; SVT, 2019; TV4, 2013). Civil society organizations have echoed these tactics: the "Rent a Girlfriend" campaign, run by RealStars and Child10 in 2020, deployed fictitious advertisements and a mock website to attract men before redirecting them to anti–sex-purchase messaging (RealStars, 2020).

Beyond policing, surveillance practices seep into everyday life. Hotel staff are encouraged to monitor guests for signs of illicit encounters, effectively becoming informal extensions of enforcement efforts (Sahlin, 2014). Opinion writers, political commentators, and public officials depict paid sex as a form of violence and call for harsher penalties and even EU-wide criminalization, framing clients as drivers of human trafficking and embodiments of patriarchal domination (Lernfelt, 2023; Regnér & Wallström, 2016). Institutions outside the criminal courts also participate in this moral disqualification: a sex-purchase conviction is often treated as evidence of untrustworthiness or unfitness for public-facing roles, even when the encounter occurred privately and consensually (Eriksson, 2023). The consequences of exposure can be severe: public figures implicated in sex-purchase cases have lost jobs, commercial partnerships, and public credibility, becoming focal points of moral outrage (Johansson, 2020; Johansson et al., 2020; Shimoda et al., 2020; Ståhle & Berggren Wiklund, 2025; Tronarp, 2020; Westling, 2020).

Across these portrayals, the man who pays for sex emerges not merely as someone who has broken a law but as a morally disqualified subject whose motives are presumed illegitimate and whose voice is discounted in advance. It is within this climate of cultural vilification, institutional quieting, and anticipatory stigma that the men in this study agreed to speak about their secret lives.

This dissertation begins there: with the decision to listen to those whose voices are rarely heard and often vilified in public debate – not, of course, to simply listen and pass on their words but to acquire an anthropological understanding of these men's practices and perceptions. Listening thus becomes an ethnographic method for tracing how stigma and criminalization produce hidden moral worlds – and how those condemned by law and public morality grapple with their experiences. Through their stories, I examine how people come to see themselves within the moral constraints that define them as deviant. These hidden worlds reveal how morality operates as a social force, drawing boundaries around what is acceptable, doable, and sayable, and how individuals work within and against those boundaries in their efforts to make sense of their actions. The negotiations, uncertainties, and doubts that shape morality become visible when people are cast as "wrongdoers" – when those labeled as perpetrators struggle to reconcile their actions with their sense of self (Korsby & Vigh, 2025). Their experiences provide anthropological insight into how people strive to be good within a moral order that defines them as bad – making visible how society and individuals draw and cross the lines between care and harm, compliance and transgression. By studying those who inhabit the wrong

side of these lines, we learn how moral values are produced, enforced, and sometimes unsettled. Listening to these men is not about vindicating them, but about understanding the moral order that condemns them.

As Ferrell and Hamm (1998) argue, studying those positioned at the margins of legality and morality is essential for understanding how social orders are produced, contested, and lived. In line with this tradition of "edge ethnography," this dissertation treats men who pay for sex not as aberrations but as participants in a morally governed landscape whose narratives illuminate how criminalization and stigma shape intimate life.

In fact, there has been limited ethnographic attention to Swedish men who pay for sex, despite the central role of Sweden's criminalization of paid sex in international debates about prostitution policy (Ekberg, 2004, 2019; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017; Johansson, 2022; Langford & Skilbrei, 2021; Östergren, 2018, 2020, 2024; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2016). The same is true for research using mixed-methods approaches. Addressing this gap, the dissertation aims to contribute to the expansion of anthropology's engagement with how "wrongdoing" is lived, negotiated, and morally reasoned. Through the examination of such hidden and morally charged worlds, we can shed light not only on those who inhabit them but on the moral boundaries that organize social life itself.

That choice was not without controversy. Studying people who live parts of their lives in secrecy and moral disrepute is not a neutral act (Angel-Anjani, 2004; Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Korsby & Vigh, 2025; Kulick, 2005b; Lawy, 2017). In fact, this research provoked responses ranging from concern to outright critique, including from colleagues, acquaintances, and public officials (see also: Östergren, 2024). Some reacted with open disgust, describing these men as "disturbed" or "sick," and questioning why I would want to hear from them at all. Others issued cautionary warnings – advising me to be careful, not to wear revealing clothes, or believe anything I was told – as if meeting and speaking to men who had paid for sex were inherently dangerous or contaminating. I also faced serious accusations, including that I was "sponsored by the sex industry" or "the pimp lobby." I was even called a "pimp." These reactions illustrate Plummer's (1995) insight that certain sexual stories face significant obstacles to being voiced as they must push against dominant cultural narratives, institutional quieting, and moral disqualification.

As Douglas (1966) and Taussig (1999) remind us, proximity to moral transgression can itself be seen as contaminating. The stigma attached to participants often extends by proxy to those who seek to understand them, revealing how moral disqualification circulates beyond its immediate targets. Research that takes stigmatized sexuality seriously therefore risks attracting the same moral suspicion that surrounds its subjects (Kulick, 1998, 2005b; Plummer, 1995, 1996). Moral orders, Fassin (2008:334) observes, "govern both the subjects of policy and those

who study them." In this sense, research with criminalized and stigmatized groups becomes an encounter not only with hidden worlds but with the social mechanisms that render them – and those who listen to them – morally suspect.

Unease about proximity to the morally condemned, some contend, also extends to anthropology itself (Angel-Anjani, 2004; Korsby & Vigh, 2025; Kulick, 2005b). As Korsby and Vigh (2025:455) observe, the discipline's long-standing commitment to "giving voice" to the marginalized has often stopped short of engaging those regarded as morally suspect and complicit in harm – "perpetrators, violators, and offenders." This avoidance, they suggest, has produced a disciplinary blind spot: while victimhood is examined in great depth, perpetration is more often moralized or ignored. Here, I take up their call for analyses that seek to understand the perspectives and practices of people who occupy morally condemned positions. I approach the case of Swedish men who pay for sex as an ethnographic lens for understanding how moral sense-making takes shape within stigmatized and criminalized intimacies. The call to move beyond moralizing dismissal resonates with the approach taken here: to listen carefully to these men who occupy a condemned social position. The purpose is not to vindicate them, but to understand how they engage in and make sense of paid sexual relations under conditions of stigma and criminalization.

For the men I encountered, sharing their stories was not only an act of disclosure but of admitting to transgressions that the law and public morality define as shameful, if not evil. For many, the interviews became moments of reckoning: revisiting guilt and doubt, confessing to loneliness, or acknowledging an inability to pursue intimacy in the conventional way. To speak was to confront not only what they had done but who they had failed to be in the eyes of society. These conversations revealed the precarious life many of the men inhabited – one of risk, secrecy, and continual negotiation, where ethical self-understanding was constantly being questioned and reassembled.

"I guess I have a strange sense of morality," one man reflected, half-apologetically, as he tried to reconcile his actions with his self-image. Another described the regret many of his encounters with sex workers had prompted, along with a lingering sense of inadequacy: "What am I even going there for? […] It's easy to think that I'm a bad person, someone who must pay for something that isn't really worth what I pay." One participant, more analytical, described an ongoing struggle between his self-perception and social judgment: "My self-image wasn't something I was proud of. I had to think: does this fit with how I see myself, with my personal goals? I see myself as someone with strong morals, but my morals don't always align with the morals of the rest of society."

Listening to such reflections revealed that the men's stories were instances of what scholars have described as "moral work" – i.e. the everyday labor through which people sustain moral selves in ethically fraught circumstances (Lupton, 2000; Mol,

2008; Presser, 2008; Ryan et al., 2010). The men's moral work encompassed not only efforts to manage guilt or conform to moral expectations but also subtle forms of resistance to stigma – moments when the men defended their integrity, challenged public portrayals, or reclaimed a sense of care and reciprocity within paid encounters. Some described themselves as pragmatic or rational actors, emphasizing clear-cut boundaries and the lack of ongoing expectations or social obligations. Others described paid sex as an escape from loneliness or emotional scarcity, or as a space of safety and control; payment, they explained, could enable forms of intimacy that felt less risky than conventional relationships. Even when framed as caring or respectful, these encounters were enveloped in silence. Still others portrayed paid sex as a pursuit of connection: encounters that could feel emotionally genuine, sometimes extending into long-term arrangements and social bonds that blurred the boundary between commerce and companionship.

Like other lawbreakers, the men engaged in justification, secrecy, and moral boundary-making. What distinguishes them, however, is that their transgression concerns intimacy. Unlike burglars or financial offenders, they must account not only for what they do, but for how they feel, how others feel, and what kinds of relationships they enter. Their wrongdoing cannot be easily externalized or depersonalized; it is lived through bodies, emotions, and relations. Intimacy could take many forms: the physical immediacy of touch, the emotional resonance of conversation, or the trust of secrecy shared with someone who already knows one's hidden self. It could be fleeting or sustained, transactional or affective, and often combined elements of all these at once.

These accounts point to the complex ways intimacy was experienced and moralized. Intimacy could be framed as transactional, caring, or even loving; it could be fleeting, sustained, or collapse altogether. To capture this spectrum, I use the term "relational authenticity" to describe the fragile, interactional work through which participants sought to make closeness feel "real" and morally meaningful under conditions of criminalization and stigma. Building on existing uses of relational authenticity across disciplines (Kraus & Chen, 2014; Su et al., 2020; Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018), as well as scholarship on "bounded and negotiated authenticity and intimacy" in commercial sex (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008a, 2008b; Benjamin, 2025), this concept situates intimacy not merely as pleasure or exchange but as a moral language through which people test, repair, and remake their sense of self.

A further distinguishing feature is that Swedish criminalization fuses legal sanction with a powerful moral discourse that targets identity as much as action. Many lawbreakers can maintain a separation between act and self – "I broke the law, but that's not who I am." In the Swedish context, criminalization and accompanying public discourse collapse this distinction. Men who pay for sex are framed not simply as individual offenders, but as collectively responsible for systemic injustice: sustaining patriarchy, embodying gender inequality, and enabling human

trafficking. The category of the "sex buyer" thus functions as a moral identity rather than merely a legal one. In Goffman's (1963) terms, the law produces a "spoiled identity" even in the absence of arrest. As a result, these men are compelled to engage in unusually intensive moral work – not only to justify what they do, but to preserve themselves as ethical subjects within a moral regime that defines their desire as socially harmful.

Seen comparatively, Swedish men who pay for sex demonstrate that lawbreaking is not always about rejecting moral norms. Instead, it can involve hyper-engagement with morality; criminalization can intensify rather than suppress ethical reflection; and intimacy under condemnation can become a site of heightened moral labor. What is special, then, is not the transgressive act itself, but the moral valuation surrounding it (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999). These men offer a clear vantage point for examining how taboo is practiced and experienced in everyday life (Douglas, 1966), as their actions unfold where legal prohibition, moral stigma, and intimate relations intersect.

Aim and Research Questions

This dissertation asks how men who pay for sex in Sweden make sense of their experiences. The aim is twofold. First, it seeks to provide an anthropological understanding not only of this particular group of Swedish men, but – more broadly – of how individuals act, reason, and sustain moral selves when their intimate practices are both socially condemned and legally proscribed. Second, the dissertation aims to contribute to – and potentially advance – methodological strategies for engaging with criminalized, hidden, or morally disqualified study populations. By combining in-depth interviewing, long-term ethnographic engagement, and comparative analysis of public attitudes, the dissertation traces how personal reasoning and feeling intersect with broader moral orders. This mixed-methods approach treats listening as both an ethical and analytical practice, revealing how morality and intimacy are produced and sustained between secrecy and exposure, care and condemnation, distance and connection. In doing so, the analysis aims to contribute to what Korsby and Vigh (2025:468) describe as a "non-moralizing anthropology" – one that seeks to understand how transgressive practices are situated within shared moral worlds rather than beyond them.

To address this overarching question, the dissertation explores the following interrelated research questions:

1. How do dominant moral, legal, and social frameworks in Sweden and the broader Nordic region shape the meanings ascribed to paid sexual exchanges?

2. How do Swedish men who engage in paid sex make sense of, navigate, and articulate their experiences in relation to these frameworks?
3. How do stigma, secrecy, and criminalization shape these men's subjectivities, strategies, and relationships with sex workers, and how might their experiences deepen anthropological understandings of moral subject formation and the governance of intimacy?
4. How can researchers engage with stigmatized, hidden, or morally disqualified study populations like men who pay for sex, and what methodological strategies elicit meaningful narratives under conditions of criminalization and stigma?

Together, these questions situate the dissertation within an anthropology of morality and intimacy, engaging not only with theoretical debates but also with the ethnographic and methodological labor of studying morally charged and socially silenced practices. The four empirical studies offer distinct yet connected perspectives on how Swedish men who pay for sex experience and reflect on their involvement in this practice. Using approaches that range from interviewing and long-term ethnographic engagement to comparative public attitudes analysis, the studies share an interpretive concern with how meaning is made under conditions of stigma and criminalization – linking individual narratives of intimacy and selfhood to the broader societal frameworks that define paid sex as deviant and unacceptable. Across the dissertation, moral work serves as a unifying lens for understanding how men who pay for sex navigate criminalization, stigma, and moral self-understanding. While Study II offers the concept's most focused articulation, using it to examine how the men classify paid sexual encounters as "good" or "bad," the other studies trace related moral negotiations – in secrecy, stigma, intimacy, and public attitudes. Together, they show how moral work unfolds at the intersection of personal reasoning and broader systems of governance and moral valuation (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999). Throughout the dissertation, I use the term "moral governance" to describe how law, stigma, and public morality work together to regulate not only what men who pay for sex can do, but also how they come to understand and evaluate themselves. It captures the interplay between external judgment and internal self-scrutiny that characterizes life under criminalization.

Outline of the Dissertation

The background chapter situates the dissertation within the historical, social, and political context of paid sex in Sweden, with particular attention to criminalization and public debate.

The literature review surveys research on men who pay for sex across sociology, criminology, and anthropology, identifying key debates on regulation, stigma, and exchange, as well as theoretical and methodological gaps that the dissertation addresses.

The theory chapter develops an analytical framework drawing primarily on anthropological perspectives on morality, stigma, secrecy, and intimacy, while engaging sociological theories of moral governance, anthropological work on exchange and value, and criminological perspectives on regulation and responsibilization.

The methodology chapter outlines the mixed-methods design of the study, combining ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and comparative analysis of public attitudes, and discusses the ethical and practical considerations involved in researching a criminalized and stigmatized group.

The findings chapter presents the four empirical studies that form the core of the dissertation, examining the men's engagement with stigma, their moral reasoning, experiences of intimacy, and the broader moral climates in which these are situated.

The concluding discussion brings together insights from the empirical studies and reflects on their implications for anthropological understandings of morality, intimacy, and criminalization.

Background: Sweden's Re-Moralization of Paid Sex

This chapter outlines the historical, political, and cultural background of the Swedish case. It shows how the criminalization of paid sex has been framed not simply as a matter of law or gender policy but as a moral reform aimed at reshaping citizens' desires, responsibilities, and sense of civic virtue. In doing so, it situates the ethnographic analysis that follows within the broader moral landscape in which men who pay for sex are positioned and understood. The chapter moves from historical and global perspectives on the moralization of sexuality to the specific development and consequences of Sweden's client criminalization.

Sweden provides a powerful example of how sexuality becomes a site for moral and political struggle. What distinguishes this case is not criminalization itself but how it has been embedded within a broader cultural project of moral renewal. The following sections trace this trajectory: from historical and religious efforts to regulate sexuality, to the contemporary framing of commercial sex as a threat to gender equality and social progress. Together, they show how the Swedish criminalization exemplifies a wider re-moralization of intimacy and citizenship – one that illuminates the moral work explored in the dissertation's later chapters.

Moral Worlds and the Regulation of Sexuality

Anthropologists have long examined how people make moral sense of their actions and relationships within the constraints of social order. From classic studies of kinship, reciprocity, and exchange (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Mauss, 2001; Sahlins, 1972) to recent explorations of ethics, affect, and personhood (Lambek, 2022; Laidlaw, 2002; Zigon, 2007, 2009, 2014), morality emerges as a negotiated practice. Moral life unfolds through frictions between norms and experience, between what people are expected to do and how they understand themselves in doing it. This perspective allows anthropology to illuminate how social worlds are sustained and contested through everyday acts of justification, care, and ethical reflection.

These theoretical insights are useful for understanding how the Swedish criminalization operates as a moral project, one that reconfigures the boundaries

between ethics, law, and citizenship. Across societies and historical periods, religious institutions such as the church, along with governments and other moral authorities, have sought to regulate sexuality as both a private desire and a public concern. The exchange of sex for money has long been a site of moral anxiety and control. In Christian traditions, paid sex represented sinful lust and moral corruption; in nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe, it was portrayed as a threat to public morality and the sanctity of the family, pathologized through emerging discourses of hygiene and degeneration (Ditmore, 2006; Lister, 2021). In these frameworks, sexuality became a means of governing virtue, discipline, and social order.

Meanwhile, paying for sex has also been seen as a pastime or even a rite of passage in certain contexts. Visiting sex workers was, for example, regarded as a coming-of-age ritual among European elites in the nineteenth century or a socially tolerated pastime in military and colonial settings (Corbin, 1990; Stoler, 1995; Walkowitz, 1982). These examples illustrate how differing understandings of paid sex have coexisted. Later works from Japan (Allison, 1994) and Italy (Corso & Landi, 1998) show how paying for sex has been treated as a socially tolerated practice in some circles, framed as leisure or education in masculinity despite condemnation from above. These historical and cross-cultural perspectives underscore that not all citizens view an act as shameful simply because society's powerful institutions frame it as such.

"Shameful and Unacceptable": Sweden's Client Criminalization and Morality Politics

In 1999, Sweden criminalized the purchase of sexual services, making the act of seeking "casual sexual relations in exchange for payment" a criminal offense (Brottsbalken, ch. 6, § 11; Government Offices of Sweden, 1999). Punishable behaviors include situations where payment or non-monetary compensation is given for sex, when payment or non-monetary compensation has been agreed upon in advance but not yet made, and when a third party pays for the sexual relations of someone else. In 2022, the minimum penalty for paying for sex was raised from an income-based fine to imprisonment or a conditional sentence. In 2025, criminalization expanded further from having originally concerned only in-person sexual transactions to digital interactions, making it illegal to pay for live, on-demand sexual performances conducted remotely via webcam, video call, or other interactive platforms. These recent changes underscore the increasing criminalization and stigmatization of men who pay for sex in contemporary Swedish society.

Counteracting the demand for sexual services has been identified as a government priority aligning with the overarching objective to "combat prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes" (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2025). This objective has been conceptualized as the "oppression paradigm" (Weitzer, 2009), which posits that the exchange of sexual services for payment inherently constitutes a form of male violence against women and should thus be abolished. Indeed, efforts to eradicate the exchange of sex for payment are integrated into the broader Swedish agenda for gender equality (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2025; Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019). This initiative to criminalize those who pay for sex has been presented not only as legal innovation but as a progressive moral achievement:

> [I]t is shameful and unacceptable that, in a gender-equal society, men obtain casual sexual relations with women in return for payment and that Sweden, by introducing a ban on purchasing sexual services, also sent an important signal to other countries highlighting our outlook on purchasing sexual services and prostitution. It pointed out that prostitution entails serious harm to both individuals and to society (Government Offices of Sweden, 2010:29).

