Mensenkennis

Photo Elicitation as a Method to Explore Self-Stigma Among Sex Workers in The Netherlands

Written Thesis

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Submission date: 20 June 2025
Word count: 11,796

MSc Visual Ethnography
Part of *Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology*
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Abstract

This methodological thesis explores how photo elicitation, as a participant-led visual method, can create space to articulate and reflect on the lived experiences of self-stigmatisation. In particular, this research was conducted in The Netherlands with sex workers who collaborated in shaping both the content and direction of the study, by producing their own photographic material and discussing it in photo elicitation interviews. The thesis consists of a written article and an interactive PDF containing curated audio fragments, photographic layouts, and participant-led sequences. Drawing on a reflexive, participant-led research design, the thesis centres photo elicitation interviews as its central method for exploring and challenging research power dynamics. Grounded in theories of photovoice, relational interviewing, and visual reflexivity, the thesis argues that photo elicitation can foster co-authorship, challenge extractive research practices, and open space for complex accounts of sex worker's lived experiences of self-stigma. The findings suggest that the method facilitated moments of intimacy, control, and narrative agency, offering a nuanced understanding of how stigma is navigated and internalised. In doing so, it reflects on the ethical and methodological stakes of doing research *with* rather than about stigmatised communities.

Key words: photo elicitation, self-stigma, sex work, reflexivity, participatory visual methods, visual anthropology

In the Picture: Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this thesis.

My deepest gratitude goes to Tika, Maryo, and CJ for their openness, honesty, and trust. Thank you for letting me into your lives, for showing me your world with such care and courage. This work could not have existed without you, and I carry your words and images with deep respect.

I am also very grateful to Maria Scali for her encouragement and support during the fieldwork, and to all my colleagues at SHOP for their engagement and trust in my research. I am especially thankful to my colleague Renée Cieraad for her support and for making valuable opportunities possible throughout this process.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Sander Hölgens, for his critical insights, patience, and guidance throughout the programme. Thank you for the cups of tea, drawings and for creating a motivating and safe space to discuss our work in group settings; your presence during supervision was always generous and grounding.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional support, both in this thesis and beyond.

Table of Contents

Through the Viewfinder: Introduction

This thesis explores how photo elicitation, as a participant-led method, can facilitate reflexivity and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant. Focusing on sex workers in the Netherlands, it investigates how photo elicitation can be used to explore the lived experience of self-stigmatisation. While stigma surrounding sex work is widely acknowledged, academia, policy making, and media attention often focus on structural or societal stigma. In contrast, internalised stigma, as experienced and articulated by sex workers themselves, often remains overlooked. This thesis focuses on self-stigma not as a isolated or fixed state, but as a fluid, situated experience that is intertwined with structural, legal, and societal forces. This thesis positions photo elicitation as a central focus, foregrounding participant-led research design and use of visual stimuli in interviews to explore layered and complex experiences related to self-stigmatisation.

My Place in the Frame

This subject emerged through my ongoing work with sex workers and my observations of how stigma operates. As part of my job at SHOP, a non-governmental expertise and knowledge centre in The Hague focused on human trafficking and sex work, I regularly interact with sex workers from across the erotic industry. Through this work, I see stigma manifest on different levels: personal, physical, systemic, and on a legal level. Often, I find that stigma does not declare itself openly. It becomes visible through its affect, exposing the constant dialogue between who we are, how the world perceives us, and how we see ourselves.

This research began from that space. From noticing how stigma circulates, and realising that I am not outside of it. I contribute to, and am subjected to stigma in ways I am still comprehending. I recognise that it is impossible to navigate discussions surrounding stigma without inadvertently perpetuating it. What interests me in particular is how this plays out on the level of self. In my early fieldwork conversations with sex workers, it became clear that stigma does not only come from the outside. It shows up in silence, in doubt, in the way people talk about themselves or hold back parts of their story. It illustrates how stigma is not only externally imposed but also internally absorbed and negotiated.

Anthropologists Brewis and Wutich (2024) differentiate between different forms of stigma: “stigmatising attitudes and behaviours (social stigma), people’s experience of those attitudes and behaviours (experienced stigma), and people’s internalisation of and agreement with these negative judgments (self-stigma)” (Brewis & Wutich 2024: 1). In anthropological discussions, the systematic analysis of Goffman (1963) extended the conceptualisation of stigma beyond individual experiences to a broader sociopolitical context (Goffman 1963: 2). In the context of my research, this understanding is significant for contextualising how self-stigma among sex workers is not merely personal but is shaped by societal forces. This, in turn, helped contextualise experiences discussed in fieldwork such as avoiding healthcare, psychological support, or social spaces, revealing how stigma shapes engagement and access to with these domains.

