

# Dangerous Fieldwork: Reflections on Ethnographic Research with Irregular, Nigerian Streetwalkers and Madams in Spain

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## Abstract

Recent calls have been made to investigate the lived experience of migrant sex workers, to broaden the scope and inclusivity of macro-level conceptualizations, and to develop contextually grounded forms of understanding. Our ethnographic study sought to explore the lived perspectives of an under-researched occupational group: migrant women working as irregular streetwalkers in a European city. Nineteen Nigerian Edo women working as prostitutes and Madams in Spain participated in an ethnographic, longitudinal study spanning five years of data collection. In this article, we focus on some of the key challenges, including ethical considerations, of undertaking ethnographic work in a hazardous fieldwork setting that presents psychological and physical dangers to both participants and researchers, including threats of violence, and researcher burnout.

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**Introduction**

As a social reform concern, human trafficking is closely related to the concepts of human rights violations and slavery (Allerfeldt 2019; Hill 2017). In recent years, human trafficking has been recognized as the most profitable global criminal activity, affecting “21 to 45 million” individuals worldwide, predominantly women and girls (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women 2024). Many compounding factors have been identified, such as political instability linked to violence and regional warfare, and socioeconomic hardship, inequality, and injustice in families and communities (Limoncelli 2017; Molinari 2017; Zhang 2012). An expanding global labor force and markets generate demands for (illegal) migrant labor (Patterson and Zhuo 2018), including the demand for sex services (Fukushima 2014; Mai 2013a; Weitzer 2014). A concern of many migration and trafficking scholars is that assumptions and norms about human trafficking are primarily driven by a North-centric anti-trafficking strategy, geared to meeting particular socioeconomic and political priorities (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016; Weitzer 2015). This focus can reduce the rich complexities of irregular migratory phenomena to over-simplified and stereotyped constructions, including those of “victims,” particularly in the case of trafficked female sex workers, thus perpetuating hegemonic anti-trafficking notions of women’s passivity and victimhood.

It is therefore important to investigate in-depth the diverse, contextualized, lived, and embodied experiences of these migrant sex workers, particularly as their voices can be so difficult to access and “hear.” Seeking their perspectives is important, not only to widen the somewhat limited scope and inclusivity of concepts currently prevailing in sex trafficking discourses (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016; Hill 2017; Mai 2013b) but also to enhance understanding of migrant sex workers’ shifting “vocabulary of motives” (Mills 1959) and seek more productive responses to sex trafficking globally. There have been calls from migration and trafficking scholars for research into the fine-grain details of sex trafficking, particularly focusing on sex worker migrants from African countries, about whom detailed information is currently sparse (Baarda 2016; Trauner and Deimel 2013). We sought to address these calls via a long-term ethnographic study of migrant sex workers from Nigeria.

The ethnographic research on which this article is based sought to access an under-researched group of in situ irregular migrant sex workers and explore their lived experiences, to add detailed information and

original insights to a qualitative research corpus on migrant sex work. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the lifeworlds of these migrant women, as the women described these to the primary researcher, Sophie. Here, we focus on how Sophie, with the support and “critical friendship” (Smith and McGannon 2018) of her supervisory team, Avril and Jacquelyn, undertook the ethnographic project, which eventually involved nineteen Nigerian migrant women working as streetwalkers (i.e., street-based prostitutes) and Madams<sup>1</sup> in Spain. We portray below how Sophie gradually came to work with and know the women in her role as a researcher and support worker. We then illuminate some of the key ethical challenges of conducting ethnographic research in this hazardous fieldwork setting, cohering around power positioning and psychological and physical dangers to the women and Sophie. We also discuss the challenge of seeking to give voice to the women while also safeguarding Sophie, as far as possible, against the detrimental effects of long-term immersion in the field, and in the women’s data, which were characterized by complex, fluid, and often paradoxical social-relational phenomena.

During the data analytic process, the social psychological concept of cognitive dissonance was found helpful in shedding light on very “messy” data, and in informing our development of debriefing as a critical safeguarding strategy. The concept of cognitive dissonance to which we refer was established and developed by Festinger (1957) as Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT). Here, we use it with a “light touch” as relevant to the contradictory, complex, and shifting accounts our participants provided.

## Theoretical Framework

As with much ethnographic research, the data from the current project were characterized by a high degree of “messiness” stemming from what might be deemed, from a positivist perspective, “inconsistencies” in participants’ accounts. These might seem contradictory from an outsider’s perspective and yet constitute every day, logical, common sense for the participants themselves. After much discussion between the research team members, it was decided that Festinger’s (1957) CDT might help provide a theoretical framework that helped Sophie stay as close as possible to the contexts of the women’s narratives, and yet also consider sensemaking and decision-making alignments and oppositions for the women and herself. While our focus in the current article is firmly on the methodological challenges of undertaking fieldwork in dangerous situations, we provide a brief overview of Festinger’s (1957) CDT, to help situate Sophie’s role, rather than as an overarching theoretical framework for the study.

