



Sex work and paying for time: Agency, vulnerability and the ethics of participant payment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ethical and procedural challenges associated with the payment of sex workers who engage in research. Our reflections are built upon a study exploring peer-to-peer support services for sex workers and highlight common ethical, institutional and sector-wide policies associated with researching vulnerable and marginalised groups. Through our analysis, we argue that institutional ethics 'at a distance' - particularly those concerning payment methods and amounts to co-researchers and participants - inadvertently re-stigmatises, paternalises and exacerbates ethical and personal risks associated with participating in the research itself. This paper draws on the relationship between vulnerability, risk and stigma to understand the function and impact of the institutional ethical processes which are common across a range of disciplines, with a particular focus on psychology and the social sciences. By uncritically positioning sex workers within broader understandings of 'vulnerability' and 'risky' or 'at risk' groups, we argue that institutional processes of additional risk management inadvertently reproduce the marginalisation and personal risks they seek to avert. This leads us to question the relationship between institutional 'ethical' procedures across the university sector and the ethics of the personal outcomes they produce. We advocate for the adoption of responsive and co-produced ethical policies and guidance on payment methods and amounts. Such positioning should be reflective of those seen in medical research and premised on a feminist ethic of care, promoting a more liberalised, flexible and inclusive approach to participant payment.

1. Introduction

Sex work is subjected to a range of policy and legal frameworks globally (Holt and Laing, 2022), from full criminalisation in countries such as China and Japan, to decriminalisation in New Zealand. Whilst the exchange of sex for money is legal in England and Wales, activities associated with this are heavily restricted, including 'soliciting for clients' and working alongside another sex worker in a shared premises; construed as 'brothel keeping' under existing legislation despite evidence that such practices increase worker safety (Platt et al., 2018). The legal and policy landscape in England and Wales is borne out of an historical positioning of sex work as a 'disease' and 'pollutant' to society (Hemyng, 1862) and an example of how Victorian England had become a place of 'vice, depravity and social danger' (Matthews, 1986).

Legislation at this time concerning sex work in England and Wales embodied the need to displace the visibility of the work by way of spatial exclusion, framing it as a form of antisocial behaviour (Lowman, 1992) similar to the legal positioning today, where some more obvious practices (soliciting for clients) are criminalised, encouraging more covert behaviours. Alternative framings of sex work emerged as a result of the political mobilisation of sex workers, particularly in Europe in the 1990's, defining sex work as legitimate work and highlighting the need for better rights and well-being for workers. Leigh (1997) coined the phrase 'sex work' to reflect the agency and political standing of sex workers. Despite the emergence of more liberal framings and narratives around sex work, notions of 'whore stigma' (Pheterson, 1990) remain 'entrenched' in legal and criminal justice responses to the profession (Stardust et al., 2021).

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In this research sex work is viewed as a legitimate form of work; fervently resisting notions that sex work is either a disease or nuisance to society (Hemyng, 1862) and instead reflecting the advocacy of the activists, organised workers and educators in peer-to-peer support services, that fall within its framework (Jeffreys, 2015). Sex work continues to be constructed within a framework of stigma (Weitzer, 2018) which is reflective of normative ideals of sexuality, casting it to the margins of the socially acceptable. Contemporary political positioning on sex work in England and Wales is more reflective of historical responses to sex work that aimed to suppress or remove it; with current calls for England to adopt a Nordic Model where 'sex buyers' are criminalised, as part of the (Crime and Policing Bill, 2025). Similarly, The European Parliament in 2023 passed a resolution on prostitution in the EU. Although it is non-binding (and calls for a European wide approach based in the Nordic Model being rejected), the resolution contains demeaning views on sex work. Resistance to such a move rightly highlights the increased risk this would pose to sex workers and how such a move conflates sex work with trafficking and sexual exploitation (Decrim Now, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Notions of vulnerability and risk permeate through debates around autonomy and sexuality, often in ways that restrict the autonomy of those categorised as vulnerable (Fineman, 2008; Brown, 2015; Palmer, 2017). The 'contingent nature' of 'vulnerability' (Brown, 2017) means that the concept is wide-reaching in terms of who 'is implicated' and the effect such a label could have. The concept is 'linked with the potential for an undesirable situation' rather than 'tangible and immediate concerns about negative outcomes' (Brown, 2017: 185), resulting in assumptions about risk and harm. Beck (2006) uses the term 'risk society' to describe how society has become 'increasingly preoccupied with debating, preventing and managing risks' (p. 332), however, the pervasive nature of risk (together with that of vulnerability) can often result in the increased control and surveillance (Giddens, 1999) of those deemed 'vulnerable', under the guise of state protection from harm (Fineman, 2008; Munro and Scoular, 2012; Brown, 2015; Palmer, 2017). Such positions have been observed in studies with children, the elderly and the disabled; Charmaz (2020) highlights how 'neoliberal framings of individual autonomy have shaped the debilitating self and societal perceptions of the disabled' and similarly, in research concerning migrant children, 'multiple layers' of vulnerability are aligned with 'greater ethical issues' (Huard et al., 2024) and greater risks, resulting in an underrepresentation of these children in research. These socio-cultural structures feed into the power dynamics reflected within research ethics at academic institutions, where Research Ethics Committees (RECs)¹ are tasked with reviewing and balancing risks to the institution, researchers and participants (Bungay et al., 2022). This balancing appears more complex in the case of 'sexuality' research, where studies have found that RECs are more resistant to approving projects involving vulnerable groups in this category, excluding their voices entirely (Bahner and Lindroth, 2023; Santinele Martino, 2023). These concerns are reflective of wider structural issues concerning societal framings of the relationship between sex work and risk, where the focus on individual risk inadvertently responsabilises sex workers for harms and inequality they experience and fails to account for socio-cultural constructions of risks (Leaker and Dunk-West, 2011).