A subsequent statement by two Swedish ministers described how "prostitution is the exploitation of people and criminalizing those who buy sex is the only right thing to do for a civilized society" (Regnér & Wallström, 2016, para. 3). In these statements, as in others, government officials designate men who pay for sex as contemporary deviants and retrogressive moral offenders, positioning them in direct opposition to the ideals of progressive Swedish society. The signal is clear: paid sexual relations are "harmful, shameful, unacceptable, and uncivilized." Drawing on this understanding, the Swedish government has championed the criminalization of sex workers' clients as a progressive feminist initiative, leading to the adoption of similar approaches in countries such as Canada, France, Finland, Iceland, Israel, Ireland, and Norway (Johansson, 2022; Östergren, 2018, 2020, 2024).

Sweden has described itself, and been described, as "the first of its kind" (Claude, 2010:6; see also Government Offices of Sweden, 2010) because it criminalizes those who pay for sex while framing the exchange of sex for payment as a gender and power inequality issue (de Cabo y Moreda et al., 2021). That said, punitive measures affecting participants in the sex trade – be it sex workers, their clients, or third parties – are not new; rather, historically, to punish them has been the norm in many parts of the world (Ditmore 2006; Lister 2021). Sweden too has a long history of attempts to control and combat the sex trade through repressive measures. The novelty lies in how, using the framework of men's violence against women, the Swedish government has presented criminalization as a progressive and original feminist measure (Johansson 2022; Östergren 2018, 2024).

Like the condemning Swedish discourse, this dissertation also focuses on men who primarily pay women for sex. This focus reflects how the Sweden has framed the

issue as emblematic of heterosexual male dominance. Yet this framing sits uneasily with empirical patterns: survey data indicate that paid sex experiences are more common among gay and bisexual men, nearly 15 percent, than among heterosexual men, around 10 percent (Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019). This discrepancy highlights a central paradox of the Swedish approach: a policy justified through a narrative of heterosexual gender inequality overlooks the broader diversity of who pays for sex and why, narrowing moral concern to a particular symbolic figure rather than to the phenomenon in its full social complexity.

In contemporary Sweden, the exchange of sex for payment has been redefined as a problem of gender equality, with the act of paying interpreted less as sin than as evidence of patriarchal entitlement or a failure to embody enlightened masculinity (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017; Johansson, 2022; Kulick, 2003, 2005a; Östergren, 2018, 2024; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2016). What distinguishes the Swedish case is not the moral condemnation itself but the form of moral reasoning through which it is articulated. Criminalization of paid sex is presented as both feminist and humanitarian, as a defense of women's dignity and a struggle against sexual violence (Ekberg, 2004, 2019; Farley, 2004; Moran & Farley, 2019; Raymond, 2004a, 2004b). By framing the law as moral pedagogy, Sweden exemplifies a shift from traditional sin-based prohibitions to a modern politics of virtue, where ethical citizenship is measured through adherence to ideals of gender equality. This approach fuses punishment with care, presenting the state as an ethical actor working on behalf of gender justice (Östergren, 2018, 2024; Vuolajärvi, 2019a, 2019b).

While the term "the Swedish model" is commonly used to denote this criminalization of sex workers' clients, it represents merely one of many measures comprising Sweden's repressive framework governing the market for sexual services (Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Östergren, 2018, 2020, 2024; Vuolajärvi, 2019a, 2019b). As Östergren (2024) demonstrates, prostitution policy forms part of a broader field of "morality politics," in which repressive legal instruments such as the Swedish sex purchase ban are applied to consensual acts. Morality politics refers to a specific category of political issues such as sexuality, desire, decency, life, and death, designating those public and governmental arenas where society decides what kinds of conduct are permissible, desirable, or unacceptable.

According to Östergren (2020, 2024), a unifying feature of morality politics issues is that they are perceived as threats to the social order and that they historically draw on religious notions of sin. The exchange of sex for payment belongs to this category, yet governments approach this issue in markedly different ways. These differences are not merely matters of policy design but reflect distinct moral evaluations of sexuality, gender, agency, and harm. Östergren identifies three broad regulatory approaches. A repressive policy, such as Sweden's, seeks to eliminate the sex trade through punitive measures, framing the exchange as inherently immoral and socially harmful. A restrictive policy permits the activity under limited

conditions, regulating it through a combination of criminal and civil law in order to contain what is understood as a problematic but persistent practice. An integrative policy, by contrast, refrains from criminalizing voluntary sex work altogether and instead regulates the trade through sector-specific labor and contract law, emphasizing rights, protection, and harm reduction.

These approaches rest on different moral standpoints rather than on the presence or absence of morality as such. The regulatory choices societies make reflect competing understandings of what constitutes exploitation, responsibility, and legitimate intimacy. As such, the chosen policy framework says something fundamental about a society's moral order and which citizens should be included in or expelled from the community; whether social cohesion is best safeguarded through punishment, containment, or integration, and how the boundaries of acceptable sexuality are drawn (Östergren, 2020, 2024).

Within this framework, the state emerges as a moral actor. In the Swedish context, this is exemplified by the definition of prostitution as a form of gendered harm and exploitation. The ambition is not merely to regulate behavior by criminalizing those who pay for sex or to promote this stance as ethically superior, but to actively reshape citizens' desires, moral sensibilities, and sense of responsibility (Östergren, 2020, 2024).

This moral framing has not remained rhetorical. It has structured the evolution of Swedish prostitution policy itself. As the state positions prostitution as a site of gendered harm and ethical citizenship, the law becomes a primary instrument through which morality politics is enacted and expanded (Östergren, 2020, 2024), a development clearly visible in the trajectory of criminalization over time (Johansson, 2022).

Over the past twenty-five years, Sweden's client criminalization has intensified. Initially a fine-based sanction, it now carries mandatory imprisonment or a conditional sentence (Brottsbalken ch. 6, § 11). Moreover, its scope has expanded to include digital sexual services such as live webcam performances and commissioned erotic videos. Whether praised or criticized, the law now governs not only behavior but moral imagination, shaping what forms of intimacy and responsibility are recognized as legitimate.

Public campaigns have also reinforced this moral framework by constructing the figure of the "deviant sex buyer." Government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and media outlets have collaborated to produce a recognizable image: the ordinary man with a hidden deviance. Campaigns such as "Buying Sex Is a Crime" and "You Decide!" framed men who pay for sex as the root of gender inequality and human trafficking (Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021). These efforts positioned the man who pay for sex as both source of harm and embodiment of moral failure – the antithesis of Sweden's gender-equal ideal. This

image, exported internationally through institutions like the Swedish Institute and Ministry for Foreign Affairs, supports Sweden's self-image as an ethical nation (Claude, 2010; Ekberg, 2004, 2019; Government Offices of Sweden, 2016).

The Moral Life of Condemnation

For the men I came across, these stigmatizing portrayals were not abstract. Most were acutely aware of being depicted as social threats or moral failures. They described deleting online search histories, arranging encounters abroad, and maintaining elaborate secrecy to avoid exposure. Even those men who rejected the state's narrative often pointed to shame, fear of discovery, and the constant work of managing who might find out. In this way, criminalization operates not only as legal control but as a system that organizes risk, secrecy, and self-evaluation in men's intimate lives.

Several men recounted how disclosure, whether voluntary or forced, had cost them love interests and relationships. One man called me in tears from a public library after a police raid in which the officers had confiscated not only his phone and computer but also his child's laptop and diary. In the aftermath, the man said, he had been forced to tell his child and ex-wife about the investigation, describing the conversation as more devastating than the prospect of legal punishment itself. The man recounted how the police had called his mother and discussed reporting him to social services as an inadequate parent, as they have with other men. In some areas of Sweden, it is common practice for the police to submit so-called "reports of concern" to social services regarding the welfare of the children of men arrested for engaging in sexual relations against payment. Swedish officials have, in fact, suggested that men who pay for sex are all unfit parents whose ability to care for their children should always be investigated by the social services (Bengtsson, 2020; Liljeström, 2020).

Despite decades of enforcement and international acclaim, surveys show that 10–15 percent of Swedish men have paid for sex at least once (Deogan et al., 2021; Lewin et al., 1998; Kuosmanen, 2011; Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019) – mirroring rates in countries like Norway (Schei & Stigum, 2010) and Israel (Lahav-Raz et al., 2024). Rather than eliminating paid sex, criminalization has displaced it – to private settings, digital platforms, and travel abroad (Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021). The persistence of these practices suggests that what has changed most is not behavior but the moral texture of participation, namely the secrecy, justification, and self-scrutiny surrounding it.

The men's narratives reveal how secrecy itself becomes a moral practice. Concealment becomes part of the moral work of maintaining belonging within a society that renders such acts unspeakable.

From a broader perspective, Sweden's case highlights how moral governance operates within and across the Nordic region. While Norway, Iceland, and Finland share frameworks of client criminalization, the Swedish approach stands out for the strength of its moral campaign and the unusually strong public consensus surrounding it. Findings from the Nordic attitudinal study conducted for this dissertation reveal significant cross-national variation in how people evaluate paid sex, largely aligning with each country's policy orientation. Gender and views on non-committal casual sex are key factors shaping attitudes toward the exchange of sex for payment, with men finding it more acceptable than women in all Nordic countries except Sweden. In Sweden, both men and women express similarly strong moral opposition, suggesting that what distinguishes Sweden is the degree of stigma attached to expressing anything other than condemnation.

Situating Sweden within this comparative Nordic framework reveals both shared regional ideals and a distinctive moral intensity. The moral campaign surrounding the Sex Purchase Act has not only shaped policy but reinforced a powerful social norm of condemnation that separates Sweden from its Nordic neighbors. Studying men who have paid for sex in this context sheds light on how morality politics (Östergren, 2024) shape everyday self-presentation, stigma, and ethical self-understanding in a society where disapproval of paid sex has become a marker of social progressiveness and national belonging.

Literature Review: Behavior and Meaning in Research on Men Who Pay for Sex

This chapter offers an analytic overview of the state of the art in research on men who pay for sex, organizing existing scholarship around key questions of behavior and meaning. Across various disciplines, researchers have examined who pays for sex, why they do so, and how legal and social sanctions affect their behavior. While contexts differ, the literature consistently demonstrates that the practices in which these men engage, and their self-understandings, are shaped by a combination of social norms, gendered expectations, legal frameworks, and public narratives. What remains less explored, however, is how moral reasoning and intimacy intersect in men's accounts of paid sex. In Sweden, early research focused on prevalence, demographics, and motivations (Månsson, 2006; Kuosmanen, 2008), but more recent scholarship has examined how men navigate stigma and criminalization (Grönvall et al., 2021; Grönvall, 2022, 2024; Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Scaramuzzino, 2014). These studies find that men adapt by developing strategies to avoid detection and mitigate relational risks. Building on recent studies in Sweden and elsewhere (e.g., Grönvall, 2022, 2024; Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Lahav-Raz et al., 2024), this chapter reviews existing research to trace how law, culture, and public discourse construct the man who pays for sex as a moral problem. It also identifies the conceptual openings that this dissertation addresses, namely how criminalization and stigma not only regulate behavior but shape the moral and affective conditions through which intimacy becomes thinkable, narratable, and livable.

Who Pays for Sex?

Research shows that paying for sex is neither marginal nor rare in Sweden. Over time, the prevalence for men appears to have remained relatively stable. Survey data consistently estimate that around 10–15 percent of Swedish men have paid for sexual services at some point in their lives (Deogan et al., 2021; Kuosmanen, 2011; Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019). In the mid-1990s, about one in eight Swedish

men had ever paid for sex (Lewin et al., 1998). A generation later, Deogan et al. (2021) found that roughly one in ten men aged 16–84 had done so. For women, prevalence is below 1 percent (Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019).

Patterns indicate that paying for sex is more common among older men, those who are divorced or single, and men with more extensive sexual histories (Deogan et al., 2021) The same study found that factors such as early sexual debut, a high number of lifetime partners, and engagement with online sexual activities correlate with a higher likelihood of having paid for sex. One of the most recent studies reported no significant differences in education levels between men who had paid for sex and those who had not, but it did find a higher prevalence among gay and bisexual men, nearly 15 percent, compared to heterosexual men, around 10 percent (Swedish Public Health Agency, 2019). Analysis of police data suggests that apprehended men span diverse backgrounds but, on average, have lower incomes than the general population and a higher proportion of foreign citizenship (Olsson, 2021). Most have no prior criminal records. Apprehensions are most common in hotels and on the street but also occur in private homes.

Overall, prevalence studies place Swedish men who have paid for sex within a familiar global profile, with estimates appearing similar in Norway, 13 percent (Schei & Stigum, 2010), and Israel, 13 percent (Lahav-Raz et al., 2024), but slightly lower in the United Kingdom (UK), 6–11 percent (Ward et al., 2005). This comparison suggests that Swedish men are not exceptional in terms of prevalence, though criminalization shapes the contexts in which sex and payment are exchanged as well as how men account for it (Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Olsson, 2021).

Beyond questions of prevalence and sociodemographic patterns, research on men who pay for sex has sought to make sense of this heterogeneous group through the development of client typologies. Such typologies have aimed to categorize men according to motivations, frequency of purchase or context, for example distinguishing between "regulars" and "occasionals," between "generalists," "internet-only buyers," and "brothel-only buyers," or between allegedly exploitative and more "respectful" clients (Monto, 2004; Sanders, 2008a; Wakefield, 2025). While such frameworks have provided useful heuristics for organizing empirical diversity, they have often relied on relatively static categories that risk reifying clients into fixed types. In doing so, they can obscure how men's practices and orientations shift across time, relationships, and situational contexts, as well as how the same individual may engage in paid sex in qualitatively different ways depending on emotional needs, life circumstances, or the specific conditions of an encounter.

Against this background, Jones and Hannem (2018) challenge dominant client typologies by proposing a more nuanced four-part classification – committed regulars, hybrids, searchers, and industry insiders – that foregrounds intimacy, motive, and meaning rather than frequency alone. While this typology is more

analytically sensitive than many earlier classifications, my findings suggest that men who pay for sex do not necessarily fit neatly into stable categories. Rather than occupying a single client type, men may move between different modes of engagement over time and across contexts. My in-depth interviews, and especially my long-term ethnographic engagement, show that the same individual may pursue markedly different forms of intimacy simultaneously or sequentially. One man may cultivate a longer-term, emotionally invested relationship with one sex worker – where gifts, conversation, and shared social activities are central to the relationship – while also engaging in short-term or one-off encounters with others, where sexual motivations remain more prominent. These shifts are shaped by life circumstances, emotional needs, legal constraints, the societal organization of these exchanges, and the specific relational dynamics of each encounter. Attending to this temporal and contextual fluidity extends Jones and Hannem's insights by showing that intimacy in paid sex is not only bounded and interruptible, but also dynamically reconfigured as men navigate changing moral, emotional, and situational conditions.

Why Do Men Pay for Sex?

Research consistently shows that men's motivations for paying for sex are varied and often morally nuanced. Internationally, several studies highlight that men who pay for sex seek more than sexual release in commercial encounters. Sanders (2008a, 2008b) conceptualizes motivations through a "push/pull" model: push factors include loneliness, relationship breakdown, or disability, while pull factors include anonymity, variety, and intimacy without long-term obligations. Bernstein (2007) describes the pursuit of bounded authenticity, in which emotional connection is desired but contained within the safety of the transaction. Similarly, Grant (2014), Milrod and Weitzer (2012), and Monto (2004) show that these men emphasize sexual variety, convenience, and control alongside a search for meaning and care.

In Sweden, qualitative studies highlight how some men describe paying for sex as an escape from everyday routines or an embrace of the taboo; others seek predictability, reliability, and control in sexual contexts (Grönvall, 2022, 2024; Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021). These studies also point to the importance of factors like loneliness, dissatisfaction in existing intimate relationships, curiosity, and the pursuit of practices otherwise seen as unattainable or unavailable in their personal lives. Moreover, men's narratives may often blend these logics. These varied reasons reflect not only personal needs but also efforts to reconcile their actions with the stigma attached to paying for sex.

Across different settings, researchers have shown that men often construct paid encounters as relationally meaningful. Wojcicki (2002) describes South African men situating commercial sex within moral idioms of care and responsibility, while

Sanders (2008a, 2008b) and Hammond (2015) demonstrate that UK-based men use online forums not only to exchange practical advice but to cultivate narratives of respectability, reciprocity, and moral legitimacy. In these accounts, paid sex is not devoid of emotion; it becomes an alternative form of intimacy – a space where distance and connection, transaction and care, coexist.

Jones and Hannem (2018) provide an important point of departure for understanding intimacy in commodified sexual relationships. They argue that intimacy in commercial sex should not be dismissed as illusory or merely instrumental. Instead, intimacy is experienced as access – to another person's body, emotions, time, and attention – within encounters that are temporally and morally bounded.

Yet despite this growing recognition of the affective dimensions of paid sex, research rarely examines how intimacy and morality intersect in men's experiences. Studies often treat intimacy as emotional variation and morality as external judgment, overlooking how these dimensions are entangled. What remains underexplored is how men's moral reasoning is enacted through intimacy itself, how feelings of care, respect, trust, or affection become the medium through which they evaluate themselves and their actions. In the men's narratives, ethical self-understanding is not separate from emotion but constituted by it: intimacy becomes a site of moral work, where the desire to be decent, responsible, or caring coexists with secrecy, stigma, and law.

From this perspective, the question is not only why men pay for sex but how they make these acts morally thinkable and emotionally meaningful within a condemning context. This intersection – where moral reasoning and intimacy co-produce one another – forms a central concern of this dissertation.

Impacts of Client Criminalization

A central aim of the Swedish criminalization is to suppress the demand for commercial sexual services, yet research shows that criminalization has reconfigured rather than eradicated the sex market. In Johansson and Östergren (2021), we argue that the law shapes how transactions occur rather than eliminating them. Encounters increasingly take place indoors, in private residences, or through technologically mediated channels such as encrypted messaging, escort websites, and review forums.

Swedish men who pay for sex develop personal strategies or "rules" to reduce exposure and sustain a sense of moral legitimacy (Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021). These self-imposed codes – such as avoiding contact with immigrants and suspected trafficked individuals, paying only abroad, or engaging exclusively with women perceived as independent – reflect attempts to align desire

with responsibility. In Norway, where similar legislation exists, Schei and Stigum (2010) describe comparable adaptive strategies, including cross-border mobility to access less punitive markets. Criminalization thus produces not only legal risk but also moral frameworks through which men assess and justify their actions.

In Johansson and Östergren (2021), we describe this shift as "responsibility-individualization": the burden of preventing exploitation is placed on the men themselves, who are expected to discern coercion, gauge consent, and act as moral agents in the absence of institutional support. This responsibilization is precarious. Men who have paid for sex hesitate to report suspected trafficking for fear of exposing themselves to prosecution; instead, they perform moral vigilance through intuition and affective judgment – deciding whom to trust, what to ask, and how to behave.