My fieldwork was conducted in the Netherlands. Specific locations are withheld to protect participants’ privacy and safety. What is crucial to understand is that the social and legal landscape surrounding sex work

in the Netherlands is highly fragmented. Although sex work has been legalised since 2000, the regulation of where and how it can be carried out differs significantly between municipalities (Van Gelder 2025: 14). As of 2025, only a handful of Dutch municipalities have implemented licensing systems that allow sex workers to operate legally from home (Sky News 2024). In many others, a permit is required, often contingent on the involvement of an external operator. Therefore, although sex work is recognised in The Netherlands, the legally framework currently in place often makes it nearly impossible to work independently.

Comparable forms of self-employment, such as masseurs or hairdressers, are not subject to the same constraints. These legal barriers push many sex workers into informal or underground work, which reinforces narratives that delegitimise sex work as labour. As cultural anthropologist Van Gelder (2025) notes, since legalisation, sex workers have experienced a reduction in legal, safe working spaces (Van Gelder 2025: 10). Over time, these narratives do not only exist publicly, they can shape how sex workers view themselves. Therefore, in line with my ethical commitments and in protection of my participants, explicit locations are not disclosed unless participants have given informed consent.

Anthropology of Sex Work

The dominant frameworks through which sex work is discussed, often dichotomised as either empowerment or exploitation, frequently fail to capture the diversity and complexity of the lived experiences of sex workers. As feminist anthropologist Cheng (1998) explains, this binary renders "the finer texture of everyday life [...] lost, together with a wide range of sex workers' desires and aspirations that do not corroborate the crime versus rights framework" (Cheng 1998: 135). In the absence of sex workers' own voices, academic and public narratives tend to reproduce stigmatising or reductive images, often fuelled by media portrayals, policy discourses, and moral panics (Are 2022: 2006; Cheng 1998: 135).

Stigma operates here not merely as a social attitude, but as a mechanism of exclusion and control. As sociologist Nencel et al. (2022) argue, "stigma is about relationships between people and also sets an interpretative frame whereby people understand and react to situations and actions" (Nencel et al 2022: 1). This framing contributes to broader structural processes of marginalisation and discrimination, reinforcing power asymmetries between researchers, institutions, and the communities they study. Moreover, the reproduction of these narratives has an effect on the lived experiences of sex workers themselves, including self-stigma. As Van Gelder (2025) notes, "because of stigma, sex workers face various obstacles that hinder them in performing their work and navigating daily life" (Van Gelder 2025: 69–70). My research traces how these obstacles become internalised, shaping how participants see themselves and move through the world.

This thesis aligns with a shift in knowledge production that prioritises sex workers' lived experiences. Rather than speaking for sex workers, feminist and participatory approaches aim to centre their voices. Recognising them as "experts of their own lives," Nencel (2017) calls this the "epistemological privileging of sex workers" (Nencel 2017: 94). This responds to a history of research in which sex workers are marginalised, stigmatised, or their perspectives are selectively interpreted (Spanger & Skilbrei 2017: 6). In the context of my research, this means treating participants' visual and narrative choices not as data to be extracted, but as

meaningful interventions in how their lives are seen and understood. This requires an attentiveness to the silences, refusals, or redirections that emerge in participant-led processes. Therefore, this thesis seeks to contribute to these conversations by positioning participant-led photography as a site of co-produced meaning, employing photo elicitation as a dialogical and participatory form of inquiry.

A Case for Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that uses photographs as prompts in interviews. Visual sociologist Harper (2002) writes about photo elicitation as an exchange of shared interpretation of photographs as a collaborative process of meaning-making between people (Harper 2002: 23). Unlike verbal interviews, photo elicitation encourages participants to narrate and to reflect on their experiences through visual material, often resulting in a kind of information that differs from verbal-only interviews (Harper 2002: 14). To engage this epistemological shift in practice, and following Nencel's (2017) call to recognise sex workers as experts of their own lives, this thesis turns to participant-led photo elicitation as its central method.