Whilst we fully acknowledge the importance of RECs, we also recognise that such ethical monitoring itself constitutes 'an exercise of power' which requires scrutiny and analysis (Juritzen et al., 2011). Ethical research with marginalised groups must be supportive of personal agency, replacing individualistic understandings of vulnerability with 'relational models'; where the concept becomes less about the protection from harm alone, but the promotion of autonomy (Mackenzie

et al., 2014; Luna, 2022). Within these models, account is taken of the 'value-laden heterogeneous' nature of agency as a concept and the social structures within which it operates (Roest et al., 2023). Ethics committees must carefully consider the relationship between vulnerability, agency and harm; ensuring that individual autonomy is centralised to not further blur the boundaries of care and control. Peter and Friedland's (2017) Canadian research explored REC's understandings of 'vulnerability' and found that the vulnerabilities of participants are often misjudged. They highlight how RECs are tasked with recognising and responding to participant vulnerability 'at a distance', leading to the identification of an 'accumulating number of hypothetical vulnerabilities' for which they then outline ways to 'lessen risk in order to protect research participants' (p.110). This process culminates in the identification of – and decisions made in response to – 'cascading vulnerabilities' (p.110). The range of risks identified by RECs is vast and varied as all reviews operate in the hypothetical and are done without any knowledge of the participants' individualised characteristics or 'risk mitigating factors' (p.111). The distance between the RECs and the participants in the study results in assumptions being made about groups, based not on any individualised assessment of vulnerability, but instead their categorisation as members of a particular group. This is representative of 'an ethics of justice' (p.110) where universal principles are prioritised above relationships and individualised needs (Botes, 2000). In this research we resist the homogenisation of sex workers as a group; whilst we acknowledge that there are indeed some shared 'vulnerabilities' (particularly in relation to institutional vulnerability and the denial of certain labour, healthcare and legal rights), there is huge diversity in the social context in which they work and operate.

In this paper, we focus on the ethical issues surrounding payment to participants and consultant researchers with lived experience of sex work. Through an exploration of these processes and their impact, we address the ways in which research institutions can minimise or avoid inadvertently re-stigmatizing marginalised groups through ethical decision-making processes that more effectively balance the considerations of the institution with that of the individual. We explore these tensions – both epistemological and practical – through our experience developing co-designed research with sex workers and allies. We are concerned chiefly with the consequences of institutional payment conservatism (Largent and Lynch, 2017a,b) on the ethical protections afforded to research participants or indeed the way in which this relationship is strained. The following section outlines our initial study which forms the basis of our analysis throughout the paper. We then interrogate the issues relating to payment for sex workers involved in academic research, split into the areas of *how we pay* and *how much we pay*. Throughout, we explore responses to these procedural and ethical concerns. We argue for a more collaborative and shared practice that centralises the voices of the most marginalised and encourages the sharing of good practice and flexibility around payment methods and amounts.

2. Collaboration, co-production and shaping ethical research

We build our reflections throughout this article from our experiences on a collaborative research project led by the authors, which investigated experiences of peer-to-peer support services for sex workers living and working across England.² This project worked with sex worker activists and allies to explore the shape of peer-to-peer support services for sex workers, seeking to understand the benefits for those who engaged with them and the challenges and barriers to accessibility that faced these services. These often voluntarily run services offer vital community support, practical guidance, and safety for sex workers. Notable support services highlighted in the original research includes

¹ Institutional ethics committees have many names across different institutions and jurisdictions. We use the term Research Ethics Committee (REC) throughout for consistency.

² A paper exploring the findings from this project is forthcoming. For further information on this work, please contact the corresponding authors.

NUMbrella Lane, SWARM, English Collective of Prostitutes and informal 'breakfast clubs'. Sex workers sought and provided legal, personal, and financial support from and through these organisations, as well as engaging in activism to advocate for the rights of the community. The project exposed that securing funding for peer-to-peer support services, that provided what we refer to as 'help within' sex work rather than help 'out of' sex work, proved more difficult within the current legal and policy landscape. The issues with funding mapped onto the personal experiences that sex worker organisers had when engaging with, managing and supporting peer-to-peer support services, which were shaped by experiences of overstretched and depleted personal capacity. The time, energy and emotional labour required in supporting others was pushing some participants to a state close to burnout.