Festinger (1957) introduced and developed CDT in social psychology to help understand how people form and change their attitudes or beliefs in trying to lead coherent, meaningful lives. The particular focus is on problem-solving and decision-making when holding two or more conflicting cognitive positions, including about ourselves and our behavior. The theory posits that cognitive conflict evokes psychological discomfort or dissonance, such as feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and regret. This prompts us to make a change in beliefs, alter the balance, and regain consonance. We tend to take the path of least resistance, for example, complying with different beliefs against our better judgment. Alternatively, we might take a defensive path, for example, adding more weight to existing attitudes or beliefs, and avoiding or refusing conflicting notions. Dissonance resolution is characterized by feelings of relief and “peace of mind” (Vries, McGrath, and Vaidis 2023). There have been revisions to CDT over time (Aronson 2019), and more contemporary research studies include induced compliance perspectives, where people feel compelled to say or do something that counters a pre-existing personal attitude or belief (Harmon-Jones et al. 2020). The use of cognitive dissonance as a theoretical lens for exploring qualitative data remains, however, relatively rare (Burke, Sparkes, and Allen-Collinson 2008; Burke et al. 2017), and future papers will explore how we drew on this theoretical framework in our data analytic process. For this current article, however, the focus is on the role of Sophie as the principal researcher, together with some of the ethical dimensions of the ethnographic study.

## **The Ethnographic Research**

The research project was granted ethical approval by Sophie’s university ethics committee. Having previously worked as a healthcare professional in the areas of multiple sclerosis, end-stage cancer, mental health, and severe brain injury, and having undertaken research on adoption work and living with multiple sclerosis (Tabuteau-Harrison et al. 2014), Sophie was well aware of the need to place professional conduct, safety, and welfare at the center of her engagement with participants. She was highly committed to developing research relationships that encompassed considerable trust and care. She had also become accustomed to monitoring the personal physical and psychological toll of working closely for prolonged periods with complex, sensitive, and unpredictable situations. Avril and Jacquelyn, the other members of the research team, similarly had extensive experience researching in sensitive domains such as with survivors of intimate partner abuse, and self-injury (Allen-Collinson 2011a; Corcoran, Mewse, and Babiker 2007).

The idea for the ethnographic research was originally stimulated by Sophie's commute to work as an acupuncturist based in Spain. Her drive to work took her along a stretch of carriageway, lined with around twenty female streetwalkers, the majority of whom appeared to be in their late teens and twenties, and to originate from a range of countries. Some women sat on white plastic garden chairs looking at their phones, while others wore headphones, and danced and waved at passing drivers. Still more paced back and forth, looking at the ground. One of the women appeared considerably older than the others and occasionally could be seen punching the sky with a fist and baring her breasts or buttocks in retaliation to obscenities yelled at her from passing cars, "Putá! Zorra!" ("Whore! Bitch!"). Watching these women had a strong impact on Sophie. She was struck by the vivid contrast between the raw realities of street-based sex work, which she witnessed, and the glossy A5 flyers relentlessly jammed under the windscreen wipers of her parked car, displaying pouting lips and stiletto heels, to advertise that "Sexy, young, obliging girls are waiting for you. Good prices. Call this number!" Sophie began wondering about the women's lives, and then subsequently about the kinds of research approaches that might permit access to their lifeworlds and allow their voices to be "heard" in the research literature.

Some years later, Sophie had the opportunity to commence a doctoral research project and decided to pursue this topic via an ethnographic study. She wanted to build relationships with streetwalkers and agents and, ideally, become an accepted part of their working and social environment so that her presence was perceived as beneficial, both to research participants and to other sex workers not participating directly in the research. Sophie's decision regarding a research role as a support worker (and to create a health and support endeavor for this purpose) drew on her previous experience as a health-care professional with vulnerable populations. Furthermore, an experienced support worker with sex-trafficked women (pseudonym Anna), whom Sophie initially consulted, confirmed to her that streetwalkers and agents might well engage with this kind of support endeavor, given its likelihood of improving the women's health and thus, importantly, their capacity to earn money.

Sophie's entry to the ethnographic field was initially facilitated by a local pastor (pseudonym Elena), who visited women sex workers each month on an industrial estate that the local government had officially designated for night-time prostitution. Elena prayed with the women, giving out bible clippings, and providing free cartons of fruit juice, and confectionery. She carefully avoided forms of support that her church might construe as condoning prostitution, such as providing condoms and safe sex information. Elena intended to relinquish her support role and offered to introduce Sophie to the women. Thus, on a bitterly cold winter's night, she

gave Sophie a brief, introductory tour of the industrial estate in her worn-out van, driving through dark and desolate areas of scrubland and reedbeds littered with windswept debris, and then along a brightly lit service road lined with glossy showrooms.