Related research in Sweden identifies what Grönvall, Holmström, and Plantin (2021) term "trust work," the relational labor through which men attempt to make encounters feel ethically safe and emotionally genuine. Grönvall (2022, 2024) shows how men emphasize attentiveness, respect, and care as ways of distinguishing themselves from exploitative stereotypes. Similar strategies appear in the United States (US), the UK, and Ireland, where men frame their actions as consensual and mutually beneficial, asserting a moral distance from harm (Hammond, 2015, 2018; Hammond & van Hooff, 2020; Huschke & Schubotz, 2016; Monto & Milrod, 2014).

Criminalization intensifies these moral performances. As Platt et al. (2018) and Levy (2014) note, punitive policies often displace sex work underground, heightening risks for sex workers while expanding the moral demands placed on their clients. In Sweden, men's ethical reasoning unfolds within a dense moral climate that urges them to be discerning, cautious, and self-scrutinizing. They do not simply obey the law or defy it; they navigate it as a moral field – one that compels them to demonstrate care, caution, and moral awareness even in transgression.

Stigma and Moral Regimes

Alongside studies of motivation and experience, research has examined how men who pay for sex navigate stigma and moral condemnation. Across contexts, scholars show that their self-understandings are shaped not only by desire or risk but by efforts to manage discredit and moral judgment. In Israel, Lahav-Raz et al. (2024) describe how men reconcile their actions with prevailing norms by normalizing, moralizing, or reframing their participation as altruistic or mutually beneficial. They conceptualize this dynamic as a "moral regime" – a structured environment in which stigma and morality are fused, shaping how individuals make sense of themselves and their practices.

Comparable dynamics appear in the US and in European contexts, where Horswill and Weitzer (2018), Hammond (2015, 2018), and Sanders (2008a, 2008b) show men using peer communities and online forums to resist stigma and reframe commercial sex as legitimate or caring. These strategies highlight that stigma is not merely a mark of discredit but a site of ongoing negotiation, where men attempt to reclaim dignity, agency, and moral coherence.

In Sweden, Grönvall et al. (2021) demonstrate that Swedish men who pay for sex are acutely aware of the political and moral discourse surrounding the exchange of sex for payment. Their participants describe navigating paid encounters in relation to both personal values and dominant gender-equality norms, and they highlight how emotions such as thrill, shame, remorse, and moral discomfort shape men's evaluations of their experiences. The authors argue that the men distance themselves from exploitative stereotypes, noting that some men were concerned with being perceived as "good" or "kind" clients. These findings closely parallel insights from Johansson and Östergren (2021), a study I co-authored, which draws partly on the same interview material used in this dissertation. There, we showed that the men place great emphasis on having a "good" experience – defined not merely as sexual satisfaction but as an encounter that feels ethically coherent, emotionally comfortable, and free from signs of coercion or distress. We argued that under criminalization, men develop precautionary strategies and moral heuristics to ensure such experiences, and we conceptualized this dynamic as a form of responsibility-individualization, whereby clients are expected to detect, prevent, and avoid exploitation without institutional guidance.

While both Grönvall et al.'s study (2021) and my earlier work (Johansson & Östergren, 2021) document how men pursue morally tolerable encounters and negotiate stigma, these studies rely primarily on single interviews and therefore capture only momentary articulations of responsibility, emotion, and moral positioning. They also leave unexamined how these moral reflections unfold over

time and how broader cultural moral climates shape the vocabularies through which clients understand harm and legitimacy.

The dissertation addresses these gaps across the studies: Study I develops the stigma engagement strategy as a methodological innovation for eliciting moral negotiation under secrecy and criminalization; Study II builds directly on my earlier work by offering a sustained, ethnographically grounded analysis of how men differentiate "good" and "bad" experiences and perform moral work – the ongoing calibration of responsibility, desire, care, and risk; and Study IV situates these narratives within the broader context of Nordic public attitudes, revealing the collective moral frameworks that structure individual reasoning. Together, these studies extend existing research by tracing how clients' ethical evaluations and justifications shift across encounters, contexts, and moral regimes.

Previous Swedish public attitudes studies reveal strong condemnation of paid sex, with the majority of Swedes viewing the purchase of sex as morally wrong (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2011, 2014; Kuosmanen, 2008, 2011). Media portrayals further consolidate this moral climate, casting men who pay for sex as exploitative, deceitful, or incapable of intimacy (Johansson, 2022). Such representations reinforce what Lahav-Raz et al. (2024) call a moral regime: a cultural order that links legal transgression to moral failure and shapes how both the public and the men themselves understand what it means to be a "sex buyer."

Researchers have explored how legal regimes shape public opinion. Studies suggest that permissive or regulated environments yield greater variability and, in general, more tolerant attitudes (Escot et al., 2022; Immordino & Russo, 2015; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017), whereas criminalization is associated with heightened negativity (Escot et al., 2022). Comparative work indicates that Swedes and Norwegians tend to be more negative toward paying for sex than citizens of countries with non-criminalized or regulated markets (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2011). Within the Nordic region, Sweden typically exhibits the strongest opposition, with gender-equality framings appearing to influence attitudes more strongly there than in Norway. Yet despite these cross-national indications, no study prior to the one included in this dissertation has systematically examined attitudes across all five Nordic countries.

In the Swedish context in particular, where client criminalization is closely embedded in gender-equality politics, stigma is not only social but institutionalized through law and public moral discourse. Here, stigma functions not merely as disapproval but as a mode of governance (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1977; Rose, 1999) that calls on men to monitor themselves, assess others' vulnerability, and perform responsibility as an ongoing moral obligation. While the literature documents how men adapt to these conditions (e.g., Grönvall, 2022, 2024;

Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Lahav-Raz et al., 2024), less attention has been paid to how criminalization reshapes moral subjectivity and the conditions of intimacy itself – how men respond to, accommodate, or at times reproduce moral condemnation in their own reasoning, and how they recalibrate their sense of self, responsibility, and connection in the shadow of legal and moral judgment.

It is within this convergence of stigma, legality, and moral expectation that the men's moral work unfolds. Their narratives show how public stigma becomes internalized as self-scrutiny, and how ethical self-formation is intertwined with secrecy, responsibility, and the pursuit of intimacy. Understanding this process requires an analytic shift – from viewing stigma primarily as an external label, as in classic accounts of spoiled identity (Goffman 1963), to examining how it operates as part of a broader system of moral governance (Burchell et al. 1991; Fassin 2008; Foucault 1978; Rose 1999) that shapes how people live, feel, and judge themselves under conditions of criminalization. In this dissertation, moral governance refers to the convergence of criminalization, stigmatizing discourse, institutional practices, and public moral sentiment that collectively regulate how men who pay for sex are positioned and how they come to position themselves. It is this ongoing labor of ethical calibration that the dissertation conceptualizes and examines as moral work.

Theory: Stigma, Moral Work, and Secret Intimacies

The social position of Swedish men who pay for sex emerges at the intersection of criminalization, stigma, public condemnation, and secrecy. Together, these forces constitute a form of moral governance: a system through which the state and the public regulate not only behavior but also moral imagination and self-understanding. Building on Foucauldian analyses of governmentality and subject formation (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999) and extending these insights through anthropological work on moral economies and moralized governance (Fassin, 2008), this dissertation approaches moral governance as productive rather than merely repressive. In this sense, law and public discourse do not simply prohibit acts but actively produce moral subjects and hierarchies of worth. Examining this intersection reveals how morality is not only imposed from above but lived through intimate practices of self-regulation, secrecy, and ethical reflection. To analyze how this moral order is experienced and negotiated, the dissertation's theoretical framework weaves together three interrelated strands of scholarship.

The first strand concerns moral governance, stigma, and secrecy, and draws on anthropological and sociological analyses of how law, discourse, and affect define and police moral boundaries (Douglas, 1966; Fassin, 2008; Goffman, 1963; Korsby & Vigh, 2025; Link & Phelan, 2001; Östergren, 2024; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Classic interactionist accounts conceptualized stigma as a spoiled identity produced through social encounters (Goffman, 1963). Later work has emphasized stigma as a political and institutional process that distributes legitimacy, blame, and moral worth (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Fassin (2008) extends these perspectives by showing how stigma operates within broader moral economies, in which inequality, punishment, and compassion are unevenly allocated. Following Douglas (1966), such processes can also be understood as a "politics of purity," in which moral order is maintained by casting certain acts and persons as polluting and by regulating their visibility. Secrecy becomes part of this moral machinery: a way of managing moral contamination while allowing individuals to preserve dignity, belonging, and social life. Under criminalization, secrecy thus operates both as a mechanism of control and as a form of moral labor. As Korsby and Vigh (2025) argue, anthropology must take seriously the moral reasoning of those positioned as transgressors, without

reproducing the moral categories through which they are condemned. While this strand clarifies how moral regulation operates structurally, it tells us less about how people live with, interpret, and negotiate such regulation in everyday life.

The second strand addresses this gap by engaging what is often referred to as the anthropology of morality. This field is not unified by a single definition or theoretical program. Rather, it encompasses a set of overlapping approaches concerned with how moral life is lived, reasoned, and contested in practice (Laidlaw, 2014; Lambek, 2022; Mahmood, 2005; Mattingly, 2014; Zigon, 2007, 2009, 2014). In this dissertation, I draw particularly on work that treats morality not as a system of rules or values, but as an ongoing, situated practice shaped by doubt, responsibility, and ethical reflection. Fassin's (2012) contribution is again central here, in that they link moral experience to political and institutional conditions, showing how ethical subjectivity is formed within regimes of inequality and governance. From this perspective, individuals do not simply internalize public morality; they engage with it through justification, reinterpretation, care, and critique. In contexts such as Sweden, where legality and virtue are tightly aligned through gender-equality politics, these approaches illuminate how moral governance extends into self-governance – how individuals internalize, resist, and recalibrate the moral expectations that define them as deviant.

The third theoretical strand focuses on intimacy and exchange as central arenas in which moral work and ethical self-formation unfold. Ethnographic and sociological studies of sex work and other intimate economies have long challenged the assumption that economic and emotional relations belong to separate moral spheres (Benjamin, 2025; Bernstein, 2007; Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2009; Garza, 2022; Groes-Green, 2014; Jones & Hannem, 2018; Sanders, 2008a, 2008b; Tsang, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Zelizer, 2005, 2010). Rather than treating exchange as the antithesis of genuine intimacy, this literature shows how money, care, obligation, and affect are entangled in the making and evaluation of social and moral life. Exchange thus becomes one of the means through which intimacy is enacted, valued, and judged. In the context of Sweden's criminalization, this entanglement becomes particularly charged. Men must continually navigate how to feel, express, and account for intimacy within a practice defined by the state as both illegal and morally harmful. Questions of closeness, care, and emotional connection are therefore not secondary to moral reasoning but integral to it. Attending to intimacy adds an affective and relational dimension to the analysis of moral work, showing how ethical reasoning is lived not only through discourse and justification, but through embodied practices of care, trust, and concealment. These practices both reproduce and, at times, quietly unsettle the moral boundaries through which paid sex is governed in Sweden.

Bringing these strands together, this framework approaches moral work as its unifying analytic lens. I use the term to describe the ongoing labor through which individuals justify, question, and reframe their involvement in stigmatized or criminalized practices (Lupton, 2000; Mol, 2008; Presser, 2008; Ryan et al., 2010).

Moral work links the intimate and the institutional, showing how reasoning, secrecy, and affective labor sustain – and sometimes unsettle – the moral orders that govern them. Through this lens, morality is not a fixed code but a negotiated process that unfolds through talk, reflection, and concealment. By tracing moral work ethnographically, the dissertation reveals how Sweden's politics of purity (Douglas, 1966) are reproduced, reinterpreted, and occasionally undone in the everyday moral life of those who inhabit its margins.

Moral Governance, Stigma, and Secrecy

Anthropological work on morality has long shown that moral orders are sustained not only through explicit rules but through the continual drawing of symbolic and social boundaries. As Douglas (1966) argued, societies maintain coherence by marking certain people and practices as "polluting" – as "matter out of place" – thereby producing moral clarity through exclusion. Such boundary-making is not merely cultural but political: it transforms difference into moral hierarchy. Fassin (2008) similarly shows how "moral valuation" turns categories of behavior into hierarchies of worth, while Foucault (1978) and Rose (1999) describe how modern governance works through "responsibilization," recruiting individuals to police their own conduct in line with public moral ideals.

Rather than asking whether such actors are right or wrong, this approach asks how they reason, justify, and live within moral regimes that condemn them. Following this call, I treat Swedish men who pay for sex not as moral exceptions but as participants in a broader system of moral governance that defines, manages, and contests wrongdoing. Moral governance shapes how individuals act, interpret their desires, and understand themselves in relation to ideals of care, equality, and responsibility. Yet these forces do more than constrain conduct; they generate the need to justify, conceal, and sometimes resist moral expectations.

It is within this moral field that Sweden's criminalization of paid sex operates. The law's force lies not only in legal prohibition but in its symbolic work: it distinguishes the pure from the impure, the caring citizen from the exploitative offender. This is a politics of purity in Douglas' (1966) sense – maintaining moral order by expelling ambiguity.

"If anyone knew, I'd lose my job, my kids, and my friends," said Bo, a man in his fifties. Reflecting on how men who pay for sex are portrayed in Swedish public discourse, he continued:

> When you look at these feminists, they all have a clear picture. It's the chubby male pig exploiting women to the maximum. There's no middle ground here. It's someone who sees women as machines, or like you're buying a woman, like I'm buying someone.

Bo's reflection captures how this moral boundary-making is central to how he described his experiences. At another point, he elaborated: "It's all rhetoric. It's always about creating an 'us and them' and then painting them as something very bad. There can't be any middle ground because that would complicate everything." His reasoning shows how the so-called "sex buyer" is produced as a figure of pollution – an embodiment of moral disorder that sustains the purity of the collective "we." This us/them logic exemplifies how stigma functions as a moral technology, simplifying moral complexity into purity and pollution (Douglas, 1966; Goffman, 1963).

While Bo's describes feeling that stigma draws moral boundaries through caricature and exclusion, William's account exposes another dimension of this process, the silencing of those positioned within it. "It's a debate where the voices of sex buyers and sex workers are silenced," he said and continued: "Prominent commentators, especially on the left, use deeply offensive terms when they describe them. Everything is done to intensify stigma, not out of genuine concern for people's well-being, but for moralistic reasons." For William, the sex purchase ban epitomized this moralism: "It's an ideologically driven law that worsens conditions for both sex workers and clients, the height of sex negativity and the essence of what I call bad, top-down feminism."

William describes experiencing this moral order as one that speaks in the language of protection and equality while, in practice, enacting exclusion. As Korsby and Vigh (2025) argue, a non-moralizing anthropology must attend to such moments of sense-making, where those cast as wrongdoers articulate their own moral and political critiques of the systems that define them. Through his reflections, William repositions the debate itself as a site of moral struggle. His critique is not an outright rejection of morality but a form of counter-moral reasoning – an attempt to reclaim legitimacy by appealing to fairness, rationality, and concern for harm.

This form of critique can be understood as a kind of relational and moral skill. Drawing on Korsby's (2023) ethnographic work on pimps and sex workers, where concepts such as "reading desires" and "instillation of love" are used to describe actors' attunement to others' expectations and moral sensibilities, William's reflections can be read as a parallel practice of moral attunement. Rather than denying dominant values of care and equality, he engages them critically, identifying how they are mobilized to silence certain voices while legitimizing others. His reasoning thus exemplifies how actors positioned as morally suspect develop situated capacities to read, interpret, and respond to moral regimes that govern them. Attending to William's critique as counter-moral reasoning aligns

with a non-moralizing anthropology that takes seriously how those positioned as wrongdoers articulate moral and political critiques from within these regimes (Korsby, 2023; Korsby & Vigh, 2025).

Seen together, these accounts illustrate that men's engagement with criminalization is not reducible to guilt or denial, or what some sociologists or criminologists might refer to as "techniques of neutralization" (Sykes & Matza, 1957) or "moral disengagement" (Bandura, 1999). Instead, they confront what is experienced as a top-down moralization that speaks in the name of care while disqualifying their somewhat different experiences as simply morally illegitimate. Their responses – ranging from critique and irony to cautious self-governance – show how stigma provokes both compliance and resistance. In Douglas' (1966) terms, they occupy the liminal position of matter out of place: socially excluded yet indispensable for maintaining the purity of the moral order. For anthropology, attending to this liminality, rather than condemning or redeeming it, makes visible how moral governance operates through both exclusion and the self-interpretations it generates.

The management of stigma is one of the key sites where moral governance takes form. To live with the kind of "discreditable identity" that these men do entails self-surveillance, concealment, and continual moral calibration (Goffman, 1963). These practices resonate with Foucault's (1978) account of productive power and Rose's (1999) concept of responsibilization. They also echo Douglas' (1966) insight that purity is maintained through containment, as those marked as impure must cleanse or conceal themselves to preserve the moral order. Within Sweden's sexual-moral regime, the sex purchase ban enlists men in a politics of self-management – urging them to internalize the state's vision or hide any deviation from it. Fassin's (2008) notion of moral valuation helps explain how their sense of worth is continually reassessed through stigma, shame, and justification. In this sense, criminalization operates not merely as law but as a moral project that extends governance into the most intimate dimensions of social life.

Many of the men framed secrecy as both necessity and a moral stance. "I've avoided telling anyone," Lars explained. "I don't think many people would imagine that I'm the kind of person who'd do something like that." His fear of disclosure was not only pragmatic but moral – a way of preserving a coherent sense of self in a society that would cast him as deviant. Similarly, Bo distinguished between legal and moral accountability: "Legally speaking it's not very smart to go around telling anyone," he laughed, "but morally, well… it's my own business. I'm looking for closeness, care, warmth." For him, secrecy protected not shame but intimacy itself – a private moral space where his search for connection could remain intact.

William described another mode of concealment shaped by digital means: "Online, under the protection of anonymity, I've talked and discussed these things," he said. "But because it's stigmatized, I choose not to talk about it under my own identity." His comment captures how secrecy extends into mediated forms of moral life. The

internet offered a semi-public confessional space – one that allowed moral reasoning to be expressed without the social risk of recognition.

These accounts illuminate how concealment becomes an active form of moral work rather than simple evasion. Following Douglas (1966), secrecy can be read as a mechanism for managing "pollution" – keeping what is deemed morally dangerous contained to sustain social order. At the same time, secrecy functions as a counter-practice of belonging, allowing men to maintain participation in the very moral community that condemns them. This double function – protection and participation – reveals the tension between moral conformity and ethical self-understanding that lies at the heart of moral governance.

For criminologically inclined ethnographers and anthropologists (Fassin, 2008; Korsby & Vigh, 2025; Sausdal & Vigh, 2019), studying the moral reasoning of those cast as wrongdoers requires attention to such contradictions. These moments show not the absence of morality but its overabundance (Lambek, 2010; Zigon, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2014) – a landscape in which individuals must navigate competing moral expectations and redefine responsibility on their own terms. In the men's narratives, secrecy is not only defensive but also creative – a space for moral improvisation where care, reciprocity, and self-respect can be re-imagined outside public judgment.