These findings foreground the current paper as they provide important insight into the multiple ways in which experiences of sex work and activism are inextricably linked to wider socio-political framings which position sex workers as vulnerable. Existing legal frameworks within England and Wales reduce the opportunities for sex workers to exercise agency safely within working environments (Holt and Laing, 2022) but also in these spaces of support and activism. Restrictive policies which limit the environments and company within which sex workers can legally operate are often justified through the language of sex worker protectionism and vulnerability (Munro and Scoular, 2012). Yet it is these policies which tangibly create vulnerability through criminalisation, unprotected exposure to risky interactions and embedded stigma (Platt et al., 2018). When conducting this study, we saw these dynamics replicated within rigid processes around the options for payment of our participants. Without the opportunity to offer cash payments to those who took part in the research, we saw the replication of this reduction of autonomy, with the needs of the participants not being suitably met through such reimbursement and the increased potential of risk (Bungay et al., 2022).

The approach we adopted in our study was informed as much as possible by the principles of co-production (Pain et al., 2016; Amann and Sleight, 2021; Bandola-Gill et al., 2023) developing the research questions, design and delivery of the project collaboratively with a diverse research team made up of healthcare support professionals, sex work professionals and academic researchers. The co-produced design was central to supporting inclusive practices which we see as fundamental in research with marginalised and vulnerable groups. Research models grounded within participatory methods, such as co-production, are increasingly championed for ensuring the representation and involvement of groups that are ordinarily marginalised or underrepresented in research with the 'participatory zeitgeist' growing across multiple disciplines (Palmer, 2020), including sex work research (Toone et al., 2025). This development reflects sector wide initiatives seeking to enhance equality, diversity and inclusivity in learning, teaching and research at universities (Rana et al., 2025). Inclusivity in research, however, requires being responsive to the varying needs and social positioning of those involved, ensuring these are embedded in all aspects of research projects, inclusive of ethics. In this article we focus this debate on 'ethical' payment practices in research, highlighting how restrictive and universal practices around payment amounts and methods assume all participants (or co-researchers) are in a position to accept a voucher, provide bank details or participate for a lower amount than their hourly rate.

Methodologies of co-production are vast, engaging a wide range of practices. The conceptual underpinning of these approaches has evolved from the ideas premised in Participatory Action Research (Lewin, 1946) as well as notions of 'knowledge exchange' and 'impact' (Flinders et al., 2016). In essence, these approaches incorporate multiple forms of knowledge in the production of research and policy in an effort to produce research which:

'tackles unequal power dynamics, challenges existing knowledge production hierarchies, ensures more equal partnerships and shared

decision making, emphasises reciprocity, promotes mutual capacity strengthening, ensures greater reflexivity and enables flexible ways of interacting and working across the research cycle.' (Lokot and Wake, 2023:9).

How this looks in practice however is multifaceted, often shaped as much by institutional restrictions and pragmatic limitations as by research intentions and design. In our study, very limited time and funding heavily restricted the methodologies we could adopt, yet we sought to incorporate stakeholders and community-members actively throughout the research. In this paper, we consider the tension between institutional RECs, tasked with reviewing risks to participants and the institutions, and some underlying principles of co-production, with a focus on participant payments. Ultimately, we highlight how the positions adopted by RECs in relation to participant can weaken the impact of co-production philosophies and methodologies. In the research referred to here, there was an epistemological mismatch between how methodologies of co-production position marginalised groups and how Ethics Committees do so. Co-production centralises sex workers, allies, and activists in knowledge production. In contrast, the institutional ethical review process instead framed them as vulnerable and in need of protection, restricting their autonomy and agency.

When conducting research engaging with sex workers, a group routinely denied rights and state protection, it is neither possible nor desirable to operate apolitically. As academics working within the tradition of sex workers' rights, we need to be clear about the purpose of our work which should be positioned 'in service to the sex workers' rights movement' (Connelly and Sanders, 2020, p. 203). This is vital to centralise when working with a group who often suffer significant harm in research and policy spaces which are about them but do not meaningfully incorporate their voices and perspectives. Building co-production into models of knowledge production in this space is therefore a valuable tool to avoid the replication of the types of engagement with academics which sex workers may (rightly) be wary of and actively resist. As Connelly and Sanders (2020) note, some sex workers feel that non-sex-working scholars have made careers 'off the backs' of sex workers, without the appropriate benefits being relayed to the group in return. Sex workers should be involved in producing the rationale about why the research is important in the first place, or provided platforms to share what they believe is important. This is a necessary – but not sufficient – step to ensuring research participants feel valued and building trust that the recommendations or conclusions of the project might have a positive impact on their lives or the way their lives are portrayed and stigmatised. Research hierarchies typically replicate broader problematic power hierarchies, which in relation to sex work can mirror the construction of stigma and vulnerability for participants (Huysamen and Sanders, 2021; Bungay et al., 2022) which researchers and RECs have a responsibility to actively resist. This research project brought with it a wide range of interactions at the intersection between intellectual and institutional ethics, facing several challenges to the integrity and possibility of the work. In this paper, we grapple with how these challenges not only shaped the study in question but also the possible wider impact of such policies throughout the academic sector, whilst reflecting on the impact of these practices on the experiences of engaging with research for participants actively working or with lived experience of sex work.