Eventually, Elena pulled the van into a layby, where she and Sophie climbed out, clad in thick winter clothing. Some young Nigerian women swiftly spotted their approach, and Elena shouted out an introduction: “This is my friend! She’s from England.” The women formed a little circle and began chatting about everyday things: weather, hair, makeup, clothing—as Elena handed out food, drink, and slips of paper with words from the bible. When Elena asked if she could pray for them, Sophie observed that the women rapidly adjusted their clothing, pulling their miniskirts a little lower and their “boob tubes” a little higher. Bowing their heads, they intermittently affirmed Elena’s petitions for God to provide protection and a way to leave prostitution. Such was Sophie’s introduction to this working environment and the group of women, who would subsequently become the participants in her ethnographic study.

For Sophie, it was particularly important to be able to offer these women something positive, as part of her research, and as an element in a wider ethics of care (Ellis 2007; Gilligan 1993), drawing on situational ethical considerations. As Iannacone and Anderson (2022) note, situational and relational ethics help in navigating the specific moments in research where ethical issues occur, the unpredictable situations that can shape a response, a research project, or indeed someone’s life. As we found, our research decisions can indeed affect participants’ lives and their physical and psychological health and well-being. We agree with Iannacone and Anderson (2022) that relational ethics push us to consider ethics as much more than documentation to be approved by an ethics board but as lived moments with real, drawn-out ramifications—for participants and researchers. We thus next consider some of the ethical challenges faced throughout the project.

## **Ethics of Care and Ethical Challenges**

As can be imagined, researchers in the domain of migration and sex trafficking research confront a gamut of ethical issues. One of the less discussed problems is that researchers seeking access to field settings by approaching existing anti-sex trafficking organizations can find they inadvertently absorb the biases, stereotypes, and particular agendas of those organizations. It is therefore important to challenge longstanding and often powerful taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypical thinking, for example, that sex-trafficked individuals always consider themselves traumatized and/or victims,

wish to escape their current circumstances and/or return to their countries of origin (see, e.g., Brunovskis and Surtees 2010; Kelly and Coy 2016; Zimmerman and Watts 2003). These authors suggest researchers maintain as far as possible an independence of allegiance, to:

- ensure as much open-minded and critical awareness as possible when researching sex trafficking phenomena;
- remain vigilant to the impact of sex trafficking and corresponding concerns with risks, threats, safety procedures, and ethics; and
- recruit participants independently, to avoid participants entering the research process through a third-party organization that might have screened them beforehand.

In the current research, maintaining independence enabled Sophie to liaise directly with local formal support organizations and to gauge their capacity and willingness actively to assist irregular migrant sex workers and agents. It also helped her address the ethical dilemma of whether to intervene in the circumstances of illegal acts (see also Brunovskis and Surtees 2010; Cwikel and Hoban 2005; Siegel and de Wildt 2016). The women were often found to breach the law, and their customers included government officials, such as police officers. It was crucial that Sophie maintained her researcher independence, which enabled her not to intervene in this regard, thus allowing rapport and a currency of trust to develop with the women. For the research team, sustaining an ethics of care involves a reflexive, responsive, and evolving decision-making process throughout the entirety of a research study, including at the write-up stage. In the current project, it encompassed a plethora of ethical concerns, including engagement in complex interpersonal relationships and interactions that were caring in nature; carefully considering power positioning; and importantly, seeking to ensure the psychological and physical safety of Sophie and the women engaged in the research. Respecting differences and autonomy, in efforts to give voice to participants in a dialogical and non-finalizing manner (see also Smith et al. 2009), was also considered crucial. In the following sections, we address some of the myriad ethical dimensions of the project, cohering around power positioning, threats to participants, including physical violence, and threats to the welfare of researchers, including burnout.

## **Power Positioning: Encounters with Professionals**

Skeggs (2007) highlights the importance of openly declaring how power dilemmas are recognized and considered in research, to keep sight of the

needs, rights, and welfare of our participants. In the current study, issues of hierarchical, patriarchal, and matriarchal positioning were salient. All participants were black Nigerian migrant women working as irregular prostitutes and Madams, seeking to make a living in Spain. By contrast, Sophie is a white English woman with legal migrant status in Spain, living in relatively privileged socioeconomic circumstances. Many of the participants expressed a desire to settle in the United Kingdom to benefit from what they perceived as easier access to a consistent supply of work, education, and social provision. They also expressed a wish to whiten their skin. Some used cosmetic products temporarily to lighten the color of facial skin, particularly before attending appointments in hospitals and formal support organizations. The women believed this would raise their social status by reducing the likelihood of being associated with outdoor work or sex work. It was noticeable that support professionals were primarily white Spanish nationals, some of whom did appear automatically to associate black, female migrants with prostitution. Understandably, many of the women wondered whether Sophie's higher status might open doors for them regarding access to basic healthcare, legal advice, social and police assistance, and education. Subsequently, the challenging, unpredictable, and at times, potentially harmful nature of consultations with support professionals were witnessed in the following situations, captured in Sophie's field notes, condensed for this article, and transferred from the first person to the third person for continuity purposes. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### *Consulting a Dermatologist*