Stigma compels individuals to engage with the moral gaze of the state and society, but not always to internalize it (Goffman, 1963). Some absorb its judgments, others reinterpret or resist them, and most move ambivalently between these positions. In this sense, stigma operates less as a stable form of internalized control than as a moral demand – one that people must continually negotiate through concealment, defense, or ethical distinction. The shame and silence that surround men who pay for sex are therefore not only effects of criminalization but also sites where the boundaries of moral governance are tested, reworked, and at times quietly refused.

In Sweden, the expanding criminalization of paying for sex has institutionalized stigma as a central mechanism of moral governance. The sex purchase ban constructs "sex buyers" not merely as offenders but as moral pollutants whose conduct threatens the purity of the civic community. Public campaigns, policy rhetoric, and media narratives extend this disqualification into everyday consciousness, transforming what Douglas (1966) described as symbolic boundary-work into a pervasive form of moral pedagogy. As Östergren (2024) notes, these efforts are presented as evidence of moral progress, yet they rest on a moral binary that distinguishes between the enlightened feminist state and the morally flawed individual man. Within this framework, as Fassin (2008) suggests, moral valuation becomes a mode of governance: the state's ethical legitimacy depends on defining and correcting the deviance it names.

The reach of this pedagogy is visible not only in discourse but in men's own reasoning. Bo, for instance, still defended his own criminalization: "I don't really

trust the police," he laughed, "but at the same time, I'm for the sex purchase law… it protects the girls a bit." When asked how, he explained, "Because they're not the ones doing something criminal – it's us. If you add up the pluses and minuses, I think it's good overall because it protects the girls." His reasoning captures the tension between resistance and endorsement that characterizes much of the men's moral reasoning. Even as Bo critiqued state surveillance and moral rhetoric, he accepted the law's premise of male responsibility and female protection, reproducing its moral logic while negotiating a position of personal coherence within it.

This dynamic exemplifies what Korsby and Vigh (2025) describe as the moral ambivalence of wrongdoing, in which individuals internalize aspects of the moral order that condemns them even as they question its legitimacy. The law thus functions as both external governance and internal compass – a framework for moral orientation that men adopt, modify, or quietly resist. Moral governance achieves its durability not through consensus but through participation in its terms of debate. The men's own efforts at moral justification, doubt, and repair reproduce the very ethical vocabulary through which they are judged. Jauregui's (2013) account of "dirty" policing similarly demonstrates that wrongdoing is marked by ethical entanglement and moral ambivalence, where actors navigate competing demands of legality, effectiveness, and moral authority rather than operating outside morality altogether.

For the men in this dissertation, this system of moral valuation (Fassin, 2008) is therefore both internalized and contested. Some take up the state's moral language of responsibility and harm, aligning themselves with ideals of care; others reinterpret or resist it, invoking fairness, autonomy, or emotional reciprocity. Most move uneasily between these positions, navigating the moral ambivalence of wrongdoing as they strive to sustain coherent selves under public condemnation. In practice, criminalization generates a field of negotiation in which moral instruction meets moral improvisation. Within this field, men's attempts to make sense of their actions – whether through justification, resistance, or care – illustrate how governance and agency become entwined in the everyday labor of ethical self-formation. Stigma functions not merely to shame but to produce moral subjects: it calls men into being as ethical actors tasked with aligning desire and decision with the moral project of the state. The result is a social field in which moral worth is continuously tested and negotiated through secrecy, self-scrutiny, and justification.

The dynamics traced above show that criminalization does not simply impose morality from above but becomes internalized, adapted, and sometimes quietly resisted in everyday life. What emerges is not moral conformity but continual negotiation – a process through which men engage the state's ethical vocabulary while redefining it in their own terms. As Douglas (1966) reminds us, moral orders persist through the management of ambiguity: what cannot be neatly contained must be continually reclassified or concealed. The following section turns inward to

examine this reflexive labor more closely. If moral governance describes how subjects are shaped through stigma, law, and public discourse, moral work captures how they, in turn, respond to these forces – the ongoing effort to reconcile action, intention, and self-understanding within the moral worlds that both constrain and enable them. In keeping with Korsby and Vigh's (2025) call for a non-moralizing anthropology, this shift moves from studying the architecture of moral regulation to tracing the lived sense-making of those who inhabit its condemned spaces.

Moral Work and Ethical Self-Formation

> The first time I paid, I couldn't sleep. I thought: what kind of person am I now? (Christopher, early forties.)

If stigma marks the external dimension of moral governance, moral work captures its internal and reflexive dimension – the ongoing labor through which individuals justify, question, and reframe participation in criminalized or stigmatized practices. Classic approaches from criminology and social psychology, such as Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization and Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement, have shown how individuals rationalize deviant acts by deflecting blame, reinterpreting harm, or temporarily suspending moral codes. While these models illuminate the cognitive mechanisms of justification, they risk reducing moral reasoning to denial or distortion. My approach extends beyond rationalization to examine moral reasoning as an ethical practice, an ongoing process through which people cultivate coherence and moral agency within constraining moral regimes.

Anthropological approaches to morality illuminate this inner labor of self-formation. Zigon (2007, 2009, 2010, 2014) distinguishes between the unreflective moral background of everyday life and moments of moral breakdown, when taken-for-granted norms collapse and explicit reflection becomes necessary. In such moments, ethical life becomes visible as people work to repair the relationship between action and self-understanding. For many of the men I spoke with, paying for sex represented precisely this kind of moral rupture – a confrontation with a dominant moral order that rendered their actions both illegal and unethical. These ruptures prompted reflection not only on law and stigma but on identity itself: on who one is, and who one ought to be.

Mahmood's (2005) notion of ethical self-formation deepens this perspective by framing morality as an active, embodied discipline rather than mere adherence to external rules. Ethical subjectivity, in Mahmood's account, is cultivated through repetition, restraint, and introspection – processes that may involve obedience as much as creative reinterpretation. Similarly, Laidlaw (2014) argues that ethical

freedom lies not in the absence of constraint but in the capacity to act otherwise – to critically evaluate one's own desires and commitments. This reflexive capacity runs through men's narratives, where self-questioning ("What kind of person am I?" "Maybe I have a strange sense of morality?") often coexisted with justification ("At least I'm not exploiting anyone").

Following Lambek's (2010) conception of ordinary ethics, moral reflection among these men was rarely abstract. It took shape in small, practical negotiations through which they sought to sustain a sense of decency in a context where being caught would mean not only legal penalty but public exposure and moral disgrace. Many established personal rules – only paying for sex abroad, avoiding what they perceived as coercive situations, seeking what they understood as mutuality – which functioned not only as strategies to avoid legal trouble but as safeguards against being revealed, judged, and morally discredited. In this way, risk management became intertwined with ethical discipline: what Fassin (2008) calls moral valuation, the ongoing calibration of self-worth in response to social judgment.

In this sense, moral work operates along two intersecting axes, inward and outward, justificatory and critical. Inwardly, men direct moral work toward the self, managing shame, doubt, and the desire to remain "a good person." Outwardly, they engage society and law, contesting stigma, defending normality, or critiquing policy. These orientations intersect dynamically, often within the same narrative. A man might assert his decency by describing how he ensures consent and safety, while simultaneously condemning a law he sees as hypocritical. Moral work, then, is both self-making and world-making: it unfolds in the tension between interior moral striving and public moral discourse.

Seen through this lens, the men's narratives reveal not a void of morality but its intensification. Criminalization multiplies moral demands, compelling men to continually locate themselves within overlapping regimes of law, care, and gender equality. Their accounts oscillate between affirmation and ambivalence, justification, and critique. As Douglas (1966) reminds us, moral systems endure through the containment of ambiguity, yet ambiguity is precisely where ethical life takes place. Within this moral landscape, men's attempts to reconcile action and self-understanding expose the cracks in Sweden's moral order: moments where the state's project of purification meets the messy realities of human negotiation.

To illustrate this multidimensional process, Table 1 maps the different directions of moral work observed in participants' narratives:

Table 1. Matrix of the Men's Moral Work

Direction	Position with example quotes	
Inward-facing (Self, identity, reasons)	– "I was lonely, this gave me intimacy." – "It's like any other service." – "I'm not like the bad clients who exploit women."	– "Sometimes I wonder if she really wanted to be there." – "It makes me feel ashamed; why do I have to pay?" – "I can't tell anyone; what does that say about me?"
Outward-facing (Society, law, stigma)	– "The law makes us out to be monsters." – "Most men who pay for sex are normal, ordinary guys." – "It's unfair that society criminalizes us."	– "The ban actually makes things worse for the women." – "Sex workers should be treated as workers with rights." – "Society is hypocritical – dating apps or sugar dating aren't seen the same way."

The purpose of showing the men's moral work across these axes is not to categorize moral types but to show movement – the shifting positions through which men navigate the demands of moral governance. The same account often contains both justification and doubt, aligning with Korsby and Vigh (2025) observation that wrongdoing is not the absence of morality but its amplification. Through moral work, men internalize, reinterpret, or resist the moral vocabularies that criminalization projects onto them (Lambek, 2022; Zigon, 2007). While Östergren's (2024) analysis traces the institutional and discursive mechanisms of morality politics, the framework developed here focuses on its micro-level counterpart: the everyday labor through which citizens negotiate, and at times quietly contest, the moral governance that seeks to shape them.

At this point, it is useful to clarify how I understand the relationship between these concepts. Morality politics refers to the political arena in which the state frames the exchange of sex for payment as a moral issue requiring intervention. Moral governance describes the broader moral environment this politics produces: the interplay of criminalization, stigma, institutional practice, and public attitudes that regulate how men who pay for sex are judged and how they come to judge themselves. Moral work, in turn, captures how individuals navigate and respond to these forces in practice. By tracing these negotiations ethnographically, the analysis reveals how state moral projects are sustained, modified, or undermined in everyday life. This perspective links the grand narratives of policy and public morality to the intimate work of ethical self-making, showing that moral governance depends not only on law and discourse but on the ambivalent, affective, and often hidden acts through which people live with – and sometimes unsettle – the moral order imposed upon them.

Exchange, Intimacy, and Relational Authenticity

Morality is enacted not only in reflection but in exchange. Money carries moral weight (Parry & Bloch, 1989); when sex is paid for, payment can appear to threaten intimacy or, conversely, to secure it through notions of fairness, clarity, and care. Yet such oppositions are themselves culturally specific. Anthropological and sociological research has long shown that intimacy and exchange cannot be cleanly separated, either empirically or ontologically. Rather than contaminating a supposedly pure sphere of emotion, exchange is one of the very means through which intimacy is made, maintained, and recognized. Examining this entanglement is important because it challenges the moral dichotomies through which both sexuality and economy are publicly understood, revealing how value, care, and responsibility circulate together in the practice of paid intimacy.

Ethnographic studies across diverse settings demonstrate this inseparability. Research on sex work, migration, and tourism (Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2009; Garza, 2022; Groes-Green, 2014; Tsang, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) reveals how payment and feeling circulate together in the making of closeness, reciprocity, and obligation. These relations do not simply exceed transactionalism; they show that economic and affective value are mutually constitutive. As Zelizer (2005, 2010) argues through the notion of "relational work," people use money and exchange not to corrupt social ties but to express, mark, and sustain them. Bernstein's (2007) ethnography of bounded authenticity and Sanders' (2008a, 2008b) analysis of intimacy likewise demonstrate that commercial sex is not devoid of emotion but organized through culturally specific scripts of connection and care. From an anthropological perspective, this inseparability between exchange and intimacy has deep roots: it echoes Mauss's (1925) and Lévi-Strauss's (1949) foundational insights that social life itself is built through exchanges that are at once material, affective, and moral.

Anders's story of a long-term paid relationship illustrates how the material act of paying for sex is entangled with affective and moral practice. "At first I was nervous," he said. "She wanted to know who I was and check me out a bit, so that she felt safe. Now we've gotten to know each other… if I were caught now, I could almost tell them everything about her – and she could tell them almost everything about me." What began as a cautious encounter gradually developed into a relationship shaped by familiarity and trust. "We don't decide in advance what's going to happen," Anders explained. "It just becomes what it becomes. We can also just sit and talk for a long time about what's going on." In Anders's account, the commercial arrangement was not void of feeling but structured by it, as money, time, and conversation circulated together as part of a broader moral practice of making connection under conditions of risk and stigma.

The Swedish case exemplifies this tension between cultural ideology and lived practice. In Sweden, public discourse insists that intimacy and commerce are antithetical – a moral ideology underpinning client criminalization. Yet the men's accounts reveal how payment and feeling intertwine. For some, paying for sex produces safety, reciprocity, or emotional transparency; for others, it exposes the impossibility of disentangling care from transaction. This dissertation therefore treats intimacy and exchange not as separate domains that occasionally overlap, but as different articulations of the same social process through which people establish connection, recognition, and moral worth.

Claims of intimacy occupy a central place in the men's moral work. When participants describe encounters as "real," "respectful," or "mutual," they are not only recounting experiences but performing ethical labor. Such notions allowed the men to situate themselves as decent actors within a criminalized practice. In a context where intimacy with sex workers is defined by law and discourse as morally corrupt, asserting emotional or relational depth becomes a way of reclaiming moral worth. The men can speak of care, empathy, conversation, or respect without directly confronting the moral taint of the paid sexual act itself. Accounts depicting emotional intimacy thus become a moral resource and a strategy of legitimation.

Bodily or sexual intimacy, however, remains morally suspect because it evokes desire, pleasure, and potential inequality, all of which are difficult to reconcile with respectability under criminalization. Across narratives, emotional intimacy emerges as the most narratable and morally legitimate form of closeness. Feelings of connection and understanding are cast as evidence of ethical character, aligning with Swedish ideals of authenticity and equality. By translating the physical into the emotional, men echo and respond to the dominant public narrative that frames paid sex as cold and exploitative. In doing so, they simultaneously reproduce and resist it – reworking its moral terms to position themselves as caring and conscientious rather than predatory. Bo's reflection makes this explicit: "If you meet someone and you're only after the sexual activity, it shows that you don't care about anything else… it feels like a weakness." His reasoning illustrates how the men's moral reasoning unfolds in conversation with public discourse: sexuality becomes ethically legitimate when coupled with feeling. Bo's account exemplifies what I describe as the "moral hierarchy of intimacies," in which emotional connection redeems while the merely physical contaminates. The hierarchy thus functions as both constraint and possibility: emotional intimacy redeems; physical intimacy contaminates.

Not all participants accepted this hierarchy. Some men refused to redeem sexuality through emotional discourse, instead reclaiming the sexual as legitimate in its own right. They rejected moralization and framed sexual desire as natural, even responsible, through notions of control, transparency, or efficiency – "keeping things clear" or "less messy than an affair." Axel put it, "Every person must be free to have sex on their own terms, it's nothing the state should interfere with." He

continued, “I usually pay for an hour, just like you would hire a tradesperson. I don’t understand the problem or the sex purchase law at all. It only exists to stigmatize a profession that can generate a high income without requiring a university degree, and that’s what really bothers the prohibitionists.” Where Bo sought redemption within the moral language of care, Axel rejected that language altogether. His reasoning resists the very public discourse that renders paid sex morally exceptional, reframing it instead as ordinary labor and moralizing condemnation as a symptom of class and gender resentment. Analytically, these different claims reflect two broad modes of moral work vis-à-vis intimacy – redemptive versus resistant.

Table 2. Moral Work and Intimacy

Mode	How intimacy is used	Stance toward stigma
Redemptive	Elevates emotional intimacy as proof of care, respect, and authenticity.	Seeks legitimacy by aligning with dominant moral ideals (connection, equality, consent).
Resistant	Centers physical/sexual intimacy and the right to bodily desire; treats the transactional as ordinary.	Rejects top-down moralization; asserts sexual agency and autonomy against state authority.

One seeks accommodation, the other a form of “ethical freedom” – the ability to act otherwise within moral constraint (Zigon, 2007). Following Fassin (2008) and Lahav-Raz et al. (2024), these divergent stances reveal a moral regime that does not simply impose discipline but provokes negotiation. Criminalization generates both moral compliance and contestation, producing a field in which men interpret, appropriate, or subvert public morality.

The men’s stories reveal that intimacy was not only something they invoked to defend their moral selves but also something they narrated as felt and negotiated in their encounters with sex workers. These dynamics point toward what I conceptualize as relational authenticity: the fragile, interactional process through which men sought to make connection feel genuine and morally defensible within the charged terrain of paid sex. In this sense, authenticity was an effort to reconcile desire with responsibility and to transform potentially compromising encounters into ethically tolerable relations. Building on the men’s accounts, relational authenticity captures the spectrum of ways intimacy is enacted, sustained, or undone in practice – encounters that seemed emotionally sincere yet bounded; ties that expanded into what I call “unbounded intimacy,” resembling friendship, companionship, or kinship; and moments where connection fractured or fell away altogether.

This concept of relational authenticity builds on earlier conceptualizations of intimacy in commercial sex. Bernstein’s (2007) notion of bounded authenticity and Sanders’ (2008a, 2008b) analysis of intimacy describe how sex workers and their clients co-create emotionally real but contained relationships, while Benjamin (2025) shows how authenticity is continually negotiated in digital sex work. My

approach extends these insights by emphasizing the relational and processual character of authenticity: it is not a property that individuals possess or perform, but a joint achievement that emerges through interaction. It also ties to a key contribution of Jones and Hannem's (2018) study, namely the concept of "interrupted intimacy," which highlights the temporality and fragility of access in commodified encounters. Connection in encounters between clients and sex workers is always in motion – built, tested, and sometimes undone through talk, gesture, and affective attunement.

Jones and Hannem's (2018) points out that because access to sex workers is structurally precarious and often abruptly withdrawn, clients may experience loss, sadness, and unresolved attachment when intimate connections are disrupted. My findings confirm that attending to these interruptions of intimacy is essential for understanding how relational authenticity and ethical self-formation are made and unmade. Roland's experience exemplifies this dynamic. He described a series of encounters that, while emotionally intense in the moment, were repeatedly cut short by practical and interpersonal barriers: the session ended, the contact details changed, the sex worker left the market or acted in a way that was not to his liking. These interruptions turned what had felt "real" in the room or through ongoing contact into lingering disappointment or sadness afterward – weeks of reflection, a sense of unresolved loss, and repeated attempts to re-establish contact that often failed. Relational authenticity helps to clarify how the very temporal boundaries that can enable a concentrated, affectively charged presence can also make the sudden absence of that presence painful. Reading interrupted intimacy alongside relational authenticity foregrounds how authenticity is not only achieved in moments of mutual presence but also tested and revealed in acts of rupture, absence, and attempted continuation.

Relational authenticity also ties directly to the men's moral work. For those seeking legitimacy, emotional connection becomes a moral resource that can redeem the act; for those resisting moralization, authenticity is found in acknowledging the sexual as ordinary and transparent. These claims of authenticity are therefore not merely descriptive but moral performances – efforts to align intimacy, selfhood, and (il)legality. Under conditions of criminalization and stigma, such authenticity is both intensified and precarious. Secrecy and risk heighten the emotional charge of connection, making moments of feeling stand out as exceptional. Yet these same pressures render intimacy unstable: the threat of exposure or judgment can quickly undo the sense of closeness achieved. To feel that an encounter is "real" or "mutual" is to momentarily redeem the self from stigma – to suspend, if only briefly, the moral division between commerce and care, deviance and decency. These fleeting recognitions provide moral relief and validation, giving substance to the men's sense of being ethical or emotionally sincere within a stigmatized practice.