3. The ethical implications of payments to collaborators and participants

The payment of participants – including sex workers - who engage in research is common (Collins et al., 2017; Head, 2009 Bungay et al., 2022) and yet the ethical positioning of this practice is underexplored. There is a particular silence surrounding the perceived appropriateness of *how* we pay and *how much* is paid. Within our project the main issues in achieving institutional approvals centred on the method by which

payment was made to participants and co-researcher consultants as well as the amount. Such payment processes greatly overlap with key ethical concerns in research with the sex worker populations and other minoritised groups, namely anonymity, confidentiality and agency. It is within these areas we highlight the need for a more robust ethical inquiry into the extent to which the regulations and principles concerning payment means and amounts could inadvertently undo the protections afforded by ethics committees.

Ethical practice is a fundamental feature of academic research; researchers owe responsibilities to ensure that we do not make our participants vulnerable or put them at risk of direct or indirect harm as a result of engaging with our research. We also owe an ethical responsibility to the wider community not to reinforce the dangerous narratives of sex work and sex workers. These are the significant ethical responsibilities we owe to each other as researchers and citizens. Institutional ethics, however, are different – whilst these seek to ensure that good ethical principles are embedded in research conducted in the name of the institution, there are often additional regulatory principles and restrictions placed on researchers which sit outside of a traditional understanding of ‘ethics’ (Huysamen and Sanders, 2021). Within institutional ethical review processes, there is a responsibility to carefully balance institutional regulatory principles and the ethical responsibilities owed to research participants. We interrogate how this balance becomes misaligned when we focus on payments to research participants and co-researchers with lived experience of sex work. Our analysis is partly informed by our experiences on our collaborative study described above, but it is also borne out of wider reflections on ethical principles and practices being applied uncritically to research with vulnerable groups.

The experiences of sex work researchers and participants are shaped by the very limited representation of these stakeholders on RECs. As Fisher (2011) notes, ‘research ethics procedures are often constructed in isolation from the values and expectations of the participants for whom they are designed to protect’ (p. 3). RECs rely on the opinions and intuition of academics working in diverse subject areas, and whilst general principles may be rightly extended across academic disciplines, the more nuanced understanding fostered through working with or being part of marginalised groups, including sex workers, is often absent (Huysamen and Sanders, 2021). The additional regulatory principles embedded at an institutional level can result in an even wider net cast in terms of those whose views may be called on in ethical decisions, such as safeguarding, marketing, human resources and finance. Whilst such views are of course important, the experience of those, whilst valuable at a regulatory level, may be even further removed from the lived experiences and reality of participants engaged in the research. As there is no regulatory body overseeing ethical applications in social sciences³ conducted outside of the National Health Service,⁴ diverse institutional policies and personal opinion can result in inconsistent decisions and conditions being placed on researchers for the same or similar research.

Payments to research participants are made for several reasons, they

can constitute incentives, recompense or reward. Recompense can include payments made to reimburse ‘reasonable’ expenses and/or compensation for time. Debates around the method of payment align with those concerning ‘how much’ should or can be paid within ethical and moral limits. Such discussions highlight the need to consider the positioning of research participants and co-researchers in wider social and political structures, avoiding ‘research exceptionalism’ in relation to payments (and payment methods) that make a one size fits all approach more complex. Payment in research enables participants to take part, acknowledging financial constraints, but also recognising skills and the time given – most notably in respect of research burden. However, we argue that beyond these very real ethical matters around payment there is a need to uphold anonymity and confidentiality and respect participants’ agency. Within this section we focus on the method or means of payment and the extent to which these decisions are seldom free from the ethical concerns marginalised communities face when deciding whether to participate in research. The polarised positions in medical research and research conducted within the social sciences and psychology is quite pronounced here, in terms of payment conservatism (Largent and Lynch, 2017a, 2017b).

3.1. How we pay

There are a number of ways in which payment can be made to research participants including the use of vouchers, cash payments and bank transfers. Our focus here concerns the ethical considerations pertaining to methods of payment deemed appropriate by research institutions and RECs. Of particular concern is the use of vouchers as a substitute for cash, where cash payments are not permitted or are greatly restricted by institutional ethical regulations. The use of vouchers is often justified as a safeguarding mechanism to prevent the use of any cash received being spent on something deemed ‘risky’ or dangerous (Festinger and Dugosh, 2012). Further, they may also be easier to situate within finance regulations and other institutional procedures outside of the ethical decision makers closer to a research project. However, gift cards can be limiting within the ‘transactional micro-economies necessary for the survival of many sex workers’ – where money for the purchase of food, paying debts and other ‘self-determined priority needs’ are not met through use of vouchers (Bungay et al., 2022, p. 948). Whilst some sex workers may prefer specific vouchers, useable in outlets determined by them or vouchers to avoid the need for a bank account (most notably in research with migrant sex workers), decisions on payment must centralise the interests of specific groups through their own voices. In research with marginalised and vulnerable groups, anxieties about cash payments tend to reflect assumptions about what the cash will be spent on (cf. Bungay et al., 2022), obscuring the agency and autonomy of those researched. It is reflective of the complexity of the concept of vulnerability and its relationship to stigma; namely, ‘how labelling participants as vulnerable can unwittingly facilitate paternalism, discrimination, stereotyping, and stigma’ (Peter and Friedland, 2017a) that shape the policy and regulatory responses to them and their lives.