Bayo has worked on the streets until the early hours, bathed herself, and waited with Sophie at the general hospital for three hours beyond her scheduled appointment time to see a dermatologist. Her friend, Chika, has come along for moral support. Eventually, Bayo and Sophie are called to a consultation room where a Spanish doctor is frantically banging the keyboard of her computer and searching the screen. Without looking up, she barks, "Why are you here?" and expresses exasperation that Bayo has somehow gained an appointment without having legal status. Bayo tells Sophie she no longer feels confident to try and speak in Spanish and asks Sophie to explain that the skin of her thighs is troubling her. The dermatologist springs to her feet from the back of her desk, flips up Bayo's skirt to reveal her underwear, jabs the left thigh with her index finger, and exclaims, "I have no experience with *this!*" She then slaps Bayo's thigh with the back of her hand and asks, "How can I see when it is *black?*" Bayo and Sophie are told to leave immediately and not trouble her again. Returning to the waiting room to take stock, Chika



comments that she prefers to consult her mother in Nigeria about her skin problems:

I have something on my armpit; I find out it is a boil. So, in my country, you look for palm oil and the shit of a lizard. You will mix it. Then you put it on the mound, and it will help the pus to come out quickly. So, since I can't find lizard shit in this place, I start putting palm oil.

### *Consulting a Gynecologist*

The women are forced to engage in sex work during menstruation and while experiencing period pains, thrush, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and associated symptoms such as painful urination, painful intercourse, abdominal cramps, vaginal pain, bleeding, and discharge. Their menstrual cycles are erratic, and unwanted pregnancies are commonplace. Kadi recalls her most recent pregnancy and says, "If you are pregnant, but you have no papers, there is no help with abortion." She follows her landlord's instructions to "get rid of it" at a private hospital and gives him free sex until she has repaid him.

In the same month, Temi tells Sophie: "My [menstrual] flow is late one week again. The tests say 'No' this time, but my breasts are painning me." She asks if Sophie can take her to a doctor and if her flatmates, Bayo and Zara, can come for moral support. They all arrive at the clinic for a prearranged appointment. The receptionist insists it is not possible to see the gynecologist and that the other women in the waiting room will be upset by the presence of illegal black women who have not paid taxes and yet expect to see a doctor. All four wait nonetheless, and Bayo prepares Temi for the physical examination by recounting her visit to the Emergency Department earlier in the year:

**Bayo** : They check about the pregnancy. Then, they check that I can give birth. I was okay. I was not pregnant. My vagina is perfect; that's what they said that day.

**Temi** : I want to know the way they do that.

**Bayo** : The doctor check everything in my womb and vagina if you have any infection or if the vagina is okay, and they did other things inside.

**Temi** : Oh!

**Bayo** : Yeh! I was surprised that they did everything [laughs]. They did not tell me that they are going to do it. I was so shocked that day! [laughs]. The way I open my body for them that day. You know it was a guy that

check me? The other girls [i.e., nurses], they just stand there. “What are you doing?” [laughs].

**Temí** : Oh! [laughs].

Finally, all four women are invited into a small consultation room where a Spanish female doctor tests Temí’s urine and confirms she is not pregnant. Then, Temí is asked to remove her lower clothing and lie on a bed behind a curtain for the examination and swab. The doctor subsequently explains to Temí, Bayo, and Zara in rapid Spanish the dangers of unprotected sex and writes them prescriptions for contraceptive tablets. After talking together afterward, they understand that contraceptives are probably a good idea because the condoms used with customers often split, and their boyfriends want sex without condoms. Subsequently, Sophie discovers that the women all take the first month’s supply sporadically and then cease altogether because they cannot prioritize paying for further prescriptions.

### *Being Interviewed by the Immigration Police*

When visiting the women on the industrial estate, Sophie sometimes sits with them on street curbs as they wait for customers. In the winter, warm blasts of air and cigarette smoke belch out of car windows as deals are negotiated. Police officers in patrol vehicles regularly pass by and periodically pull over to issue legal notices to the women, check their safety, and/or arrange personal, after-hours sex for which they might or might not pay. Temí receives a legal notice and asks Sophie to accompany her to the local police station.

Temí and Sophie are escorted to the floor of the immigration authorities and asked to sit midway along the corridor. No one seems to be around. Forty minutes later, a man approaches wearing a police uniform and a pistol on his hip. He runs his eyes slowly over Temí’s body, and she clenches her knees together and turns her face away. He instructs Temí to stand up and knock on the door directly to her left. Sophie is escorted to an office in the opposite direction: a narrow room in which three men in black uniforms are seated behind three desks in a row. Sophie is asked to sit on a hard chair before them and explain her relationship with Temí. Sophie tells them the relationship is grounded in the health and support endeavor registered with the Spanish authorities. They ask sharply in quick succession, “Where is the girl from?,” “Who brought her here?,” “Who is controlling her?.” Sophie explains that her role prevents her from sharing personal and confidential information. In slow succession, each man pushes back his chair, walks to the front of his desk, and adjusts his holster. They are now standing over Sophie. One opens his arms in dismay and exclaims, “The stories of the prostitutes are lies! They