Anthropologically, this perspective situates relational authenticity within a broader understanding of intimacy as moral work. It resonates with long-standing debates

on relatedness and personhood (Carsten, 2000; Strathern, 1992), viewing intimacy as relationally produced rather than individually possessed. The pursuit of authenticity, whether successful or fleeting, reveals how people assemble moral selves and relationships within morally contested spaces. In this sense, relational authenticity bridges the redemptive and resistant modes of moral work discussed above: it captures the doing of morality through affective interaction, where individuals strive to make paid intimacy feel emotionally real, ethically permissible, and humanly significant. Understanding these dynamics matters because it exposes how public moral regimes are absorbed, reworked, and sometimes unsettled through intimate practice – showing that even within criminalized settings, moral life persists through relation rather than separation.

The men's efforts to make paid connection feel genuine or ethically permissible reveal that moral governance operates not only in the domains of citizenship and legality, but also in the smallest gestures of care, desire, and reciprocity. This perspective builds on classic anthropological insights into moral order and ambiguity (Douglas, 1966), while aligning with the body of ethnographic work that approaches wrongdoing, stigma, and moral ambivalence through close attention to lived experience and ethical entanglement (Das, 2006; Fassin, 2008; Jauregui, 2013; Lambek, 2010; Korsby, 2023; Korsby & Vigh, 2025; Sausdal & Vigh, 2019). Within this methodological orientation, moral orders are understood not as fixed systems imposed from above, but as continually enacted, negotiated, and reworked in relational life.

Methods: Intimate Ethnography and Comparative Moral Mapping

This chapter outlines the mixed-methods approach underpinning my research, situating the project within a broader non-moralizing anthropological inquiry into morality under conditions of criminalization and stigma. The dissertation combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how men make sense of paid sex, placing their experiences within a wider societal context by linking their individual narratives to the condemning public discourse and the attitudinal patterns that shape them. To capture how these domains intersect, this dissertation adopts a "mixed-methods toolkit" (Snodgrass et al., 2024) that moves between the intimate and the collective, the experiential and the structural. By situating men's accounts within this wider moral regime, the dissertation examines how morality is both personally negotiated and publicly prescribed.

Mixed-Methods Anthropology of Morality

Combining interviewing, long-term ethnographic engagement, and quantitative approaches allows me to follow moral reasoning across different dimensions – from the intimate moral work of individual men to the shared moral sensibilities that shape public discourse in Sweden and public attitudes in the Nordic region. This design is not a matter of triangulation but of moral mapping: tracing how the same moral vocabularies and affective logics operate within both personal and national frames.

The main body of the research is qualitative, grounded in in-depth interviews with twenty Swedish men and extended fieldwork involving continuous engagement in both digital and in-person settings. This work was guided by an interpretive anthropological orientation that emphasizes proximity, reflexivity, and moral complexity. The interviews, follow-up communications, and fieldnotes constitute a corpus through which I examine how participants narrate and negotiate their moral selves under conditions of criminalization and social stigma.

In parallel, the dissertation incorporates a comparative quantitative study that analyzes public attitudes toward the exchange of sexual services for payment across the five Nordic countries. Drawing on data from the European Values Study (2017)

and the World Values Survey (2020), this study examines how gender, sexuality, and national policy frameworks shape the moral imagination of the exchange of sex for payment at the population level. While distinct in form, this quantitative component is interpreted through the same anthropological lens that guided the qualitative research: as a moral mapping revealing how collective understandings of acceptability, gender, and sexuality are patterned and reproduced.

The rationale for this combined approach is grounded in the theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapter. Law and policy define categories of wrongdoing; public discourse circulates moral sentiment; and individuals internalize, resist, or reinterpret these moral expectations in everyday life (Korsby & Vigh, 2025). Analytically, this design resonates with Zigon's (2009) distinction between "institutional morality" and personal ethics: by juxtaposing data on the public and the personal, the dissertation traces how moral orders move between these levels. This approach makes it possible to examine morality as a relational process – one that is at once individual and collective, emotional and political.

This methodological design also aligns with what Sausdal and Vigh (2019) describe as an ethnographically grounded, mobile, and reflexive approach to studying crime and criminalization. Their five propositions – ethnographic engagement, methodological mobility, cross-cultural comparison, attention to the ordinary, and grounded critique – provide a useful lens for articulating my methodological choices. Through sustained fieldwork, cross-border comparison, and attention to everyday moral reasoning, this project responds to their call for ethnographies that illuminate how criminalization and morality are lived rather than presumed.

It also aligns with Brekhus, Galliher, and Gubrium's (2005) argument that these kinds of inquiries benefit from both "thick" and "thin*"* description. Revisiting Geertz's (1973) classic distinction, they show that these are not opposites but methodological companions: thick description reveals the interpretive and affective texture of experience, while thin description clarifies patterned relations and moral orders. This logic underpins the methodological design of this dissertation. Thick ethnographic engagement, through in-depth interviews and long-term contact, illuminates the moral reasoning and emotional labor of men who pay for sex. Thin description, operationalized through the use of stigmatizing media narratives in interviews and through comparative quantitative analysis, traces how those same moral logics are institutionalized and reproduced in Swedish public discourse and in public attitudes across the Nordic region. Together, these approaches make it possible to analyze morality as both practice and patterned structure. The mixed-methods design thus enacts the very dynamics it studies: the movement between morality on the intimate level and moral governance, between individual negotiation and collective moral order (see also: Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Snodgrass et al., 2024).

The combination of methods makes it possible to situate the men's narratives within the wider Nordic moral landscape. Sweden's consistency of public condemnation,

contrasted with the more ambivalent attitudes in neighboring Denmark and Finland, shows how legal regimes shape moral geographies. This pattern empirically substantiates Östergren's (2024) claim that Sweden exemplifies morality politics – the political field in which intimate matters such as sexuality become moralized as public concerns. Where Denmark and Finland maintain zones of moral ambiguity, Sweden's policy framework has institutionalized moral certainty. In the terms developed here, this certainty shapes not only public discourse but also the scope of moral work of individuals.

Public attitudes towards the exchange of sexual services for payment are thus not treated as a separate empirical field but as part of the same moral economy that structures the men's experiences. They illuminate the social imaginaries that shape the extent to which we understand the exchange of sex for payment as acceptable or unacceptable, but also the men's moral vocabularies – the terms through which they distinguish between "good" and "bad" paid sex, or "responsible" and "exploitative" behavior. In turn, the interviews reveal how these public attitudes are taken up on the individual level, how they are refracted or carefully contested.

Taken together, these approaches situate the project within a mixed-methods anthropology of morality – one that moves between personal experience and collective meaning, between the intimate and the structural, and between narrative and numbers. The following sections outline the ethnographic orientation, recruitment and interviewing practices, fieldwork engagements, transcription and analysis processes, reflexive positioning, and the complementary quantitative study that broadens the interpretive horizon of the dissertation. I address how ethnographic intimacy enables the study of moral work as experience and consider how public attitudes can be read anthropologically as collective expressions of morality.

Ethnographic Orientation

My approach to this research was shaped by an ethnographic sensibility inspired by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011:11). They describe ethnography as a practice of "getting close" to people's interpretive worlds in an "intimate way." For me, this meant approaching my interviews with these men not simply as formal conversations, but as delicate moments of meaning-making in which many of them talked about their experiences for the first time. Each interaction was an interpretive event – an opportunity to understand how these men make sense of their actions, experiences, relationships, and moral worlds within the constraints of criminalization and stigma.

Researching men who pay for sex required what Ferrell and Hamm (1998) describe as "ethnography at the edge": fieldwork conducted in socially contested, morally charged, and legally precarious settings. Like other edge ethnographers working

with deviantized or criminalized groups, I navigated conditions shaped by secrecy, risk, and moral disqualification. The boundaries of the field were not only spatial but ethical and affective, defined by what could be said, concealed, or negotiated under the shadow of the law. Drawing on this tradition, I approach the interview encounter as a site where researcher and participant jointly manage danger, stigma, and meaning, and where ethnographic knowledge is co-produced under asymmetric moral constraints.

In this project, "the field" was not a fixed location but a relational achievement. It unfolded across digital exchanges, phone calls, and in-person meetings, and in the spaces that these interactions created. The field existed wherever participants reflected on their experiences of paid sex and wherever those reflections intersected with the moral, legal, and emotional frameworks that shape their possibilities for self-understanding. In this sense, the field was both embodied and mediated – formed through the intimacies of dialogue, the distances of digital communication, and the atmospheres of stigma and risk that permeate the topic.

At the same time, the field was shaped by the broader Nordic moral order in which both participants and I were embedded. Criminalization, gender politics, and national debates about paid sex formed the conditions of speech and silence that structured our interactions. These forces were not external to fieldwork but integral to it: they determined what could be said, what had to be concealed, and how proximity and distance were negotiated. Thus, rather than treating the field as a physical or bounded site, I approached it as a moral and affective assemblage – a network of relations through which questions of responsibility, care, and legitimacy were continuously made and remade.

Some participants invited me into their personal and professional spaces – homes and empty offices after hours – and on walks through different cities, offering glimpses into their everyday lives. While my primary method was interviewing, the research evolved into a form of sustained ethnographic engagement. A handful of men remained in contact over several years through follow-up interviews, emails, messages, and many informal meetings. In some cases, I accompanied them on trips to Copenhagen, a site where Swedish men seek sexual encounters beyond the reach of criminalization, spending time together in hotel rooms before and after their encounters with sex workers. These encounters extended the field beyond the interview, creating opportunities for what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011:35) call "deep immersion": not witnessing sexual transactions per se, but tracing the anticipations and aftermaths that surrounded them.

This ethnographic stance meant treating fieldwork as a process of co-presence and participation rather than detached observation. Getting close entailed emotional and ethical involvement – listening, responding, and sometimes revealing fragments of my own moral or relational life. I approached this not as methodological deviation but as ethnographic intimacy: an ethical mode of engagement that acknowledges

understanding as something produced through reciprocity, vulnerability, and shared uncertainty. The analysis thus focuses on how moral life is articulated, negotiated, and made intelligible within interview encounters and extended researcher – participant interactions, rather than on direct observation of conduct. Interviews are treated not as transparent reports of behavior, but as sites where moral reasoning, responsibility, and self-understanding are actively produced in interaction.

Interview Design and Recruitment

The dissertation is based on qualitative interviews with twenty Swedish men who have paid for sex, aged 28–64. I conducted the main part of these interviews between 2016 and 2019 through a mix of encrypted digital communication, phone calls, and in-person meetings, following ethical principles. The aim was not to quantify attitudes or behaviors but to explore how participants made sense of their experiences emotionally, morally, and socially. Recruiting men in this context – where the purchase of sex is criminalized – presented distinctive methodological and ethical challenges. Participants were recruited through online forums, encrypted chat platforms, and word-of-mouth referrals. These recruitment strategies balanced accessibility and safety, offering anonymity while still enabling meaningful contact.

Given the risks involved in disclosing participation in a stigmatized and criminalized practice, the research prioritized informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Each participant was informed about the project's aims, the use of pseudonyms, and their right to withdraw at any time. All identifying details were removed or altered in transcripts and notes.

The legal and moral climate created an atmosphere of perceived risk that shaped how participants engaged. As a researcher, I was attentive to this tension, seeking to create spaces of safety and respect without reinforcing moral or legal judgment. Interviews were participant-centered and flexible in format. Some men preferred in-person meetings, while others chose encrypted digital exchanges via chat or secure email. Several interviews unfolded over multiple sessions or through prolonged correspondence, creating opportunities for iterative reflection. Digital interviews often enabled participants to disclose more sensitive material, while in-person meetings fostered embodied rapport and mutual recognition. The mixed-methods design was essential for building trust and accommodating participants' diverse comfort levels in a stigmatized field.

These recruitment processes unfolded within a legal and moral environment that made ethical considerations central to every stage of the project. The next section outlines how formal ethical approval and ethics as practice intersected in the conduct of this research.

Ethical Approval and Practice

Ethics formed one of the most demanding and defining dimensions of this research. Ethical approval was obtained from the Regionala Etikprövningsnämnden (EPN) in Lund (Dnr 2016/192), as required by national law. In Sweden, researchers are legally obligated to obtain such approval when collecting or processing sensitive personal data – a legal category that includes information about sexual life, political opinions, ethnicity, health, or legal infractions. Because this project involved discussions of paid sexual encounters, criminalized behavior, and moral self-reflection, it fell squarely within this category. Ethical review was therefore not only a procedural step but a legal prerequisite for undertaking the research.

Yet, the most significant ethical demands emerged not from institutional protocols but from the contingencies of fieldwork itself. The criminalized status of paid sex in Sweden meant that participation always carried potential risk. Several men contacted me in the aftermath of police raids or arrests, seeking reassurance, clarification about confidentiality, or simply someone to speak with. On other occasions, I was approached by police authorities requesting information about men they had detained, citing overlaps with the population described in my research. Each of these moments required careful navigation – balancing empathy with legal obligation and reasserting the boundaries of research confidentiality.

These experiences made clear that ethical responsibility in this field was an ongoing and relational practice rather than a single moment of approval. I often had to decide, sometimes under emotional pressure, how to respond in ways that upheld participants' safety without compromising research integrity. I maintained a strict commitment never to disclose any identifying information, even under external inquiry, and consistently reminded participants that my role was not to mediate or intervene in legal matters but to understand how they made sense of their experiences. Such moments underscored the fragility of trust in a context where intimacy, legality, and stigma intersect.

Following anthropological traditions of situated and reflexive ethics, I approached these dilemmas not as threats to the project but as part of its ethnographic reality. They revealed how the field itself could generate new moral obligations for the researcher – obligations that demanded attentiveness to power, exposure, and care. Ethical practice here meant recognizing that confidentiality and empathy were not only procedural duties but forms of moral engagement that mirrored the very dynamics of responsibility and accountability central to the research itself. These ethical negotiations laid the groundwork for how rapport was built and sustained in the field, shaping the affective and relational dynamics that defined my encounters with participants.

Modes of Engagement and Field Relations

Building rapport in this research required attentiveness to both ethical and affective dynamics. Many participants approached the research with caution, fearing exposure or misrepresentation. I often had to emphasize that my goal was not to confirm pre-existing moral narratives but to understand their experiences and perspectives. Over time, these encounters developed varying degrees of intimacy – emotional, moral, and communicative. Some men described the interviews as "cathartic," while others framed them as opportunities to "set the record straight" about a stigmatized identity. Many of the men noted that their decision to participate was influenced by my association with a more senior researcher who had publicly criticized Sweden's criminalization of sex workers' clients (Östergren, 2024). This connection helped establish trust, easing their concerns about being judged.

Each interview context carried its own moral and affective atmosphere. Conversations held in parks or while walking allowed for movement and reduced eye contact, facilitating disclosure. Meetings in participants' homes or offices, by contrast, highlighted the intersection between their public respectability and private transgression. Such settings were not neutral backdrops but active elements of field relations, shaping how participants performed self-understanding and moral reflection.

Engagements also extended into digital and transnational spaces. Encrypted chats, email threads, and shared links to escort websites became forms of mediated fieldwork, where intimacy was negotiated through text, timing, and tone. The fluid movement between digital and embodied encounters blurred traditional distinctions between "online" and "offline" ethnography. Following participants across these contexts allowed me to trace how moral reasoning was articulated and rearticulated over time – in shifting registers of voice, proximity, and emotion.

Through my ongoing engagement, fieldwork became a relational process of negotiation and mutual disclosure. The men's willingness to share morally charged experiences depended on my ability to balance empathy with analytical distance – to listen without judgment yet remain attentive to broader structures of gender, power, and criminalization. The field was thus constituted not by a fixed site but by a series of encounters through which knowledge, trust, and vulnerability were co-produced.

As part of this ongoing engagement, I offered participants with whom I sustained long-term contact the opportunity to read and comment on my use of selected interview excerpts and my emerging analyses. Participation in this process was entirely voluntary, and only a subset of participants chose to engage in it. Those who did provided reflections and, at times, questions about my interpretations. These exchanges did not function as validation of findings, nor as a form of consensus-seeking, but as an extension of the dialogical fieldwork through which moral reasoning, self-understanding, and ethical positioning were already being

articulated. Participants' responses became part of the analytic material, shedding further light on how they recognized or reworked the narratives through which their experiences were represented.

These empirical moments underscore that context and rapport are key, not only for how paid sex is practiced and perceived but also for how it can be researched. Law, stigma, and public discourse did not merely shape what participants did, but how they narrated their lives, what they hesitated over, and what required care, silence, or justification in our interactions.

Writing, Transcribing Interviews, and Analyzing Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes were central to this project. After each interview, trip, or digital exchange, I wrote detailed notes that combined sensory, emotional, and descriptive elements. Following Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), I treated fieldnotes not as neutral records but as interpretive inscriptions – texts through which experiences were translated, remembered, and theorized. I paid attention to setting, tone, gestures, pauses, and silences, as well as to my own affective responses: empathy, unease, curiosity, or fatigue. Writing was thus a means of re-entering the encounter and reflecting on how knowledge and emotion were co-constructed.

The process of transcription formed an important bridge between fieldnotes and analysis. I transcribed all interviews myself, often listening repeatedly to recordings to capture not just words but cadence, hesitation, and affect. In doing so, I became acutely aware of how my own presence – laughter, pauses, tone – shaped the flow of conversation. These traces were not distractions to be edited out but data in themselves, revealing the relational dynamics of the interview.

I explicitly linked fieldnotes and transcripts to create a layered analytic corpus. Fieldnotes provided the contextual and sensory background of each interaction, while transcripts preserved linguistic and narrative detail. I often annotated transcripts with excerpts from fieldnotes in the margins or analytic memos, noting relevant gestures, atmospheres, or moments of tension. Conversely, I revisited fieldnotes with transcripts in mind, expanding them with additional insights as interpretations evolved. This cross-referencing allowed me to trace how meaning was produced across modalities – spoken, written, embodied, and affective.

By moving iteratively between fieldnotes and transcripts, I tried to maintain the immediacy of field experience while developing conceptual interpretations. This relational approach to inscription and analysis reflected my broader ethnographic stance: understanding data as co-constructed, partial, and alive to the contingencies of participation.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Conducting research with men who pay for sex required sustained reflexivity. As a woman researching a criminalized and morally charged practice, I occupied a complex position – simultaneously insider and outsider, confidant, and analyst. Before and during fieldwork, I was warned that men who buy sex were untrustworthy or potentially dangerous. Such warnings, though often well-meaning, reflected the same moral discourse I sought to examine.

In practice, the interview encounters often inverted these assumptions. Participants expressed shame, fear, or vulnerability, revealing their own moral unease. Many worried about how I would perceive them, sometimes framing themselves as "good" or "ethical" clients in contrast to stereotypical depictions of exploitative men. These self-presentations were not neutral; they were performances shaped by stigma, gender, and the presence of a female researcher. Yet rather than treating such performances as distortions, I approached them as moral work – narrative strategies through which men negotiated responsibility, desire, and self-understanding.