It is common for vouchers to be recommended in the social sciences as the preferred method for payment, instead of cash, despite the limitations this places on participants. The Social Research Association Ethics in Research guidance (2021) states:

‘Incentives are usually provided as vouchers for high street shops, rather than cash. This is safer for fieldworkers, administratively convenient, and avoids the risk of any perception that research may be funding harmful activities’ (p 8)

Festinger and Dugosh (2012) found that despite concerns regarding cash payments to participants who use drugs, participants used the money in a ‘responsible manner’ to pay bills, for transport or other related expenses. In fact, the research noted how payment in the form of gift vouchers could hinder participants’ use of the money given the need

³ Whilst the British Psychological Society has a Code of Human Research Ethics this is guidance ‘intended, as were previous editions, to help psychology researchers to engage actively in identifying, analysing and addressing the range of ethics issues that are pertinent for their particular projects.’ (Oats et al., 2021) Whilst all members of the British Psychological Society are to act in ‘accordance’ with the code, the finer detail concerning payments, for example, is deferred to institutional ethics committees. Unlike the British Medical Association, there is a more conservative language used in relation to payments amount and methods.

⁴ The Health Research Authority and the Devolved Administrations provide a Research Ethics Service so that research proposals relating to their areas of responsibility can be reviewed by a Research Ethics Committee (REC). Research Ethics Committees protect the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing of research participants. Managing the Research Ethics Committees in England is one of the Health Research Authority’s core functions. (Health Research Authority, n.d.)

to ensure such vouchers are used for and at specific places. Additionally, administrative convenience, highlighted by the guidance, is hard to reconcile with the importance of institutional policy responsiveness regarding payment, to ensure minimal harm or disadvantage to research participants. There are ways in which fieldworkers could adapt practices to protect against any personal risk in the field, and these are often reviewed as part of the ethical review process.⁵ However, the statement above offers little guidance for researchers seeking to be responsive to individual research needs. The preference for vouchers, we argue, assumes that sex workers or other marginalised groups, are incapable or 'risky' in terms of managing cash payments and result in sex workers or other marginalised groups being further marginalised or put at increased risk, because of taking part in the research.

Unlike the guidance from the Social Research Association, the British Psychological Society (BPS) notes that payment to participants can be in the form of monetary payment or non-monetary payment. There are several alternatives listed including 'vouchers to spend in specific retailers, small gifts' and 'certificates of participation' (Oats et al., 2021). Whilst there is no mention of risk per se, cash payments are not actively encouraged or recommended over the use of vouchers. Further, there is an absence of guidance on the need to be flexible and reflect on the ethical merits or disadvantages of payment methods employed in any given context. The risks and deemed appropriateness of using cash is devolved fully to institutional RECs. It is within these deliberations at a distance that notions of stigma and vulnerability result in paternalistic justifications of payment methods, which operate to heavily restrict the autonomy of marginalised participants. We argue that an absence of these issues in guidance fails to encourage institutions to actively seek out ways to enable payment flexibility and responsiveness, beyond common sense narratives around risk and money. For example, BPS offers little guidance to researchers on staying safe in the field and research generally. Instead the guidance is limited to participant risks alone (Parker and O'Reilly, 2013). Should the guidance include the promotion of flexibility and responsiveness around payment methods this would necessitate and encourage evidence-based solutions to risks and practices to reduce or eradicate them, enabling researchers to be more responsive in their methodologies.

In medical research guidance we see a different approach, one that advocates for the use of cash where payment is acceptable, moving beyond 'insisting' on vouchers. The NHS guidance states:

'Where payment is deemed to be acceptable for taking part in research it is acceptable for that payment to be made in cash. Whilst vouchers (or other non- cash payments) may also be used, a REC should not normally insist upon the use of vouchers (or other non-cash payments) for participants who use drugs where cash payments are proposed by researchers.' (Health Research Authority, 2025)

Where institutional RECs are left grappling with decisions concerning payment methods, there is a risk that RECs will adopt a protectionist position akin to payment conservatism (Largent and Lynch, 2017a, 2017b). The limited support for cash payments to research participants outside of medical research can inadvertently re-stigmatise this group (Goffman, 1963; Nussbaum, 1998, 2006), where 'efforts to protect' encourage stereotypes, increase stigma and undermine agency' (Peter and Friedland, 2017: 112). The assumptions around risky activities sex workers may engage in are borne out of the stereotypes and stigma around the work they do. This creates a situation where RECs assume a position that seeks to simultaneously prevent institutional risk - including any association with financing risky behaviours - and 'protect'

sex workers. However, in offering vouchers sex workers' agency is undermined and instead they are subjected to wider risks concerning their inability to meet self-determined needs. Time given to research could mean time out of work that enables them to meet the needs they see as essential. Ultimately, vouchers in research fail to properly acknowledge the lived realities of sex work as work, reflective of wider law and policy shaping sex workers' lives.