believe in Voodoo. Voodoo doesn't exist. They are crazy." The man in front of Sophie demands: "Tell her that if she denounces her trafficker, we will help with her papers. Tell her to speak with us. Tell her that she can prevent other girls from being trafficked." Sophie replies that her role prevents her from doing so. The man to her right throws his hands in the air with exasperation and cries, "What? You don't want her to be free? You don't want to help the police? You don't want to stop sex trafficking?" Sophie repeats her statement. This seems to mark the end of the interview, and she is asked to return to the corridor, reunited with Temi, and escorted from the building. Temi and Sophie head for a café to talk things over. Temi tells Sophie that she insisted she had not been trafficked, and she received instructions to sign a register at the police station every week. The way Temi sees it, she has two choices: to risk being deported or "go into hiding."

All the above extracts from field notes provide examples of encounters with power positioning and how Sophie sought to support participants as part of an ethics of care while being careful not to over-step her dual role as support worker and researcher. It also required Sophie to hold dissonant views, commensurate with Festinger's formulation of CDT, while maintaining an appropriate "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959) to different audiences, for example, her participants and the officials and professionals with whom she engaged.

We next consider the key ethical consideration of threats of violence—to participants and researchers.

## Threats of Physical Violence

As Dumont (2023) argues, a threat of violence is not only a preliminary manifestation of violence but a violent act per se, not least in connoting a harmful outcome. He notes that some ethnographic accounts include reflections on conducting fieldwork where violence pervades interactions, together with fieldworkers' strategies to navigate these contexts (Rodgers 2007). While, in the current research, Sophie did not witness any of the participants being threatened with violence or having violence inflicted upon them because of speaking with her, nevertheless, we were highly cognizant of this possibility. Sophie took to heart the advice of Anna, an experienced support worker, who strongly advised her to comply with the requirements and restrictions set by the women's Madams or pimps. This included obtaining the permission of the latter to speak with sex workers on the street or elsewhere, and importantly, to cease interaction immediately when asked to do so. Anna illustrated her advice via the following harrowing account.

Anna had gained permission from a pimp to speak with a young street-walker for just five minutes. The conversation was proceeding so well that Anna continued for a moment or two longer than the agreed five minutes. As she finally brought the conversation to a close, the pimp calmly approached the young girl, grabbed her hair, and hit her head against a wall. Not a word was said. He returned to his car. From then on, Anna ensured that she spoke with streetwalkers with the alarm clock on her phone held above her head in full view of the pimps, to demonstrate her vigilance and compliance with their instructions. This account had a powerful impact on Sophie, who subsequently took great pains always to respond promptly and respectfully to the Madams' verbal cues and their body language. The Madams would usually mark the end of conversations by saying matter-of-factly something along the lines of: "You will leave now," followed by, "Thank you very much, I appreciate."

Dumont (2023) highlights that although some ethnographic reflections hint at the role of threats in fieldwork (Rodgers 2007; Williams et al. 1992), they often stop short of discussing *how* to deal with being under threat, and, we would add, fearing that participants will be under threat as a direct consequence of their involvement in our research. Next, we address these concerns, first with a focus on efforts to provide safe social engagement.

## **Providing Safe Social Engagement**

A primary concern expressed in guidelines for interviewing sex-trafficked women (Zimmerman and Watts 2003) is the tendency for professionals to want to offer advice or assistance instead of respecting personal choices and sometimes refusals of help. In our study, Sophie developed onward referral pathways (such as healthcare, social and legal support, and vocational training) to help ensure the women received secure and purposeful forms of social engagement that reflected and respected, as far as possible, their perspectives and choices. This involved sensitively exploring and considering with the women: why they had agreed to or requested engagement with Sophie; their hopes, motivations, and any agendas underlying the engagement; the risks and benefits involved, including the potential expectations of support professionals and how the women might manage and navigate these; and any questions or concerns the women might have, understanding they could opt out or reschedule research involvement at any time. As Zimmerman and Watts (2003) note, it is important not to overstate the level of assistance available to participants. In our study, formal support organizations often demonstrated unpredictable, variable, and changeable levels of response and reliability (as noted earlier, in the context of power positioning). Furthermore, social engagement could

trigger emotional responses in the women, such as happiness and hope for the future, or unhappiness and hopelessness about their current situation. Sophie therefore developed a process of participant debriefing with the women, to discuss and reflect on summaries of what had happened and any next steps.