My positionality was thus an active element of the research. Sharing small personal reflections at times helped build trust and authenticity but also risked emotional entanglement. I navigated these tensions by treating reflexivity as an ongoing practice rather than a retrospective accounting. Writing fieldnotes became a key space for tracing these affective and ethical negotiations – how empathy, discomfort, and analytic distance coexisted within me.

Gendered and moral dynamics were never static. In some interviews, my presence encouraged introspection; in others, it elicited defensiveness or moral justification. Recognizing this variability was part of my analytic process. The knowledge produced in this research was not detached but situated – emerging through interactions that were at once dialogical, affective, and morally charged.

Reflexivity here is not only methodological but analytic: my own encounters with secrecy, defensiveness, and care became part of the same moral terrain I sought to understand. Fieldwork itself thus emerged as a site of shared moral work – an ongoing negotiation of vulnerability, legitimacy, and understanding.

My own encounters with these men were likewise shaped by the logics of criminalization. Some interviews occurred via encrypted messaging; others followed carefully negotiated in-person meetings. These interviews were not neutral exchanges, but relational processes structured by affect, trust, and negotiation. As a researcher, I became part of the conditions under which these stories could be told. Several men remarked that the rituals of meeting me mirrored those they used when arranging paid encounters: discretion, screening, and mutual reassurance.

In this sense, criminalization not only regulates behavior but also shapes the conditions under which people feel permitted to speak, reflect, and relate. Tracing

these dynamics contributes to a broader anthropological understanding of how law, stigma, morality, and intimacy intertwine. What emerges is not a singular story of deviance or redemption but a morally complex field in which responsibility, desire, and shame are continuously negotiated.

My positionality as a researcher was thus shaped in part by what Ferrell and Hamm (1998) identify as the ethical tensions of "edge" ethnography, where researchers must navigate proximity, danger, and moral ambiguity. Encounters with participants were structured by secrecy and stigma, and the field itself was marked by the potential for legal exposure. Rather than treating these tensions as methodological noise, I take seriously the insight from edge ethnography that such dynamics are constitutive of the field and of the knowledge it makes possible.

Analytic Approach

The analysis combined thematic and narrative strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Riessman, 2008), grounded in the iterative reading of transcripts, fieldnotes, and analytic memos. Themes were identified inductively, with attention to recurring motifs, moral tropes, and affective tensions. I coded not only for content (e.g., "good experience," "shame," "responsibility") but for narrative form – how participants structured their stories, what emotions they emphasized, and how they positioned themselves within broader cultural scripts of masculinity, care, and deviance.

Contradictions and silences were treated as meaningful. Moments of hesitation or contradiction often revealed participants' struggles to reconcile conflicting moral frameworks. I examined how men's narratives invoked notions of respect, harm, authenticity, or control, and how these moral registers shifted across contexts. The combination of thematic and narrative analysis allowed me to trace both patterned meanings and the singularity of individual moral reasoning.

This analytic process was iterative and reflexive, moving continually between data, theory, and writing. The goal was not to extract "findings" as discrete truths but to interpret how moral sense-making was produced through language, emotion, and social relations. In doing so, I sought to make visible the moral work participants performed – to show how they narrated care, harm, and responsibility in a landscape of stigma and criminalization.

The multi-sited and relational nature of the fieldwork further shaped both the production and interpretation of data. The dissertation does not confine itself to Sweden alone. It follows participants across national borders, documenting how men navigate differing legal and social norms. As I accompanied participants on trips to Denmark, I observed how law and public narratives shaped their behavior

and emotional states. Even in this setting where paid sex was legal, the men described carrying a moral discomfort rooted in Swedish norms. As one man reflected, "Even if you're allowed to do it there, you're still carrying something – you're still hiding it."

Quantitative Comparative Analysis: Public Attitudes Across the Nordic Region

While the primary orientation of this dissertation is ethnographic and qualitative, the broader project also incorporates a quantitative comparative study that extends the inquiry from personal moral reasoning to the broader public attitudes that define the Nordic context. This fourth study, published in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a), investigates how people across the Nordic countries evaluate the exchange of sexual services for payment, using data from the European Values Study (2017) and the World Values Survey (2020). Whereas the interview-based studies focus on men's self-understandings, moral work, and experiences of intimacy, this survey-based study maps how national contexts, gendered imaginaries, and sexual norms contour public attitudes toward exchanging sex for payment. In this sense, the study does not stand apart from the ethnographic work but expands its scale – offering a way to think about how cultural scripts of morality, gender, and intimacy are reproduced within the Nordic moral landscape.

The survey data include responses from over 8,000 participants across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Respondents were asked to indicate on a ten-point scale the extent to which they find "prostitution acceptable." In the analysis, responses were modeled against key sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, including gender, age, education, religiosity, and political orientation, as well as respondents' views on non-committal casual sex. Multivariate regression analyses were employed to examine how these factors interact and how the patterns vary by country. Rather than treating these regressions as purely technical exercises, I understand them as heuristic devices – statistical renderings of moral difference that illuminate how specific configurations of gender and sexuality come to structure legitimacy and stigma across national contexts.

The central finding of the study is the persistence of a gendered moral gap. Across four of the five Nordic countries, women evaluate the exchange of sexual services for payment as markedly less acceptable than men do, even when holding liberal views about casual sexual relations. Only in Sweden, where the purchase of sex has been criminalized and tightly linked to feminist state rhetoric on gender equality, does this gap disappear. Here, both men and women express near-universal disapproval of paid sex, suggesting that state discourse has effectively aligned public morality with penal ideology. In contrast, Denmark and Finland, where no or

only partial client criminalization exists, display both greater variability in attitudes and the widest gender differences. In these contexts, men who approve of non-committal sexual relations are substantially more likely to accept paid sex as legitimate, while women often maintain moral distance despite similar sexual liberalism. This divergence points to the endurance of what might be called "gendered moral translation" – men's and women's differential incorporation of sexual permissiveness into moral reasoning about commerce, care, and harm.

From an anthropological standpoint, these quantitative patterns can be read as collective expressions of moral discourse. Survey responses are not neutral data points but condensed moral utterances, reflecting how individuals locate themselves within available cultural grammars of sex, gender, and respectability. The statistical model becomes, in this sense, a map of how moral categories travel and sediment: how national policy, public debate, and gender ideology come to shape what is sayable, defensible, and condemnable. The observed cross-national variation mirrors the moral architectures of governance – Sweden's punitive feminism, Norway and Iceland's moderate criminalization, Finland's ambivalence, and Denmark's pragmatic tolerance. Each regime corresponds to a particular moral tone, a way of feeling and speaking about sex work that citizens take on to varying degrees.

Yet, as the study also makes clear, quantification can only partially grasp these textures. The survey's reliance on the word "prostitution" – rather than "sex work" or "transactional sex" – reproduces the very moral binaries the research seeks to interrogate. Respondents' reactions to this term likely draw on culturally entrenched associations of female victimhood, male demand, and social decay. Thus, what appears as measurement is also invocation: the survey question conjures a moral world that constrains possible answers. Interpreting these results anthropologically requires attention not only to the numbers but to the moral semantics embedded in the instrument itself. The notion of "acceptability," too, is polysemic – respondents may judge legality, morality, or personal comfort, each invoking different moral registers.

In integrating this quantitative study into an otherwise qualitative dissertation, my aim is not to collapse methodological distinctions but to trace correspondences between different levels of moral reasoning. The interviews reveal how individual men narrate their moral selves under criminalization; the survey reveals how publics, too, are positioned within gendered and national moral orders. Both illuminate how legality and stigma shape the moral imagination – what forms of sexuality are rendered acceptable, redeemable, or illegitimate.

Seen in this light, the comparative study offers a complementary vantage point to the ethnographic material. It renders visible the moral climates that form the backdrop against which the men I interviewed narrate their experiences. The statistical gender gaps reflect, in aggregate form, the same dynamics of moral work,

justification, and stigma that emerge in individual stories. Numbers, like narratives, are social facts – expressions of collective reasoning about intimacy, commerce, and legitimacy. Interpreting them together enables a fuller understanding of how morality plays out across personal and national domains.

Concluding Methodological Reflections

Taken together, the methodological approaches in this dissertation constitute an anthropology of morality attentive to both individual reasoning and collective moral climates. The qualitative and ethnographic components enabled close attention to how Swedish men who pay for sex articulate hesitation, justification, and affective negotiation under criminalization. Through sustained contact, flexible interviewing, and engagement across embodied and digital settings, moral work became accessible as a fragile, contradictory, and relational practice. Writing, transcription, and analysis functioned as forms of moral listening, producing knowledge that is interpretive rather than extractive.

The comparative survey analysis extends this inquiry to the level of public moral discourse. Data on public attitudes toward paid sex across the Nordic countries illuminate how legality, gender politics, and policy shape shared moral sensibilities. Read alongside the interviews, these findings show how individual moral reasoning and national moral climates are mutually entangled. The ethnographic getting close described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) thus finds its counterpoint in comparative quantification: not as an opposing method, but as another interpretive lens on moral life.

This mixed-methods toolkit (Snodgrass et al., 2024) reflects an ethical and analytic commitment to treating both narratives and numbers as situated moral texts. Ethnographic intimacy makes visible how moral work unfolds in practice, while comparative analysis reveals the broader moral frameworks within which such work takes place. Together, these approaches illuminate how moral condemnation and ethical self-understanding are navigated across intimate and collective domains in a criminalized and contested field.

Findings (Summary of Studies)

The empirical studies that form the core of this dissertation offer complementary perspectives on how Swedish men who pay for sex navigate criminalization, stigma, intimacy, and moral self-understanding in an increasingly expansive criminalization regime – one that now extends from physical encounters to digital and transnational spaces. Together, the studies trace how a politics of purity (Douglas, 1966) is experienced from below, how men marked as morally polluting negotiate belonging through secrecy, justification, and care. Each study emerged from the broader ethnographic research but developed distinct analytical emphases as insights from the field evolved.

The first study, *Using the Stigma Engagement Strategy in Interviews with Men Who Pay for Sex* (Johansson 2025), introduces a methodological approach designed to elicit disclosure and explore how stigma negotiation unfolds within the interview encounter itself. This strategy employs external sources of stigmatizing narratives – such as newspaper articles, media headlines, and opinion columns – as textual probes within interviews with stigmatized individuals. By bringing these cultural artifacts into the research dialogue, the study demonstrates how researchers can (1) concretize public discourse on stigmatized behaviors, (2) situate participants' reflections within the broader moral landscape, (3) create a degree of separation between stigmatizing societal narratives and the interpersonal dynamics of the interview, and (4) contrast collective and personal moral frameworks. The strategy enables participants to respond to, reject, or reinterpret dominant moral scripts, demonstrating how disclosure unfolds as an affective and relational process rather than as straightforward confession. The study contributes to methodological debates on researching hidden, criminalized, and stigmatized study populations by showing how stigma can be engaged as an analytic resource rather than treated as an obstacle. This approach transforms stigma from a silencing force into an analytic and dialogical tool.

The second study, *Moral Work in the Shadows of Criminalization: Narrating "Good" and "Bad" Paid Sex in Sweden* (Johansson, under review), examines how men morally evaluate their experiences as "good" or "bad". By using the concept of moral work in the study of sex work clients, a domain where it has rarely been applied, it captures the ongoing processes of justification, ethical calibration, and repair through which participants try to sustain coherent moral selves. The study analyzes how the men's evaluations of "good" versus "bad" paid sex helped them

navigate stigma and criminalization. These negotiations show how men reason within a moral order that defines them as matter out of place, reworking its boundaries through moral distinction between "good" and "bad" encounters. "Good" encounters were described through attentiveness, safety, and mutuality, while "bad" ones were marked by unease, shame, suspicion, or the risk of legal exposure. These distinctions were not neutral assessments but instances of moral work – situated, affective, and relational efforts to interpret cues, justify decisions, and claim responsibility under punitive conditions. Framing morality as a relational and situational practice, the study shows how men navigate affective discomfort, discern consent, and negotiate responsibility under moral scrutiny. Conceptually, it offers a framework for tracing moral reasoning as it unfolds in the narrating of experiences rather than in explicit moral claims, expanding the anthropological repertoire for understanding ethical self-formation in contexts of condemnation.

The third study, *Relational Authenticity: An Anthropological Reconsideration of Intimacy in Commercial Sex* (Johansson, under review), examines how the men narrate their experiences of intimacy under conditions of stigma and criminalization. The analysis shows that intimacy in paid sex is a fragile social achievement rather than a fixed state, taking multiple and shifting forms: encounters that felt emotionally real yet bounded; ties that expanded into unbounded intimacy resembling friendship, companionship, or kinship; and moments in which connection collapsed altogether. Although based solely on the men's perspectives in their role as clients, these narratives were profoundly relational – the men described their experiences not as isolated acts but as interactions shaped by the dynamics between themselves, the sex workers, and their broader social surroundings. Building on Bernstein's (2007) concept of bounded authenticity, Sanders' (2008a, 2008b) bounded intimacy, and Benjamin's (2025) negotiated authenticity, the study uses the notion of relational authenticity to capture this spectrum. The concept highlights how connection is enacted, sustained, or undone in practice, revealing how men negotiate the moral and emotional boundaries of closeness in and beyond the criminalized setting. Relational authenticity thus becomes a way to reclaim moral worth within a system that deems intimacy under payment impure. The study demonstrates how illegality and condemnation intensify both the significance and the fragility of these intimate ties.

The fourth study, *Predicting Attitudes Towards the Exchange of Sexual Services for Payment: Variance in Gender Gaps Across the Nordic Countries* (Johansson & Hansen 2024a), extends the analysis from individual moral reasoning to collective moral climates expressed through public attitudes. Using data from the European Values Study (2017) and the World Values Survey (2020), it examines how gender and sexual permissiveness shape views on exchanging sex for payment in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway. This is the first comparative public attitude study on this topic including all the Nordic countries. Across the region, most respondents consider paid sex unacceptable: 77 percent in Sweden and Iceland, 69

percent in Norway, 61 percent in Finland, and 52 percent in Denmark. Condemnation is strongest in countries with stricter repressive policies, like Sweden. Notably, a gender gap appears in all countries except Sweden – widest in Finland and Denmark, moderate in Iceland, smaller in Norway, and absent in Sweden. This convergence in Sweden reflects the internalization of the client criminalization framework and its fusion of gender equality with sexual morality. The study interprets these attitudes as expressions of moral climates shaped by law, gender ideology, and public discourse. In this findings chapter, these large-scale attitudes are linked to the personal moral reasoning explored in the preceding ethnographic studies through the concept of "moral geography," which situates the men's narratives within the broader moral orders of the Nordic region and illustrates how moral governance operates simultaneously through law, discourse, and public sentiment.

Taken together, the four studies move from methodological innovation to personal moral reasoning and collective moral climates. They demonstrate that moral work is accomplished through how the men describe themselves to a researcher, justify or question their actions, experience intimacy within stigmatized settings, and mirror or contest public moral orders. Collectively, the studies address key gaps in existing research: the lack of sustained ethnographic attention and long-term engagement with Swedish men's moral reasoning and intimate experiences under criminalization and the near absence of work that combines ethnographic and comparative quantitative perspectives. By combining them, the dissertation advances an anthropology of morality attentive to how ethical selves are formed and sustained across intimate and public domains under conditions of condemnation.

Study I – Using the Stigma Engagement Strategy in Interviews with Men Who Pay for Sex

Published in *Sexualities* (Johansson, 2025), this first study introduces the stigma engagement strategy as a methodological and analytical innovation for researching stigmatized and criminalized populations. The strategy emerged from a central ethnographic challenge: how to design interviews that not only enable participation by men who are legally vulnerable and morally disqualified but also capture the social, political, and moral contexts that shape their experiences and self-understandings. In Sweden – where the purchase of sex is criminalized and deeply embedded in a discourse on harm – disclosure is risky and moral scrutiny pervasive. The study asks how the interview itself can become a site for tracing how criminalization and stigmatizing public discourses infuse personal narratives.

Stigma, Criminalization, and the Problem of Access

The study situates the problem of research access within Sweden's broader system of moral governance (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999), in which criminalization and public discourse jointly define men who pay for sex as moral offenders. This configuration does not merely regulate behavior; it shapes who can speak, under what conditions, and at what personal risk. Public narratives portray these men as deviant, exploitative, or emotionally deficient, creating a climate in which disclosure is fraught with fear of exposure, misrecognition, or moral condemnation. As a result, potential participants often hesitate to engage in research at all, or carefully manage what they reveal, anticipating judgment even in ostensibly neutral research encounters.

Following Douglas's (1966) insight that moral order depends on the expulsion of matter out of place, men who pay for sex come to occupy a position of moral pollution within Sweden's politics of purity. This position renders them not only stigmatized subjects but methodologically elusive ones. Standard interview approaches risk reproducing the very dynamics of exposure and accusation that silence participants in public life. The stigma engagement strategy was developed in response to this access problem: rather than asking men to speak directly from a position of moral vulnerability, it introduces stigmatizing public narratives as external objects of discussion. This creates a degree of analytic and emotional distance, allowing participants to reflect on, contest, or reinterpret dominant moral framings without immediately placing themselves under scrutiny. In this way, the strategy addresses the problem of access by transforming stigma from a barrier to participation into a shared point of reference within the interview encounter.

The Stigma Engagement Strategy

The method integrates stigmatizing media texts into the interview process as textual probes, treating them as cultural artifacts of Sweden's moral regime. These materials bring public discourse directly into the conversation, allowing participants to respond to external portrayals rather than direct questioning. This approach can reframe the moral tension of the interview: instead of being the target with questions, participants and researcher jointly interpret the texts, producing shared commentary on collective moral narratives. The approach materializes the interface between public morality and personal narrative, revealing how men interpret, resist, or realign themselves with dominant moral scripts. By redirecting moral pressure away from the researcher–participant relationship toward the shared task of interpretation, the method opens a dialogical space. Participants can position themselves in relation to collective narratives – critiquing, rejecting, or selectively identifying with them – making visible the moral work through which they reconcile self-understanding with social condemnation.

Three cases – Roland, Tim, and Eric – illustrate how the strategy elicited reflection. Each man used the textual probes to negotiate moral meaning: challenging the idea that all men who pay for sex exploit, questioning how respect or fairness might redefine legitimacy, or describing moments when shame and empathy complicated pleasure. Across these examples, the strategy revealed ethical calibration as a dialogical process: participants used the probes to negotiate alignment and distance from dominant moral framings, testing where they could recognize responsibility, where they resisted stigma, and where moral unease remained unresolved.

Linking Methodology and Theory

Conceptually, the study demonstrates that methodology can itself be theorized as a site of moral engagement. The stigma engagement strategy operationalizes the dissertation's key concepts of moral governance and moral work, translating them into an interviewing practice that exposes how moral regulation unfolds in interaction. By incorporating cultural artifacts of public stigma into the research encounter, it shows that moral regimes operate not only through law and discourse but through the micro-politics of conversation. This approach resonates with Korsby and Vigh's (2025) call for a non-moralizing anthropology attentive to the reasoning of wrongdoers and to the frictional spaces where fieldwork becomes a moral and affective encounter. In such moments, the interview transforms from a data-collection tool into a microcosm of Sweden's moral regime – an arena where secrecy, shame, and care are negotiated in real time.