Beyond providing vouchers or cash, an alternative payment structure allows for monetary payments to be made via bank transfer from the research institution to the participant. This may be particularly relevant in more participatory models of research design where payment is to be made to a collaborator or co-researcher with lived experience, wherein payments may be higher to reflect more longstanding and structured involvement in the research. However, to process such payments, personal details such as name, address and identity documentation are often required. Whilst such a requirement is commonplace in many institutional and business transactions our argument here is that payment methods cannot be taken for granted in research with marginalised groups but instead should form part of the core ethical considerations in the project. Providing this information can exacerbate ethical and personal risks associated with participating in the research itself, by compromising anonymity (Surmiak, 2020) whilst also impacting on the breadth and quality of the research by deterring some potential participants from taking part. Concerns about anonymity and confidentiality regarding payment processes within the research institution can relate to the number of people involved in processing payments and the retention of the data. Researchers' ethical protocols are informed tightly by anonymity and confidentiality scrutinised by the REC review process. However, whilst the researchers' practices, methods and data management are reviewed by RECs and communicated to research participants, other departments who may have access to this sensitive data, such as finance teams or administrators, are not bound by the same ethical restrictions. Individuals within these teams are unlikely to be aware of any additional risks that a particular group or individual may face and how to treat this data accordingly.

The flexibility needed around payment methods in research with marginalised groups is not sufficiently met by restricting payments to those made via vouchers or bank transfers. Bungay et al. note that sex workers in their research viewed 'cash as "always best"' (2022, p.948). The research found that cash was the 'most respectful and safe approach to foster participation'. In relation to alternatives to cash payment, gift cards and other monetary alternatives such as bus tokens were deemed disrespectful 'contributing to stigmatizing, infantilizing, victim-status stereotypes of sex workers as individuals unable to make independent decisions about how they spend their money.' (P. 948) This is not to say that vouchers or alternative monetary methods are never appropriate, but the importance of choice and flexibility must be at the heart of guidance and decision-making. Some reasons for refusing cash payments centre on concerns around audits and tax. However, there are examples of institutional guidance and practice which demonstrate that structured practices can be built in to overcome these issues and enable cash payments.⁶ Whilst the discussion here relates to research with sex workers, such challenges are reflective of issues faced by other minoritised and vulnerable groups, where conservative practices around payment methods are witnessed due to anxieties around participants engagement with high-risk activities (Festinger and Dugosh, 2012) and administrative concerns regarding managing such a process. We advocate for the

⁵ The Social Research Association (2001) suggest ensuring that you are not alone in the field where possible, undertaking research in public places where possible, where security is in doubt use venues where an assessment for safety has already been made.

⁶ See for example the University of Glasgow's guidance on payments to research participants where there are guidelines for cash payments and information to assist in the determination of its appropriateness (University of Glasgow, 2024). The University of Oxford also highlights that where there may be concerns regarding what the cash paid may be used for, this should be 'weighed against the need to respect participants' autonomy and avoid paternalism' (University of Oxford, 2020).

involvement of participants themselves in discussions about their vulnerability in particular contexts - not to exclude them from research but instead allow additional guidance and protection to ensure their safe and informed participation (Peter and Friedland, 2017). Discussions with participants and wider advisors with lived experience should be central to payment matters in research with marginalised and vulnerable group, so to avoid unnecessarily restricting how this may be done.

3.2. How much we pay

Ethical guidance and literature on payments to research participants tend to focus on how such payments risk constituting undue inducement or exploitation' (Różyńska, 2022; Abadie et al., 2025; Health Research Authority, 2025). However some authors, relying on the principle of social beneficence (Różyńska, 2022) and challenging 'payment conservatism', argue there is in fact a moral responsibility placed on researchers to pay their participants (Largent and Lynch, 2017a, 2017b; Waddington, 2025). We highlight here that the complexity of debates concerning 'how much we pay' is heightened due to the unequal burdens faced by members of marginalised groups when taking part in research, which are often missed or misunderstood when RECs operate through a model of 'ethics at a distance' (Peter and Friedland, 2017). In calculating the parameters of appropriate payment, RECs and researchers are required to navigate multiple competing ethical considerations, including reimbursing participants for any financial losses, showing respect and gratitude whilst avoiding undue influence and ensuring informed and full consent and voluntariness of their engagement (Oats et al., 2021, pp. 19–20; The Social Research Association, 2021, p. 8). In this section we explore the ethical questions around payment amounts as they relate to sex workers. We focus particularly on the challenge of quantifying the burden of research for participants, the conflict of perceptions and biases that are apparent in this ethical question, and the processes through which these decisions are made.