## Minimizing Unhelpful Researcher Responses

A key part of providing safe social engagement was to embrace, as far as possible, the women's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The demands posed by this could trigger Sophie's verbal, emotional, and physical reactions and responses that were, at times, considered by the women unwelcome and/or unhelpful. This might be raising a sensitive issue during conversations, reacting too emotionally to dilemmas faced by the women, or attending too intensely to what was being said or demonstrated. Sudden changes in the woman's behavior often indicated to Sophie that she had inadvertently reacted or responded inappropriately. The women would then appear uncharacteristically forgetful or distracted, fidgeting and grimacing, or staring into space or at their phones. Furthermore, the women could become concerned they had divulged too much personal information or worried about the welfare of Sophie rather than their own. This latter situation was captured in the following field note, where a male colleague, Cristian (pseudonym), acted as a safeguarder, due to the unpredictability and volatility of the field-setting. During night-time research encounters, Cristian stood a small distance away from Sophie to get a better sense of the surroundings and alert her and the women to potential or actual dangers. During the day, he monitored the surroundings to help ensure Sophie and the women were as secure and comfortable as possible in potentially unpredictable and chaotic circumstances and situations (e.g., helping to locate relatively safe venues and finding refreshments).

Cristian pulls the car into a layby outside Nasha's flat. I [Sophie] phone Nasha and say, "Good afternoon! How are you? I am here," Nasha replies, "Good afternoon, Ma! Wait for me! I am coming!" Ten minutes later, she steps out of the lobby clutching a bag of rubbish and strolls past the car to toss it into a skip. She then returns to the car and slides onto the back seat. We lean toward one another, kiss cheeks, and say, simultaneously, "Good morning. Very nice to see you. It is very hot!" Nasha's face is free of make-up, and she wears a hairnet in place of a wig. She tells me about a serious dilemma she is facing. The police have arrested her, taken fingerprints, and instructed her to sign a register at the local station once a week. On the one hand, if Nasha signs the register, she can be rearrested and deported. If she instead flees to another country, the border

authorities will likely recognize her fingerprints and return her to Spain to face the consequences. After an hour of intense engagement, I feel despair at the gravity of the dilemma and spurt out, "Oh! I am so sorry for your situation. This is awful!"; Nasha responds immediately, "Oh! Ma, please! No, no! You cannot worry for me. You must not! It is not your problem." Nasha now seems worried she has burdened me, and the conversation comes to a close. We say our farewells and Nasha returns to her flat. Later that week, I more mindfully say to Nasha, "I don't know. Maybe you are thinking more about your situation and what to do?" Without hesitation, she replies, "I just say to myself, maybe you can help me find a lawyer that is not 'police-lawyer' or 'Madam-lawyer'." This signals an opportunity for me to try and source an alternative, more appropriate form of legal support for Nasha.

Sophie soon found that developing her capacity sociologically to bracket (Allen-Collinson 2011b), as far as possible, what she understood to be "true" and accurate, helped her to embrace the women's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as credible, despite the cognitive dissonance sometimes felt. It also helped Sophie consider carefully her own potentially inappropriate behavior. A helpful strategy was "mindful listening" in which Sophie focused on potential latent meanings communicated behind the women's words. This helped Sophie create distance from her thoughts and remain vigilant to the needs of the women, while closely monitoring her personal reactions and responses to the women. She also engaged in specific "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959) strategies, such as respectfully and sensitively mirroring each woman's pace and rhythm of speech; simplifying vocabulary and shortening sentences; adopting words and phrases used by the women; reflecting to them what was said, to clarify understandings; and inviting questions. Where appropriate, Sophie would also move the women to more secure environments, and pause or end the social interaction. Signs that these responses were rekindling the interaction included the women regaining composure, breathing more steadily and deeply, regaining eye contact, and laughing.

Our next ethical consideration focuses on threats to the welfare of researchers as a direct consequence of long-term immersion in risky ethnographic settings, before we address the risk of researcher burnout in the current study.

## **Threats to the Welfare of Researchers**

As has been highlighted, sex trafficking research is notoriously alive with ethical, moral, and methodological challenges (Easton and Matthews 2016). It requires ethics committees to consider, interpret, and apply ethical scrutiny and research governance across diverse, sensitive, and complex contexts, and to balance risks and costs as part of social responsibility. In ethnographic

studies, striking a balance is often a key factor in minimizing harm. On the one hand, researchers have opportunities to connect with and learn from sensitive contexts, and marginalized social groups (Braun and Clarke 2019; Nelson 2024; Yea 2017). On the other hand, as portrayed below, the physical and psychological risks might not always be evident and have the potential for significant harm. As Easton and Matthews (2016) note, researchers face the “conundrum” of exploring and giving voice to the personal perspectives and voices of participants as far as possible, while unable to guarantee no harm. Such a conundrum in our study included recognizing that as a white, European, mature woman (in her 50s), with a dual role of researcher and support worker, Sophie held a shifting insider-outsider perspective as well as a power position. As noted above and in auto/ethnographic research generally, degrees of “insiderness” often shift and change throughout the research process (Allen-Collinson 2013). Sophie was in a position of knowing that relationships, circumstances, and situations could unexpectedly change, and relationships might abruptly end without warning.