Answering the Research Questions

This study contributes to the dissertation's overarching inquiry by developing a methodological approach that reveals how societal narratives of morality, legality, and harm shape the very possibility of speaking about paid sex. It demonstrates how criminalization and stigma structure not only what participants say but how they can say it, showing that the research encounter itself becomes a site where moral power and resistance are negotiated.

The study shows how Sweden's moral order constructs men who pay for sex as moral offenders, generating the silences, hesitations, and self-presentations that shape dialogue. It captures how men navigate, resist, or internalize these frameworks, revealing the ongoing interplay between public morality and private reasoning. In doing so, it traces how criminalization and stigma reshape subjectivity itself, how men engage in self-surveillance, justification, and the pursuit of respectability as moral practices.

Methodologically, the study offers a model for ethically accessing hidden moral worlds. Through reflexive, dialogical, and material tools – such as the use of provocative media headlines – it demonstrates how researchers can elicit moral reasoning and emotional nuance. In this way, the study not only generates empirical insight into the moral governance of intimacy but also contributes to anthropological debates about how knowledge is co-produced in stigmatized and criminalized settings.

Contribution to the Dissertation

Empirically, Study I reveals how the men's voices emerge within and against a climate of moral judgment. Methodologically, it establishes an ethically grounded strategy for eliciting and interpreting those voices, showing that the study of criminalized intimacy begins within the moral conditions of speech itself. The stigma engagement strategy transforms the interview into a microcosm of Sweden's politics of purity (Douglas, 1966) – an encounter where secrecy, shame, and resistance are negotiated in practice and where the moral life of research itself becomes visible. This foundation enables the following studies to move from method to meaning, from the conditions that make moral reasoning speakable to the moral labor through which men sustain coherent selves under criminalization.

Study II – Moral Work in the Shadows of Criminalization: Narrating "Good" and "Bad" Paid Sex in Sweden

The second study, *Moral Work in the Shadows of Criminalization: Narrative "Good" and "Bad" Paid Sex in Sweden* (Johansson, under review), builds directly on the methodological and theoretical foundations established in Study I, applying the concept of moral work to analyze Swedish men's accounts of paid sexual encounters. Drawing on in-depth interviews and long-term ethnographic engagement, the study examines how participants classified their experiences as "good" or "bad" and how these evaluations expressed negotiations of morality, stigma, and responsibility under criminalization. The study explores how moral reasoning becomes visible in men's efforts to evaluate, justify, and reconcile their participation in a condemned practice.

From Risk Management to Moral Reasoning

The analysis begins by revisiting Swedish and international research on the experiences and perspectives of men who have paid for sex. Previous studies (Grönvall et al., 2021; Johansson & Östergren, 2021) show that these men develop self-protective strategies to avoid legal exposure or moral blame. Study II reframes these behaviors as moral practices – ways of sustaining ethical selfhood in the shadow of criminalization and stigma. Following Douglas (1966), these practices can be read as attempts to manage moral pollution, while, in the spirit of Korsby and Vigh (2025), they reveal how those cast as wrongdoers reason within and against the moral orders that condemn them.

By shifting attention from risk to morality, the study situates men's reasoning as a situated, affective, and relational form of ethical labor. Drawing on anthropological theories of ordinary ethics and moral breakdown (Lambek, 2022; Mattingly, 2014; Zigon, 2007) and sociological work on justification and "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), it conceptualizes moral work as the interpretive process through which individuals read bodies, atmospheres, and affective cues to reconcile desire, responsibility, and stigma. This approach directly addresses the dissertation's first research question by showing how Sweden's system of moral governance (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999) creates the conditions that make moral work both necessary and visible.

Methodological Approach

The study draws on the same empirical base as Study I and III – interviews with twenty men and long-term engagement with several participants – but emphasizes multi-temporal, multi-modal interaction: repeated meetings, encrypted online exchanges, and follow-up correspondence over several years. This longitudinal design enabled moral reasoning to be traced across time, revealing how self-narratives evolved rather than remaining static. Ethical safeguards mirrored those in Study I and III and reflected the project's principle of ethical relationality, treating research itself as a shared moral practice. Analytically, the study combined thematic and narrative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Riessman, 2008), treating contradiction, silence, and emotion as data in their own right to capture how men articulate morality not only through words but through tone, hesitation, and affective atmosphere.

Empirical Findings: Distinguishing "Good" and "Bad" Paid Sex

Participants' stories revolved around the opposition between "good" and "bad" paid sex – a moral vocabulary through which they negotiated self-worth and ethical legitimacy. Secrecy became part of this moral practice: by concealing encounters from partners or peers, men framed discretion as respect and responsibility. Concealment thus functioned as boundary work, maintaining moral purity in everyday life while quietly contesting its limits.

Encounters labeled "good" were described as attentive, communicative, and mutual. Men reported moral comfort when they sensed reciprocity and consent, often mapping their experiences across national borders: Danish or German settings, for instance, were viewed as legitimate and transparent, while Swedish encounters carried secrecy and tension. Traveling abroad was framed as an ethical act – a way to act responsibly by avoiding illegality and perceived harm. Long-term arrangements symbolized loyalty and trust, while brief encounters could be redeemed through emotional recognition or care.

By contrast, "bad" experiences evoked discomfort, suspicion, or shame. Participants described "off" atmospheres – silence, passivity, visible bruises, fear – and withdrawing from encounters that felt coercive or emotionally cold. These moments of moral friction often produced post-hoc reflection or guilt, showing that moral work extended beyond the encounter itself. Even abroad, Swedish moral norms traveled with the men: legality did not erase moral unease, and some encounters remained "nerve-wracking," "humiliating," or "not really sex."

Across both sets of accounts, men positioned themselves as morally discerning actors who read signs, adjusted behavior, and reflected on responsibility. Criminalization and stigma thus intensified, rather than silenced, moral reflection: by delegitimizing the practice, the law compelled men to make morality explicit.

Interpreting Moral Work: Law, Affect, and Governance

The discussion links these findings back to the dissertation's theoretical framework. The Swedish criminalization functions as a moral amplifier – a legal device that enforces a singular moral vision while compelling individuals to demonstrate ethical responsibility on their own terms. Drawing on Douglas (1966), the man paying for sex is rendered matter out of place: men's distinctions between "good" and "bad" encounters become efforts to cleanse or contain this pollution through care, attentiveness, and moral discernment. Study II therefore shows that moral work under criminalization and condemnation is dialogical – state law and personal reasoning continually reference and remake each other. Participants' withdrawal, caution, and justification exemplify the micro-politics of moral governance (Burchell et al., 1991; Fassin, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Rose, 1999): the translation of public ethics into everyday conduct. By portraying attentiveness, consent, and care as hallmarks of "good" paid sex, the men both reproduce Swedish ideals of responsibility and contest their moral monopoly, asserting that ethical relations remain possible within criminalized exchange.

Answering the Research Questions

This study deepens the dissertation's central inquiry by examining how men make moral sense of paid sex under a legal order that defines their actions as both criminal and morally tainted. It moves from questions of policy and public morality to the intimate terrain of self-explanation, revealing how men negotiate the tension between condemnation and care in their efforts to appear responsible, ethical, and self-knowing.

The study demonstrates how Sweden's framework delineates the symbolic boundaries of moral acceptability – boundaries that travel with individuals and shape perception even in more permissive contexts abroad. Through the concept of moral work, it shows how participants articulate selfhood and responsibility in relation to these frameworks, distinguishing themselves from "bad clients" by emphasizing consent, attentiveness, and ethical discernment.

Criminalization emerges here not only as a form of control but as a catalyst for new kinds of ethical labor: men learn to read emotional and situational cues, manage secrecy, and narrate responsibility in ways that maintain moral coherence. Though not its primary focus, the study also demonstrates the value of long-term, ethnographic engagement for tracing how moral reasoning evolves within a stigmatized group, revealing morality as an ongoing, situated practice shaped by law, intimacy, and the search for legitimacy.

Contribution to the Dissertation

Study II uses moral work as a conceptual bridge between micro-level narrative and macro-level governance. It extends Swedish research beyond risk and responsibility toward an anthropology of morality that captures how legality, intimacy, and affect intersect. The men's reflexive narratives reveal how moral subjectivities are produced through affective tension – between shame and justification, empathy and control – illuminating how criminalization extends the governance of intimacy into men's inner moral lives. Empirically, the study shows how men reframe commercial sex as ethical by aligning it with ideals of consent, safety, and care – transforming acts of purchase into performances of morality. Theoretically, it positions moral work as a relational and affective process of continual calibration between conscience, social discourse, and structural constraint. Methodologically, it demonstrates the interpretive power of sustained ethnographic engagement for tracing the evolution of moral reasoning over time. Bridging Douglas' (1966) concern with purity and Korsby and Vigh's (2025) attention to the moral reasoning of transgressors, Study II reveals how moral governance depends on those it condemns to sustain – and sometimes unsettle – its boundaries. Together with Study I, it deepens the ethnographic understanding of moral governance and prepares the ground for Study III, which examines intimacy and emotional connection.

Study III – Relational Authenticity: An Anthropological Reconsideration of Intimacy in Commercial Sex

The third study, *Relational Authenticity: An Anthropological Reconsideration of Intimacy in Commercial Sex* (Johansson, under review), moves from moral justification toward emotional connection, examining how Swedish men who pay for sex narrate intimacy within and beyond commercial encounters. It explores how men describe connection, care, and disappointment in a moral environment that defines paid sex as inherently exploitative. The study treats intimacy as a moral frontier where subjects cast as transgressors negotiate worth and belonging. In doing so, it examines intimacy as a key site of moral subject formation, where legality and affect converge in shaping how participants understand themselves and others. Drawing on repeated interviews and long-term ethnographic engagement, the study introduces relational authenticity as an analytical concept for understanding how intimacy in commercial sex is enacted, extended, and sometimes undone in practice.

Situating Intimacy in the Swedish Moral Geography

Building on Study II's analysis of moral reasoning, this article turns to how men describe closeness and connection under criminalization. Swedish law and public discourse rest on a categorical opposition between money and intimacy: commercial sex is portrayed as void of emotion and morally incompatible with gender equality (Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Kulick, 2003, 2005a; Östergren, 2024). In Douglas' (1966) terms, this separation constructs paid intimacy as matter out of place – a pollutant that must be contained to preserve the moral purity of the social body. This repressive framing not only criminalizes behavior but regulates which emotions can be recognized as legitimate.

In dialogue with international scholarship – Bernstein's (2007) bounded authenticity, Sanders' (2008a, 2008b) bounded intimacy, and Benjamin's (2025) negotiated authenticity – the study argues that these frameworks, while influential, conceptualize intimacy as temporally and emotionally contained. Extending this literature, Study III introduces relational authenticity to capture how connection is continually negotiated, sustained, or lost across time, space, and relational fields. This approach reveals how Sweden's moral order becomes a frame through which participants assess what counts as "real" intimacy and situates their experiences within a broader Nordic moral geography.

Conceptual Innovation: From Bounded to Relational Authenticity

The concept of relational authenticity integrates economic, affective, and moral dimensions of connection. It draws on Zelizer's (2005, 2010) notion of relational

work – the everyday labor through which people manage boundaries between money and care – and on anthropological theories of relatedness that understand intimacy as continually produced through exchange (Carsten, 2000; Strathern, 1992). While the concept resonates with work in psychology (Kraus & Chen, 2014), heritage studies (Su et al., 2020), and philosophy (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018), this dissertation mobilizes relational authenticity primarily as an anthropological tool for analyzing how connection is enacted and evaluated within morally charged social fields.

From this perspective, authenticity is not an inner truth or stable property of the self, but a fragile social achievement, dependent on gestures, timing, and shared vulnerability. Intimacy in paid sex thus appears neither wholly scripted nor wholly genuine but relationally made. Encounters feel "authentic" when participants achieve moments of mutual presence, attentiveness, or care – however briefly – and unravel when these conditions fail to materialize.

Conceptually, relational authenticity complements the notion of moral work. While moral work captures how individuals negotiate self-worth and responsibility under stigma, relational authenticity attends to how emotional legitimacy and meaningful connection are negotiated within the same moral field, revealing how moral governance extends beyond judgment and conduct into affective life itself. Building on Bernstein's (2007) and Sanders' (2008a, 2008b) analyses of boundedness, as well as Benjamin's (2025) notion of "negotiated authenticity" in digital sex work, I extend these insights by examining how relational authenticity unfolds across time and space, including under conditions of criminalization.

Methodological Approach

The study draws on the same ethnographic corpus as the previous studies but emphasizes long-term relational engagement as both data and method. Several of the men maintained contact over years through encrypted communication, phone calls, and in-person meetings. These ongoing relationships allowed me to trace how narratives of intimacy shifted over time and to capture the fragility and endurance of emotional connection. This methodological stance addresses part of the fourth research question. By treating fieldwork as a moral relationship, the study demonstrates that producing knowledge about intimacy mirrors intimacy itself: both depend on trust, vulnerability, and mutual recognition. The research design thus becomes not only an ethical safeguard but an epistemological condition for accessing emotion-laden narratives in a stigmatized field

Empirical Findings: Intimacy as a Spectrum

The analysis shows that intimacy in paid sex was a fragile social achievement that could take different forms: encounters that felt emotionally real yet bounded; ties that spilled into unbounded intimacy resembling friendship, companionship, or kinship; and moments where connection collapsed altogether. While the analysis draws only on the men's narratives, their accounts are relational in that they described their experiences through interaction with, and evaluation of, another person, the sex worker. These connections were narrated in both positive and negative terms: sometimes as warmth, companionship, or affirmation; other times as detachment, deceit, or suspicion. Relational authenticity captures this full range, not by judging experiences as "good" or "bad," but by examining how men framed them as relational achievements or failures in practice. The sex workers themselves may have experienced these encounters differently. Still, what the men recounted about tenderness, attentiveness, disappointment, or withdrawal was always framed in relation to this specific other. I thus use "relational" in a broad sense: not to claim mutuality, but to emphasize that men situated their feelings of connection or collapse in relation to another person and to contextual surrounds – ads and platforms, venues and timing, money formats, and different legal and moral climates. In this view, authenticity is a product of a relational achievement rather than a property of the individual or the moment.

Bounded but Meaningful Moments

Many participants described encounters marked by care and attentiveness that felt emotionally "real" yet remained confined to the time and space of the transaction. Gestures such as conversation, hugging, or mutual responsiveness were cited as proof of shared presence. Roland explained: "It's not only about intercourse; it's the touch, the conversation, the feeling of being loved." This finding resonates with Bernstein's (2007) bounded authenticity, Sanders' (2008a, 2008b) bounded intimacy, and Benjamin's (2025) negotiated authenticity, which capture how commercial sex incorporates emotional labor and closeness while remaining delimited. While many encounters created intimacy within the frame of the session, others spilled across those boundaries into ongoing intimate ties.

Unbounded Intimacy

Other men narrated connections that exceeded transactional limits – helping with errands, exchanging gifts, or maintaining contact over years. Eric's long-term relationship with Vivian in Denmark epitomized this: what began as transactional evolved into companionship sustained through financial support and shared rituals, including bureaucratic recognition during COVID-19 border closures. Here intimate ties spanned affective, economic, and institutional registers. Per, by contrast, described emotional resonance that "lasts for weeks," showing how paid encounters could generate enduring affect even without ongoing contact.

Fragility and Collapse

The men also recounted moments when intimacy failed: misrepresentation, emotional absence, or perceived coercion led to withdrawal and moral unease. These accounts parallel the "bad" experiences in Study II but foreground affect rather than ethics – showing that authenticity was fragile, dependent on mutual engagement, and easily undone when sincerity faltered.

Across these modalities, intimacy emerged as a relational project mediated by the people involved, as well as law, stigma, space, and money. These negotiations demonstrate how Sweden's moral regime organizes not only conduct but emotional life, defining which forms of closeness may be felt, spoken, or hidden.

Criminalization and the Intensification of Intimacy

The study's central argument is that criminalization does not extinguish intimacy but amplifies its moral and emotional resonance. Under conditions of stigma and secrecy, gestures of warmth or recognition acquire heightened significance. Secrecy, once a form of concealment, becomes a moral condition that intensifies feeling and transforms risk into reflection. Drawing on cultural criminology (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2015) and edgework theory (Lyng, 1990, 2004; Tsang, 2017, 2019a, 2019b), the analysis suggests that risk itself can heighten authenticity: transgression sharpens emotional awareness and moral reflection. This finding shows that criminalization not only governs behavior but structures the affective and ethical textures of intimacy: risk and secrecy become intertwined, transforming desire into a moral terrain where care and responsibility are continually negotiated. In this sense, criminalization reaches into emotional life, shaping how subjects experience, interpret, and perform intimacy itself.

Answering the Research Questions

This study contributes to the dissertation's overarching inquiry by showing how intimacy becomes a moral site of negotiation under criminalization. It builds on the earlier analyses of moral reasoning and justification, extending them into the emotional and relational domain where men articulate closeness, care, and disappointment as part of their ethical self-understanding. Through these narratives, the study examines how participants make sense of intimacy that is both desired and forbidden, revealing how relational practices become a means of moral and emotional negotiation.

The study shows how Sweden's moral–legal order frames intimacy in paid sex as inherently illegitimate, yet participants reinterpret these norms through their own relational ethics. By describing moments of connection, vulnerability, and reciprocity, the men construct authenticity within the constraints of stigma and law. Their accounts

reveal that intimacy is not a fixed condition but a fragile social achievement – something continually produced through moral discernment and emotional labor.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that criminalization heightens moral and emotional reflexivity: men seek "real" connection precisely because it is proscribed. Stigma and secrecy thus become formative not only of how intimacy is experienced but of how ethical subjectivity itself is governed. Finally, the study shows that sustained, trust-based ethnography makes it possible to explore this complexity – revealing how intimacy, morality, and criminalization intertwine, and aligning methodological reflexivity with the relational ethics that underpin the fieldwork encounter.

Contribution to the Dissertation

Study III extends the analytic vocabulary of moral work by introducing relational authenticity as a means to understand how intimacy, moral reasoning, and emotional experience intersect under criminalization. It bridges the anthropology of morality and the anthropology of exchange, showing that intimacy, money, and moral worth are co-produced through relational practices that both reproduce and subvert Sweden's moral order. By situating relational authenticity within Douglas' (1966) politics of purity and Korsby & Vigh's (2025) anthropology of wrongdoers, the study demonstrates how those deemed impure sustain – and sometimes destabilize – the moral boundaries of the state. Empirically, it contributes to cross-cultural debates on the entanglement of money and intimacy and to analyses of sex work that challenge the assumption that commerce necessarily corrupts emotion (Benjamin, 2025; Bernstein, 2007; Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2009; Garza, 2022; Groes-Green, 2014; Grönvall et al., 2021; Parry & Bloch, 1989; Sanders, 2008a, 2008b; Tsang, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Zelizer, 2005, 2010). Methodologically, it reaffirms that time, care, and reflexivity are essential for accessing the ambiguities of intimacy under criminalization and condemnation.