Photo elicitation invites a dialogic mode of engagement. This collaborative model makes the interview process a shared act of meaning-making rather than information extraction. The photograph becomes a mediating object that allows researcher and participant and to co-create knowledge. Visual autoethnographer Scarles (2010) supports this, noting that "respondent-led photography transfers control to respondents" (Scarles 2010: 23), allowing for greater agency and potentially more empowering forms of participation. Pauwels (2019) clarifies that this method allows respondents to act "as 'knowledgeable' informants or even experts rather than mere 'objects of interrogation'" (Pauwels 2019: 131). This is central to my research, which does not seek to speak for sex workers, but aims to hold space for their self-representation and lived realities that are based on historically and socially situated experiences. These accounts are not meant to generalise sex work or the experience of self-stigma, but to foreground personal perspectives that matter on their own terms.

Speaking With, Not For: Problem Analysis

The white, cisgender woman behind a window, wearing hot pink pleasers bathed in red-tinted light. Our understanding of sex work and sex workers is most often shaped by representations created by those outside the sex industry, whether that is activists, policy-makers, journalists, and academics (Cheng 1998: 132). While this image is widely recognisable, it captures only a sliver of the erotic industry, yet is often used to stand in for the whole. Activist sex workers who do speak publicly are often positioned as spokespersons for an entire community, which my interlocutors described as an unfair and uncomfortable burden. This tendency flattens the diversity of experiences within the erotic industry, erases differences across gender, race, class, and migration status, and reinforces a singular, often sensationalised, public narrative.

Meanwhile, other forms of erotic labour are increasingly framed socially as empowering and entrepreneurial, such as selling feet pictures online or going on pay dates as a side-hustle for students. This is still sex work, but they are rarely treated with the same moral suspicion. This double standard highlights the deep

ambivalence surrounding sex work, where some forms are glamorised and others criminalised, both on a legal and personal level. It reveals how representation on all levels contributes directly to the persistence of stigma, by shaping how sex work is seen by others, and how sex workers come to see themselves.

This tension between visibility and erasure was repeatedly echoed in my fieldwork conversations. It is precisely this imbalance that motivates my research. Rather than producing research about sex workers, I aim to conduct research *with* and alongside them. This means creating space for participants to define what is meaningful, and to do so on their own terms. It is also what lead me to research a method and its possibility for opening up this kind of space, where experience is not simply captured and extracted, but negotiated through shared efforts.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this thesis and are grounded in both methodological curiosity and an ethical commitment to co-producing knowledge in ways that remain attentive to the effects of stigma.

Research question:
How can photo elicitation contribute to exploring sex workers' lived experiences of self-stigmatisation?

Sub research questions:
1. How can photo elicitation influence the way participants construct and express narratives of self-stigmatisation?
2. How can photo elicitation facilitate participants' reflexive engagement with their lived experiences of self-stigmatisation?
3. How can the participatory nature of photo elicitation influence the power dynamics and relational engagement between researcher and participant?

Framing Self-Stigma Together
Photo elicitation, as a participant-led visual method, offers a productive way to explore sex workers' lived experiences of self-stigmatisation. In this thesis, self-stigma is reframed through everyday life, memory, visual narration and authority. This aligns with relational meaning-making, as conceptualised by Harper (2002) and Burris (1997). Photovoice frameworks developed by Wang (1999) and Burris (1997) further shaped this research. Finally, the project facilitated visual reflexivity and enacted the ethical commitments of participatory visual methodologies, foregrounding co-authorship in line with the work of Pink (2011) and Marks (2000). In practice, this participant-led design established a sense of safety and mutual commitment between researcher and participant, which in turn facilitated deep reflection, emotional honesty, and the emergence of complex, often unexpected experiences of self-stigma.

Multimodal Thesis

This thesis is composed of a written methodological article and an audiovisual ethnographic work presented as an interactive book. The two components are distinct in focus yet interconnected. While the written article

examines the use of photo elicitation as a method, the interactive book presents fragments of the research material in ways that reflect the method's participatory nature, self-stigma and sex work itself. Together, the two formats allow the research to communicate both about and through its method.

Loading the Camera: Methodology

Methodological Positioning

This thesis uses photo elicitation not only as a tool to access the lived experiences of participants, but as the central object of investigation. The method itself becomes the lens through which I explore the layers of self-stigma. Rather than seeing photo elicitation as a neutral means of data collection, I treat it as a form of social interaction that shapes how stories are told and understood. In line with Harper (2002), photo elicitation "evokes a different kind of information" by creating a "shared dialogue" between researcher and participant (Harper 2002: 156). This makes it particularly useful for exploring the often emotionally charged and internalised dimensions of self-stigma. At the same time, it raises questions about how knowledge is produced and who is allowed to frame it.