The prolonged, unpredictable, precarious, and emotionally charged nature of engagement both in the field and also in the data analysis process, carried personal costs for Sophie, who often felt frustrated and anxious about the seeming lack of appropriate and effective support for the women. She often felt emotionally and physically battered after field engagement because of trying to manage intensely sensitive, complex, and often perplexing interactions and situations that generated cognitive dissonance in her while seeking to minimize potential harm to the women and herself. Smith et al. (2009) portray such challenges in trying to navigate “how close is too close” and “how far is too far,” as captured by Sophie in the following extended field note.

It's a Saturday night in October and Cristian draws the car into a layby on the industrial estate just ahead of a group of Nigerian women. As we get out of the car, they walk towards us and sing greetings, “🎵Well-come! Good even-ning! How are you?” I place a supermarket bag on the pavement and we crouch around it, chatting and laughing together as I distribute condoms, wet wipes, lubricant, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, snack bars and juice, and ask, “How are you faring this week?” I notice a trickle of sweat running down Bayo's face from under her hairpiece and say to everyone, “There are iced bottles of water and mini cooling fans in the car. Would you like to see them?” After 20 minutes, we all kiss goodbye, and Cristian and I climb back inside the car. In the next street, Kadi catches sight of us and circles her index finger mid-air (signaling to drive around the block and return when she's finished with a customer) before jumping into a black, shiny car. Nabila soon gives us the same instructions by rotating one arm like a windmill as she calls and chases after a

lorry, frantically trying to retain her flip-flops. Both women return within 15 minutes. Nabila looks towards Cristian and asks me with a mischievous chuckle, “Why doesn’t he ask for a blow job?” I explain that it’s simply not his custom. She thinks this is very funny and we laugh affectionately together.

After two hours of visiting the women, I search without success for Femi who wanted to see me tonight but hasn’t appeared. Finally, I phone her workmate, Dayo, who shouts over the traffic, “I am here! Wait for me! I am coming!” and appears from behind a clump of bamboo, readjusting her clothing and popping a piece of chewing gum into her mouth. Dayo tells me, “Femi is not making enough money in the street. She is in the fun house now. You will not see her again.” I’m instantly thrown off-kilter by an intense wave of loss and despair. One part of my mind throws out the Shakespeare quote, “Grief fills the room up of my absent child,” and another part grapples for a foothold as I ask Dayo how she is faring. Cristian and I return to the car. Cristian says, “Femi could be my daughter. It’s a throw of the dice,” and we talk together about our genuine care for the women. We drive around the industrial estate one last time for the evening. A small group of women stands at the exit waving farewell. I open the car window, wave, and call out, “Good night. We are leaving. Take care!” They reply, “God will bless you! Have a safe journey!” and I am struck by an irrational, almost overpowering desire to bring them home with me, rather than drive away.

In the above data extract, we demonstrate the potential emotional vulnerability of researchers in “being a researcher and remaining human” (Etherington 2007), for Sophie is almost overwhelmed by her emotions and intense desire to keep safe and “save” the women. As Easton and Matthews (2016) note, adopting a stance of “conscious partiality” can help facilitate self-reflective exploration of lived, social-relational phenomena and form a source of support for researchers in the process. In our study, Sophie sought reflexively to recognize the impact of her intimate familiarity with the women’s lived perspectives, her friendship relationships with the women (see also Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014), and her sometimes intense emotional responses. She sought to minimize harm, as far as possible, for the women and herself, and to help respond to and transform her own experiences of danger, heightened emotions, and the risk of researcher burnout.

## **Researcher Burnout**

As Nelson (2024) notes, there is growing awareness in the social sciences that researching traumatic subject matter, or “sensitive subjects,” can cause secondary traumatic stress in researchers. In the field of social justice and human rights specifically, Chen and Gorski (2015) highlight the potential for



severe psychological and physiological vulnerability and discomfort, or “burnout,” in those committed to engaging with forces for social change, and humanitarian notions of social justice, equity, and human rights. Symptoms of such burnout include distress, anxiety, and exhaustion from hearing sensitive stories and personal experiences of loss, injustice, discrimination, and abuse, and despair at the enormity of social problems. This can result in reduced engagement and even lead to complete disengagement. Zimmerman and Watts (2003) add that feelings of burnout in those engaging with, and researching trafficked women, can lead to inappropriate desires to rescue individuals, to make unrealistic promises, and to display unwelcome expressions of sympathy, empathy, and even pity.

Easton and Matthews (2016) highlight that talking with others about personal experiences can help researchers recognize, respond to, and transform personal emotions. This can be facilitated through discussions with research managers or doctoral supervisors, and formal debriefing, for example. Potential constraints, however, include weak forms of social support, such as line managers unfamiliar with the emotional impact of sensitive field settings and data analysis. In the current study, Sophie drew on her experience as a healthcare professional to ensure, as far as possible, that the impact of the research on her emotional, psychological, and physical health was voiced, acknowledged, and processed immediately after field engagement, often while still in the car with her safeguarder, Cristian, and also more formally every week on neutral territory. A form of researcher debriefing carried out with Sophie’s safeguarder as a self-care strategy initially comprised the following elements:

- purposefully and reflexively recalling specific situations and circumstances, key events and interactions in the field, practical and emotional factors, and personal impacts on emotional, psychological, and corporeal health;
- openly recognizing, expressing, and exploring emotional, psychological, and physical responses and senses of personal capability and limitation;
- practicing mindfulness of the present moment and drawing on specific breathing and visualization techniques;
- reflecting on and writing down in a personal notebook any insights and understandings of certain phenomena and un/helpful thought processes surrounding them, such as a deep desire to rescue the women (as described in the field notes above);
- scheduling any self-care strategies or tactics required.