Avoiding coercion or undue influence and ensuring the voluntariness of participation is a central pillar of ethical research. This relates to payment amount due to assumptions that when payments to participants are unjustly high, there is the potential to unduly impact the decision-making of participants. The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics states that payments or incentives are ethically acceptable 'so long as they are not so large that they run the risk of compromising a persons' freely made decisions to participate, which would violate the principle of respect for autonomy and become coercion' (Oats et al., 2021, p. 19). Despite being a significant principle of the ethical decision-making that researchers and institutional ethics committees are required to engage in, there is little guidance as to *how much* payment could constitute 'undue influence' or coercion. This ethical responsibility of avoiding such undue influence – with shared sentiments across ethical codes within and beyond the social sciences – are seen to be particularly pertinent when participants are seen to belong to a 'vulnerable' group. The 'cascading vulnerabilities' associated with being a sex worker include perceptions of living in poverty and having irregular sources of income, something which reflects *some* of the personal situations of *some* sex workers. As Peter and Friedland (2017) found, the recognition of such vulnerabilities leads to an open-ended conceptualisation of potential risks which could leading to conservative approaches to issues such as payment.

The extent of payment which could be considered 'excessive' is a source of substantial disagreement – particularly between different stakeholders, such as researchers, RECs and participants – which has prevented the development of a practical framework to guide researchers in evaluating the appropriateness of payment amounts (Gelinas et al., 2018). With the limited centralised guidance on research participant payment in the social sciences, RECs regularly demonstrate a conservative approach to the payment of participants, distorting the potential harm and ethical challenges to unduly focus on the risks of coercion. Largent and Lynch (2017a) argue that these risks are

excessively weighted in the wrong direction, asserting the alternative ways that REC's safeguarding practices would prevent undue influence even when larger payments are made. With an outsized fear of coercion in the upper limits of incentive payments, there is a risk that this reinforces the paternalistic assumptions which can negatively impact sex workers engaging in research. Such assumptions were evidenced in Bungay et al.'s (2022) study exploring the perceptions of payment for sex worker research participants in Canada. Through their study with researchers, community services staff and sex workers participating in research, they found the prevalence of paternalistic bias throughout researcher and community support workers interviews and practice. They found examples of researcher biases relating to participant's membership of a 'vulnerable' group and presumed relationship to drug use leading to decisions to reduce incentive payments as well as leading to breaches in privacy and explicit ethical violations (p.948). Taking the guidance that the principle of justice requires the degree of remuneration to not reinforce social inequity (as argued by Waddington, 2025), it becomes quickly evident that REC and researcher decision-making around appropriate levels of pay being grounded within such biases risks breaching this ethical principle.

To respect the wide diversity of the lived experiences – and associated potential 'vulnerabilities' – of sex workers (Brown et al., 2025), it is necessary to consider that the burden placed upon an individual when taking part in research can be complex, personal and difficult to establish at a distance. When determining appropriate levels of remuneration recognising the burden experienced by a participant when taking part in research should be central (Persad et al., 2019). There are some uncontested burdens whereby calculations for reimbursement are able to be quantified with relative ease. 'Reasonable' costs incurred, such as travel, accommodation or similar costs should be reflected in the amount of payment received. However, some research burdens can be more complicated to establish. Participants in our study – sex worker activists and peer supporters – expressed the heavy responsibility that they felt as advocates for their community. They stated that at times the opportunity to use platforms made available to them to raise the profile of sex workers and their needs felt like an obligation which created a personal burden. Engaging in research was seen as a potential route to elevate the experiences of their community and create change, leading to some participants becoming involved in research despite the impact on their limited personal capacity. Each motivation for engagement in a study provides a different set of rationales for payment (Phillips, 2011), which reflects the need for a nuanced calculation of appropriate remuneration which incorporates flexibility and a close understanding of the perceptions of the participants. Similarly, individual relationships to remuneration can be complex and personal. For some activists we spoke with, being paid to be involved in research brought with it a complexity which they felt diminished their advocacy, particularly being paid for raising the voices of those who were not being paid. The balance between burden, obligation, community responsibility and remuneration can reflect personal dynamics which are difficult to quantify and for some participants, perhaps even difficult to express.