This is especially relevant in the context of sex work, where representation has long been used as a mechanism of control and stigmatisation. As feminist sociologist Pheterson (1993) writes, normative framings of sex workers uphold cultural logics that define women through sexual "dishonour" (Pheterson 1993: 46–60). Taking this into account, I aim to position photo elicitation in a way to challenge such framings, not by substituting one narrative for another, but by examining how the method itself opens space for different ways of speaking and seeing. This aim informed the structure of the method itself: participants were given full control over what, when, and how to photograph, with no thematic prompts or restrictions imposed.

This includes framings that are often overlooked or flattened in mainstream narratives, such as the diversity of sex workers themselves, including male and queer-identifying sex workers, and the intersections between pride, sexuality, and professional identity. In order to explore how stigma is interwoven across societal, structural, and personal levels, I felt motivated to research a method that could accommodate the same multiplicity and complexity.

For example, during fieldwork I had a conversation with a sex worker who was initially hesitant to speak with me. When I asked why, she explained that she had negative experiences with people who asked invasive questions surrounding her work, always the cliché: "what's the worst experience you've had with a client?" Questions framed in this sense immediately position sex work from a negative starting point, which, in turn, reinforces stigma. Not only towards the work, which becomes portrayed as women-unfriendly or dangerous, but also towards clients, who are reduced to the stereotype of the exploitative, lonely man. For her, this framing also reinforced self-stigma: it made her feel complicit in a narrative of harm, even when her day-to-day reality did not match that portrayal.

In this sense, this thesis resonates with visual anthropologist Pinney's (2012) call for a "world-system photography" that resists the marginalisation of 'non-normative' practices and foregrounds the historical and cultural entanglements that shape photographic meaning (Pinney 2012: 142). This resonates with my methodological angle: not to produce definitive truths, but to explore partial, situated truths that emerged

through collaborative framing and aesthetic choices. The photographs do not offer a direct representation of self-stigma, but created a contingent space through which participants could approach it through reflection indirectly (Pinney 2012: 143).

Methods in the Field

This section outlines the methods that shaped my fieldwork, with a focus on photo elicitation. Other methods, such as the go along method, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, also informed the research process. These methods were conducted before and alongside photo elicitation, and were essential in building trust, rapport and understanding the everyday routines of participants' lives. They provided context for the photographic material and helped situate the visual narratives within broader personal and social dynamics.

For example, the go-along method offered an essential spatial and relational context for understanding the environments in which participants navigated self-stigma. As sociologist Kusenbach (2016) explains, the go-along method allows researchers to explore the "stream of experiences and practices" of participants as they interact with their physical and social environments (Kusenbach 2016: 154). A key strength of the go-along method lies in its ability to reveal experiences in situ, those which can be invisible during sit down interviews. Kusenbach (2003) notes that the method provides a way to "access some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience" (Kusenbach 2003: 455). In my research, this real-time unfolding of movement and narrative allowed me to reflect on my participants and contextualise their experiences in different spaces.

The go along method also allows for a shift in power dynamics. According to medical sociologist Carpiano (2009), participants act as "tour guides," which helps foster "a more egalitarian connection" (Carpiano 2009: 268). This mirrors Kusenbach's (2016) emphasis on giving participants control over narrative direction (Kusenbach 2016: 157). This shift is crucial to my research in resisting dominant extractive modes of knowledge production and affirming the agency of participants. This emphasis on participant control in the go-along method echoes the approach taken in photo elicitation, where participants similarly shaped the direction and content of the research through their own visual contributions.

Methods: Reflection in the Field

In practice, mixing different types of methods, such as participant observation and the go-along method, allowed me to take on different roles during fieldwork. At times researcher, observer, and even temporary participant. I accompanied sex workers during parts of their daily routines, which offered access to a broader social network. For instance, through these outings, I spoke with clients of sex workers and their perspectives on self-stigma. These unexpected encounters offered valuable layers of context that might not have emerged otherwise.

Yet, this proximity also raised new ethical considerations and emotional boundaries. In some moments, I was perceived as a fellow sex worker or simply asked whether I offered sexual services myself. These moments

were reminders of how, by physically occupying the same spaces, I was also subjected to overlapping forms of gaze and expectation. The go-along method doesn't only bring the researcher closer to participants' worlds, it implicates them within it (Anderson 2004: 260). This situatedness opened space for richer understandings of how sex workers navigate self-stigma, not just through language, but through being perceived, space and routine.