As the research progressed, two new elements were subsequently added to help prepare for and deal with personal experiences of psychological distress associated with cognitive dissonance. Sophie engaged in forms of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), characterized by the strategic, social-relational expression, and suppression of her personal emotions (see also, Tracy 2005) both in the field and also while grappling with difficult and emotional aspects of the women's data. These two additional elements were:

- openly recognizing, expressing, and exploring experiences of cognitive dissonance;
- considering tactics to help restore cognitive equilibrium and wellness, such as realistic notions of success and how to navigate and manage the demands of the role; and drawing on forms of social support and engagement to help confirm a "preferred sense of self" (Tracy 2005).

Sophie also embraced Kelly's and Coy's (2016) interpretation of "what it means to be an ethical researcher" in the field of sex work and trafficking, by ensuring the debriefing process was anchored in recognizing and considering the purposes and intentions of her role in the research, alongside the women's purposes, needs, and rights.

## **Conclusion**

Our purpose in this article has been to contribute fresh understandings to ethnographic research in dangerous contexts, and, specifically in the setting of irregular, migrant sex work and sex trafficking. We focused on key ethical challenges in this hazardous fieldwork setting that present psychological and physical dangers to both participants and researchers, including threats of violence and the risk of researcher burnout. Drawing on the conceptualization of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) was found helpful in understanding Sophie's researcher situation, the messy, unstable, and context-dependent social-relational phenomena in the women's data (particularly shifting social-relational sensemaking and decision-making processes), and in developing forms of researcher debriefing as a critical self-care research strategy. Here, we sought to balance some of the practical and emotional elements of a demanding dual role as ethnographic researcher and support worker, in a setting where Sophie developed close bonds with participants. As others have highlighted, as researchers we sometimes develop bonds of friendships with participants (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann-Healy 2003), including as part of a commitment to seeking social change and humanitarian notions of social justice, equity, and human rights. This can

engender feelings of acute vulnerability and discomfort, and, when the research is relatively long-term, burnout.

The emotional, cognitive, and corporeal hazards of engaging in dangerous research remain relatively under-analyzed in the ethnographic literature and specifically in the anti-trafficking arena. Accounts of such research challenges are much needed, including to prepare less experienced ethnographic researchers for what can be very demanding and challenging research work. As McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans (2024) argue, managers responsible for doctoral education programs and/or training for newer researchers might wish to consider how to give some preparation for the ethical and emotional challenges of undertaking ethnographic work, including in dangerous settings. Critical reflection and reflexivity are key elements in such research, including in the domain of human trafficking. This could be investigated further to raise researchers' (and students') awareness, and address the potential for emotional and physical vulnerability. Such preparation or training might include, for example:

- identifying opportunities for critical reflection;
- considering how appropriate and supportive forms might be tailored to and facilitated for particular researcher projects;
- seeking to create in advance a sense of the research experience, such as being in largely unchartered, sensitive, and volatile environments and situations;
- addressing the potential for “unstable, awkward, uneven” forces and dimensions throughout the research process (Van der Pijl, Oude Breui, and Siegel 2011) and their impact on psychological, emotional, and corporeal health.

Engagement in critical reflection could be enhanced as a reflexive, experiential form of un/learning by deliberately creating experiences of cognitive dissonance and resonance in students or those new to ethnographic research. It might be helpful, for example, to facilitate cognitive dissonance arousal in a supportive way, to address potential resistance to this uncomfortable state of mind, and challenge persistent, hegemonic concepts, assumptions, and normative thinking so that re/learning can occur.

In conclusion, the current study responded to calls from migration and trafficking scholars for research into the fine-grained details of sex trafficking, particularly based on sex worker migrants from African countries (see Baarda 2016; Trauner and Deimel 2013). We thus sought to explore in-depth the complex and shifting lived, embodied experiences of Nigerian, female, migrant sex workers, whose experiences have to date been under-researched.

Accessing the accounts of these sex workers, however, generated substantial, sometimes acute, complex, and shifting dangers for both the women participants and the ethnographic researcher, Sophie, as described above. Such dangers and challenges form the focus of the current article. We hope that some of the hard-won lessons learned (and continuing to be learned) help raise awareness of the potential challenges of engaging in this kind of risky but worthwhile ethnographic research, particularly for those newer to ethnography and qualitative research more generally.

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### Note

1. Here we use the term “Madams” rather than the French “Mesdames” as the former is the term used by participants and also widely within the literature.

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