We therefore see a nuanced approach to appropriate levels of remuneration within research as providing a route to challenge and resist the wider socio-cultural structures, framed by stigma and embedded within the power hierarchies inherent in research, which oppress and marginalise sex workers. A lack of recognition of the diversity of the lived experiences of sex workers and assumptions which reduce them to a homogenous group, strips them of the autonomy which ethical research should be seeking to enhance. Fundamentally, these issues concerning payment in research reflect the deeply personal and subjective relationship that participants have to money, responsibility and advocacy. For example sex worker research participants in Bungay et al.'s study resisted the perspective that high-paid incentives might be coercive and deemed it 'insulting,' stating that it 'failed to recognise the diversity of sex workers' lived realities and decision-making surrounding research participation' (2022: 949). To make decisions on payment

amounts to certain groups dependent on assumptions concerning whether what they will spend it on may be 'risky', but not making the same demands on others who may take part in research, crosses a significant ethical line. Designing research which is meaningfully co-produced is a valuable way of responding to some of these issues. By engaging in research which is closely targeting a problem within the community, ensuring the research is fashioned in a way that addresses the needs or burdens of the community, with members of the community. However, it brings with it additional burdens; further responsibilities for conducting or engagement with research on researchers, institutions and those with lived experience, as well as more responsibility for its outcomes. Within a sector where the stakes are so high for those without access to basic rights, this burden can weigh particularly heavily.

4. Conclusion

Vulnerability as a term is often used to justify, uncritically, interventions into the private lives of individuals deemed vulnerable a priori, by their belonging to a particular group. In this article we have highlighted key concerns about 'ethics at a distance' (Peter and Friedland, 2017) where vulnerability has mobilised assumptions about sex workers through the use of universal principles around payment methods and ambiguous positions on payment amounts. Law and policy on sex work has sought to restrict and repress the profession and interventions justified via paternalistic means where sex workers, deemed vulnerable, must be saved; such historical framings are evident in the law and policy of today. In this article we have argued that care needs to be taken to ensure that such repression and restrictions are not inadvertently recreated in research undertaken with sex workers.

Institutional ethical practices need to be responsive and flexible in relation to payment, similar to those seen in medical research. The promotion of flexibility in universal guidance could alleviate some of the tensions experienced by RECs in the social sciences. Highlighted within this article is the discretion afforded to institutional ethics committees which, unlike research conducted through a regulatory body such as the NHS, means ethical decisions and responsibility is fully devolved to RECs and individual researchers; where experience and understanding of working with marginalised and vulnerable groups may be limited. We are concerned chiefly with the need to balance institutional payment conservatism (Largent and Lynch, 2017a, 2017b) with the ethical protections afforded to research participants, to avoid inadvertently causing the harms they seek to avoid. As Malone et al. (2006) argue, there is a need for 'an expansion of ethics dialogues beyond procedural, principle-based approaches' (p. 1918). Such reflections should be centralised in institutional priorities concerning equality, diversity and inclusion and the promotion of research that draws on the experiences and skills of those with lived experience, both as participants and co-researchers. The way in which institutions operate ethical review processes risk recreating the hierarchies of power that exist within society, where the proposed or attempted universality of 'normative' ethical guidelines and principles, limits the agency of the most marginalised (see Bauman, 2008); where RECS (the 'guardians of the code') review submissions and determine conditions at a distance from the lived experience and voices of those being researched. Building consultation into the early stages of research design can overcome the limitations of any standardised system, which is built on analysis outside of the expertise of the cohort in question, most notably on the appropriate levels and formats of pay. We advocate for a shift in ethical review processes where RECS enter into a dialogue with researchers, participants and wider stakeholders, where necessary, to ensure that the decisions made are with, rather than to, sex workers or other marginalised groups.

The issues of autonomy raised throughout this article are reflective of wider structural issues concerning sex workers and payment - for example the 'impact of governance developed and enforced by payment

intermediaries on the working conditions of performers working on adult labour platforms, where credit card networks determine permissible content performers can produce' and 'structure the industry in a way that prioritizes the interests of platforms over performers' (Franco and Webber, 2024). Properly constructed guidance framework can reduce some of the discretion for both RECs and researchers, wherein risk analyses can be informed by implicit bias (such as what a participant may spend their money on). Ethical processes must be flexible to the needs of not only the institution but those of the specific groups being researched. Individuals are the best placed to understand and manage their own risk; Connelly and Sanders (2020) have highlighted how sex workers, as a result of limited state protections, have fostered their own ways of managing and responding to risks. In this paper we have highlighted the epistemological disconnect between notions of vulnerability, that underpin ethical codes on the one hand, advocating for the 'protection' of those being researched, and principles of co-design in research on the other, that centralise the agency and autonomy of sex workers, allies and activists in knowledge production. We argue that research institutions have a duty to ensure their ethics 'at a distance' does not recreate the power hierarchies present in law and policy. As articulated by Peter and Friedland, a feminist ethics of care would enable a more individualised and responsive ethical process where participants are able to determine their own vulnerability and risk management (Peter and Friedland, 2017) and we argue, the most appropriate form of payment. Neilans (1922) stated that 'the prostitute is the scapegoat for everyone's sins, and few people care if she is treated justly or not'; we argue that today's societal positioning of sex work and sex workers must challenge such framings, and these should inform research in the area at all levels. It is central to ethical review processes to find practical and tangible routes to demonstrate care, not only about protecting institutional risk, participants, and researchers but also the autonomy and agency of those being researched.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Charlotte English: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Morwenna Bennallick:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Del Beach-Campbell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Jason Domino:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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