Within the dissertation as a whole, Study III advances the argument from moral reasoning to emotional connection. If Study I established a method for ethically eliciting narratives under stigma and Study II theorized how moral reasoning operates under criminalization, Study III explores the relational and affective dimensions of those moral worlds. Together, these studies trace an arc of moral and emotional life under condemnation – from how stories are told, to how morality is reasoned, to how intimacy is negotiated and felt. Study III thus consolidates the dissertation's contribution to the anthropology of morality, exchange, and intimacy by showing that even within repressive regimes (Östergren, 2018, 2020, 2024), people continue to craft fragile, relational forms of authenticity – moments of connection that are as meaningful as they are precarious – and that these intimacies unfold within a broader moral geography where legality, desire, and care are continuously remade.

Study IV – Predicting Attitudes Towards the Exchange of Sexual Services for Payment: Variance in Gender Gaps Across the Nordic Countries

Published in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a), this final study expands the dissertation from the intimate and narrative to the collective and comparative. Using regression models on harmonized data from the European Values Study (2017) and the World Values Survey (2020), it examines how attitudes toward the exchange of sexual services for payment vary across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The key predictors are gender and attitudes toward casual sex, with controls for education, income, religiosity, and political ideology. Read through the framework of moral governance and the politics of purity (Douglas, 1966; Fassin, 2008), the study shows how entire publics participate in defining and policing the moral boundaries that Studies I–III explored at the individual level. It complements the ethnographic analyses of moral subject formation by tracing how collective moral orders – expressed through law and public sentiment – structure the affective and ethical conditions within which individual narratives unfold.

Framing the Study: Public Attitudes and Moral Governance

Addressing the dissertation's central concern with how legal, moral, and social frameworks shape meanings of paid sex, the study treats the Nordic countries as a comparative moral landscape. Across the region, a gradient of legality and stigma delineates distinct yet connected ways of defining the boundaries of acceptable intimacy.

Full client criminalization has been adopted in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, where the mere act of paying for sex constitutes a crime. Sweden was the first to introduce this reform in 1999. Iceland and Norway followed a decade later, with Norway extending its criminalization extraterritorially to include citizens who purchase sex abroad. Finland represents a partial approach: it criminalizes public solicitation and paid sex involving trafficked or procured persons, while consensual private exchanges remain legal. Denmark stands at the permissive end of the spectrum as the only Nordic country where paying for sex has not been criminalized.

Together, these regimes form a comparative moral field in which legality doubles as pedagogy, teaching citizens what kinds of sexuality and commerce are acceptable or condemned. Following Douglas (1966), they can be read as moral systems that maintain social purity by casting certain sexual practices and actors as matter out of place. Linking to Korsby and Vigh (2025), the analysis examines how both

"wrongdoers" and compliant citizens sustain the boundaries of virtue through their reasoning and affect.

This study extends the dissertation's inquiry from individual moral reasoning to collective moral climates. Rather than treating numbers as neutral facts, the analysis reads them as aggregated traces of how moral orders are felt, voiced, and reproduced. The resulting statistical patterns are interpreted as collective storytelling: the ways societies articulate which forms of intimacy are legitimate and which are condemned.

Method and Data

The study uses data from the European Values Study (2017) and the World Values Survey (2020) – two large-scale, cross-national programs designed to capture how citizens think and feel about moral, social, and political issues. Over 8,000 respondents across the Nordic region were asked to indicate, on a ten-point scale, "to what degree do you think prostitution is acceptable?" (1 = never acceptable; 10 = completely acceptable). A parallel question asked about the acceptability of non-committal casual sex, an important question we knew to include based on the findings from our earlier analysis of Danish data, which demonstrated that attitudes toward general sexual behavior are the strongest predictor of acceptance in this regard (Hansen & Johansson, 2022). This pairing enabled an examination of whether people who express sexual permissiveness in general also extend that permissiveness to exchanging sex for payment – and whether this relationship differs by gender and national context. Additional variables included religiosity, education, income, age, and political orientation, allowing for a comparison of how moral attitudes travel across domains: from private sexual norms to judgments about market intimacy.

Regression analyses were conducted separately for each country, using these variables to model how attitudes toward casual sex and gender interact in shaping respondents' evaluations of the "acceptability of prostitution."

It is important to note that the survey item used the term "prostitution" rather than alternatives such as "sex work" or "commercial/transactional sex." Previous research has shown that wording profoundly shapes public responses by activating distinct moral associations (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). In this earlier work, we found that the term prostitution evokes stronger negativity than either sex work or transactional sex, prompting respondents to translate pre-existing moral judgments and negative associations – such as exploitation or human trafficking – into disapproval of the practice. In contrast, sex work tends to elicit more neutral responses and transactional sex more ambiguity, suggesting that linguistic framing directly structures moral evaluation. Building on these insights, our subsequent study on positive and negative associations (Johansson & Hansen, 2024b) showed

that respondents' moral appraisals of paid sex are anchored in specific conceptual linkages – sexual freedom, companionship, empowerment, exploitation, and trafficking – that organize public reasoning. Together, these findings indicate that question wording does not simply measure opinion but reproduces moral order. In the present Nordic comparison (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a), this means that the term prostitution likely cued the historically charged and moral schema embedded in the region's political discourse, thereby amplifying the very moral boundaries the study seeks to describe.

Key Findings: Gendered Patterns of Condemnation

The study finds that attitudes toward paid sex are predominantly negative across the Nordic region, yet the degree of disapproval – and the gender gap within it – varies systematically with national legal and moral regimes. In Denmark and Finland, where paying for sex remains legal, acceptance levels are the highest, with roughly a quarter of respondents offering positive evaluations. These contexts also display the widest gender gaps: men are significantly more accepting than women, in some models by as much as 25 to 30 percentage points.

In Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – where the purchase of sex is largely criminalized – public attitudes are markedly less permissive. The gender gap narrows as the degree of legal restrictiveness and public condemnation increases. It disappears entirely in Sweden, where client criminalization has been firmly established for more than two decades, with strong top-down campaign against paid sex and the expanding criminalization. Here, both men and women express similarly strong disapproval, reflecting the success of a policy regime that has fused narratives of gender (in)equality with sexual morality.

Across all five countries, regression analyses confirm that general sexual liberalism – seeing non-committal casual sex as acceptable – is the strongest predictor of viewing paid sex as acceptable. Yet this relationship is far from uniform. In Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, sexually liberal men are much more inclined than comparably liberal women to regard paid sex as legitimate. In Sweden, this interaction vanishes: even those who hold liberal views about casual sex reject commercial sex, suggesting a convergence of moral reasoning across genders.

Taken together, these findings reveal how gender, legality, and sexual morality intertwine to shape public sentiment. Where the state adopts a punitive moral stance, the public internalizes its logic; where law is more permissive and moral campaigns less pervasive, gendered differences in moral translation endure.

Interpretation: Law, Gender, and Moral Governance

From an anthropological perspective, the correlation between sexual permissiveness and attitudes toward paid sex is significant because it reveals how sexual freedom and moral condemnation coexist. Liberal sexual values do not necessarily translate into tolerance of sexual commerce; their meaning is filtered through national moral regimes that link gender equality to the control of sexuality.

This comparative design makes it possible to map the moral geographies of the Nordic region. Gender and sexual norms are deeply entangled with policy frameworks and public discourse: where the state actively frames paid sex as a moral crime, citizens internalize that stance; where law is more permissive and moral campaigns less pervasive, gendered moral translation persists.

In Douglas' (1966) terms, Sweden's regime achieves moral cleanliness by erasing ambiguity – difference itself becomes a form of pollution contained through consensus. In Östergren's (2024) terms, this alignment exemplifies morality politics: a specific field of political contestation where issues such as sexuality and pleasure are debated as matters of public concern, of which the sex purchase ban is an instrument. The disappearance of gender differences in public attitudes in Sweden can thus be read as indicating the successful consolidation of this moral project.

Yet such conformity may also reflect caution: men aware of social or professional sanction may choose silence over dissent, mirroring the secrecy, self-surveillance, and moral calibration observed in Studies I–III. In contrast, the persistent gender gaps in Denmark and Finland echo the ongoing negotiation visible in the men's ethnographic accounts. Boundaries drawn between "good" and "bad" clients or between bounded and authentic intimacies find their analogue in public opinion where legal moralization is weaker. Across contexts, moral governance operates through the management of ambiguity – tightened into consensus in Sweden, loosened into debate elsewhere.

Answering the Research Questions

This study contributes to the dissertation's overarching questions by translating the individual moral reasoning explored in the earlier ethnographic studies into a collective register. It demonstrates how legality, gender, and moral discourse intersect not only in personal narratives but also in the shared moral climates that shape how members of the public think and feel about paid sex. In doing so, it bridges the micro- and macro-levels of analysis – linking the men's moral work to the systems of moral governance that structure their possibilities for speech, legitimacy, and self-understanding.

The study shows how dominant legal and moral frameworks shape collective meanings of paid sex across the Nordic region, revealing how moral governance

becomes embedded in patterned public judgment. It situates individual accounts within a wider moral field, clarifying how national policies and public rhetoric provide the vocabularies through which people articulate, contest, or internalize the meaning of sexual commerce. By examining the relationship between gender, sexual permissiveness, and moral evaluation, the study highlights how law and public discourse influence the moral subjectivities of citizens – determining not only what can be done but what can be felt and said about paid sex.

In this way, the study demonstrates that stigma and criminalization shape both individual reasoning and collective affect, extending moral governance into the emotional and ethical life of citizens. It also shows that quantitative data, when read anthropologically, can function as a form of moral discourse – illuminating how collective moral orders are produced and sustained. Taken together, these insights underscore how morality under criminalization is not static but negotiated across scales, linking the private ethical labor of individuals with the public moral architectures that define and constrain them.

Contribution to the Dissertation

Study IV exemplifies the dissertation's mixed-methods anthropology of morality, moving from ethnographic intimacy to comparative public sentiment. By juxtaposing interviews with cross-national survey data, it demonstrates how moral governance operates across levels: the same structures that govern private self-interpretation also shape collective reasoning.

Theoretically, it advances the claim that criminalization contributes moral convergence when accompanied with a strong top-down moralizing campaign, whereas permissiveness preserves plurality. The comparative findings extend Östergren's (2024) account of morality politics, showing that Sweden's repressive approach affective consensus – a form of moral closure that distinguishes it from its Nordic neighbors.

Within the dissertation, Study IV shifts the analysis from the micro-politics of narrative (Studies I–III) to the moral geography that underwrites them. Public attitudes become part of the broader context in which moral work and relational authenticity unfold. In Sweden, where client criminalization has turned paid sex into a national moral boundary, the absence of a gender gap signals the institutional consolidation of stigma, in Denmark and Finland, the persistence of gendered divergence points to a moral field still in motion.

Read anthropologically, the statistical patterns serve as evidence of collective moral reasoning. Together with the preceding studies, Study IV situates individual moral labor within the wider systems of moral governance that shape both public sentiment and private moral life.

Concluding Discussion: Stigma, Moral Work, and Intimacy under Condemnation

This dissertation began from an ethnographic commitment to listening – to taking seriously the voices of Swedish men who pay for sex, voices that are legally criminalized, morally condemned, and rarely granted narrative legitimacy. Listening here is not an act of endorsement but an anthropological orientation toward ethical life as it is lived (Lambek, 2010; Mattingly, 2014). Within these men's accounts of secrecy, justification, and ambivalence lie crucial insights into how morality is formed, felt, and negotiated under conditions of stigma and criminalization. Following a non-moralizing anthropology (Korsby & Vigh, 2025), I approached transgression not as deviation from a moral norm but as an analytic vantage point from which the workings of moral order become visible.

Across the dissertation, I have shown how the men's narratives reveal moral work: the ongoing, situated labor through which individuals seek to sustain themselves as morally intelligible persons in a condemned domain. This work is not reducible to belief, attitude, or rule-following. Rather, it aligns with anthropological approaches that understand morality as practice – relational, affective, and embedded in everyday life (Lambek, 2010). Moral work unfolds in judgments about "good" and "bad" encounters, in attentiveness to consent and care, and in the private calibrations through which men seek ethical coherence. The ethnographic studies trace these processes as lived practice, while the comparative survey situates them within broader Nordic moral climates, showing how ethical self-formation is shaped by law, public discourse, and shared moral sensibilities (Fassin, 2008; Zigon, 2007).

A central contribution of the dissertation to the anthropology of morality concerns secrecy. Rather than treating concealment as merely strategic, the analysis shows secrecy to be a moral practice in its own right – a form of boundary work through which ethical selves are sustained under stigma. To hide is not simply to evade sanction but to remain recognizable as a father, colleague, partner, or friend within a moral world that would otherwise reject them. Drawing on Douglas's (1966) insight that moral orders depend on distinctions between purity and pollution, the dissertation shows how men who pay for sex come to occupy the position of matter out of place. Secrecy thus becomes both consequence and condition of moral

governance: it protects individuals while simultaneously sustaining the silence on which moral condemnation depends. This paradox echoes previous work on stigma and concealment as simultaneously oppressive and productive (Goffman, 1963; Tyler & Slater, 2018).

The men's accounts also demonstrate how moral work extends deeply into intimate and emotional life. Criminalization and stigma do not extinguish intimacy; they intensify its ethical stakes. Participants described moments of closeness, care, tenderness, and vulnerability that were evaluated not only for emotional meaning but for moral legitimacy. Intimacy became something to be worked on – ethically calibrated, narratively justified, and continually assessed. The concept of relational authenticity, developed in Study III, resonates with anthropological analyses of ethical self-formation that emphasize care, attention, and responsiveness as moral practices (Lambek, 2015; Mattingly, 2014). Authenticity here is not an inherent quality of the encounter but a fragile moral achievement, sustained through attentiveness and undone by shame, doubt, or perceived exploitation. In Study II, men framed "good" encounters as ethically meaningful, while "bad" ones appeared as moral failures requiring withdrawal or repair, underscoring how intimacy itself becomes a key site of moral labor.

Situating these findings within anthropological debates on exchange further clarifies the moral texture of paid sex. Classic work on moral economies has shown that economic exchange does not negate morality but becomes ethically charged as it circulates through social life (Mauss, 1925; Parry & Bloch, 1989; Zelizer, 2005, 2010). The men's narratives resonate with this insight. Many framed payments not as commodification but as a moral device – a means of ensuring consent, fairness, and mutual clarity. Money became a medium through which intimacy could be bounded and rendered ethically tolerable. Moral work, in this sense, consists in the ongoing effort to transform a stigmatized transaction into a morally livable relation, complicating liberal assumptions about the incompatibility of money and care.

Methodologically, the dissertation advances a mixed-methods anthropology of morality by bringing ethnographic attention to lived ethical practice into dialogue with comparative analysis of public moral climates. In-depth interviews and long-term ethnographic engagement illuminate the micro-processes through which individual moral reasoning unfolds, while the analysis of public attitudes maps the collective moral grammars that render certain practices acceptable, condemnable, or unspeakable (Zigon, 2009). Interpreting quantitative data as moral utterances follows calls to treat numbers as cultural artifacts embedded in moral worlds (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). The Nordic comparison demonstrates that legality patterns moral imagination: Sweden's notable disapproval of paid sex reflects the affective consolidation of what Östergren (2024) terms morality politics, while greater ambivalence in Denmark and Finland marks contexts where moral negotiation remains more open. The men's cross-border movements render these contrasts ethnographically tangible. This analysis complements Östergren's account

of morality politics by revealing its underside: the everyday moral work and boundary-keeping through which those condemned sustain, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the moral order itself.

At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of situating studies of criminalization within the broader moral climates that sustain and legitimize repressive measures. The Swedish approach to sex purchase criminalization has intensified over time in tandem with strong and enduring public opposition to paid sex. This convergence between law and public sentiment suggests that further expansion of repressive measures is not only possible but politically likely. Acknowledging this trajectory is crucial for understanding the conditions under which criminalized practices are governed and experienced. Despite sustained condemnation and escalating sanctions, people continue to engage in paid sex, often adapting their practices and moral reasoning in response to changing legal and moral pressures. For this reason, ongoing empirical research with criminalized and stigmatized populations remains essential – not to assess the normative legitimacy of such laws, but to document how intensified regimes of moral governance reshape everyday life, ethical self-understanding, and the possibilities for intimacy, care, and agency under conditions of condemnation.

Taken together, the dissertation makes three main contributions to the anthropology of morality. Empirically, it offers one of the first extended ethnographic accounts of Swedish men who pay for sex, foregrounding their moral reasoning rather than reducing them to stereotypes of deviance. Theoretically, it refines moral work as an analytic for understanding ethical self-formation under constraint, extending theories of moral breakdown and ethical subjectivity (Laidlaw, 2014; Mahmood, 2005; Zigon, 2007) by emphasizing justification, repair, and everyday calibration. Methodologically, it demonstrates how ethnography and large-scale comparative quantitative analysis can be productively combined to trace moral life across intimate and collective domains.

More broadly, the dissertation speaks to anthropological concerns with how moral orders are sustained through everyday practice. Swedish client criminalization exemplifies a wider form of moral governance in which care, responsibility, and condemnation are intertwined (Fassin, 2008; Sausdal & Vigh, 2019). The analysis shows how such regimes do not simply prohibit conduct but generate forms of ethical labor through which individuals strive to remain morally intelligible. These dynamics resonate beyond paid sex, echoing across other moralized domains – migration, welfare, digital sexuality, environmental responsibility – where people are called upon to be good within punitive moral frameworks.

Returning to the words that opened this dissertation – “I’ve never told anyone this before” – we can now read them as an ethical act. To speak under stigma is itself moral work: an effort to render a compromised self narratable and livable (Das, 2006). Anthropology’s task is not to adjudicate such efforts but to attend to how

they are made (Korsby & Vigh, 2025). Like the dissertation's title, the "secret life" evokes the quiet negotiations of conscience, desire, and responsibility that unfold within these morally charged spaces. For these men, secrecy was both protection and burden – a condition through which they worked to make moral sense of themselves. The title also speaks to the ethnographic encounter itself: moments when secrecy became shared, however briefly, between researcher and participant. By listening to these secret lives, the dissertation traces the quiet labor through which ethical selves are sustained in morally fraught worlds, showing how morality is not only imposed or resisted, but negotiated – carefully, ambivalently, and in motion.

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In My Secret Life

Paid sex in Sweden is illegal and portrayed through narratives of harm. This dissertation explores the experiences of Swedish men who pay for sex. Drawing on interviews and long-term ethnographic engagement, Isabelle Johansson examines how these men navigate criminalization, stigma, secrecy, and intimacy while striving to sustain themselves as moral subjects. To contextualize these accounts, Johansson developed an interview method that invites men to respond to stigmatizing media portrayals of paid sex and a comparative study of public attitudes toward exchanging sex for payment in the Nordic countries.

The author, Isabelle Johansson.

The title, *In My Secret Life*, borrows from Cohen's song, where secrecy appears not merely as concealment but as a space of reflection, contradiction, and moral striving. Cohen writes: "And the dealer wants you thinking that it's either black or white. Thank God it's not that simple in my secret life." These lines capture the spirit of this work: a refusal of moral simplification in favor of attending to the gray zones where people reason and act.

Like the slightly open door on the cover, these secret lives offer only a partial view of a complex phenomenon – yet through this opening, the dissertation illuminates how morality is negotiated where public condemnation meets the effort to make sense of oneself.

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