Loading the Camera: Photo Elicitation

Research Design

At the core of this methodological framework is photo elicitation. For the photo elicitation interviews during the fieldwork, I worked with three participants. Each participant was given a point-and-shoot film camera and asked to fill one roll of film. After developing the photographs, we held unstructured interviews, starting only with an open prompt: an invitation to introduce themselves however they wished. This minimal framing was an intentional choice. By refraining from prepared questions, I sought to keep the interpretive frame open, allowing participants to define themselves, and what the images meant in relation to their own experiences.

Originally, I intended to conduct three photo elicitation interviews with each participant at different stages of the fieldwork. However, this multi-phase structure proved too demanding in practice due to time constraints of the fieldwork period. Instead, I carried out one in-depth photo elicitation interview per participant. These interviews were complemented by other methods, as mentioned before. This broader ethnographic approach made it possible to build trust and rapport over time, ensuring that the photo elicitation interviews took place at a stage in the fieldwork when participants felt comfortable and familiar.

Memory and the Visual Encounter

Photo elicitation supports a kind of meaning-making that is rooted in memory, association, and emotion, making it particularly suited to exploring complex, internalised experiences such as self-stigma. Photo elicitation offers participants a way to reflect on and articulate aspects of their lives that may be difficult to express verbally, as it "mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews" (Harper 2002: 23), often "spur[s] meaning that otherwise might have remained dormant in a face-to-face interview" (Clark-Ibáñez 2004: 1513), and provides an "emotionally supportive" means of exploring complex or sensitive topics (Torres & Warr 2016: 143).

Given that my research focuses on the internalisation of stigma, this potential for non-verbal expression and emotional safety was foundational. During fieldwork, I found that introducing my thesis through the lens of self-stigma alone often rendered as too abstract, leading to some interlocutors to dismiss stigma entirety. While such responses reflect valid personal perspectives, they also highlight the difficulty of engaging with a complex, multi-layered concept like stigma through abstract conversation alone. This likely contributed to the initial rejection, not as a denial of stigma's existence, but as a reaction to how it was framed. Interestingly, the very individuals who initially dismissed stigma later shared experiences during photo

elicitation in which various forms of stigma were clearly at play. Reaching that point of insight emerged through the method itself, and through the collaborative nature of our engagement during the elicitation.

The use of photo elicitation in this research is grounded in a reflexive, collaborative ethos, not only in an effort to equalise the research power relationship, but to explore how such dynamics might generate knowledge that more closely reflects the lived realities of participants. This is especially critical in research with sex workers, where representation visibility are politicised. What I aim to understand through this method is how photo elicitation can create a space between researcher and participant, where the image becomes a shared site of attention and intention.

Beyond Empowerment

While participatory methods are often framed as inherently empowering the participant, it is important to remain critical of the assumptions that underlie this framing. Nencel (2017) critiques the romanticisation of participation and reminds us that "this assumption conceals too many directives concerning the conceptualisation of power" (Nencel 2017: 105). Rather than assuming power in this sense can simply be "transferred," my design follows visual anthropologist Pink's emphasis on the negotiated nature of meaning-making, where "ethnographic knowledge... is based on ethnographers' own experiences" and is co-produced "through intersubjectivities" (Pink 2011: 3).

For example, this was demonstrated in the Pandora Photo Project. Korean sex workers used photography to present the Yongsan red-light district not as an object of external analysis, but as "an affective space" (Cheng 1998: 140). The method gave them a way to narrate their lives on their own terms, asserting personal and political agency. Cheng (1998) observes that photography in this context allowed participants to move beyond "the limits of dominant discourses" and bring forward a different narrative of their everyday (Cheng 1998: 146). Similarly, in my project, photo elicitation is not used to generalise about sex work or self-stigma, but to explore how these experiences are remembered, felt, and interpreted by individuals each positioned differently within broader structures of stigmatisation and visibility.

The conversations during the photo elicitation interviews were guided by the choices of the participants. It allowed them to "do their story" visually, drawing on memory, association, and affect rather than needing to articulate complex experiences about self stigma in words alone. One participant spoke very little about their personal experiences during our earlier interactions, sticking to general claims, such as "we all suffer". However, when talking through the photos they had taken, they gradually began to share more, using the images to share underlying motivations and activist narratives that shaped their personal and professional life. These moments made visible how the method itself became part of the relational field, disrupting the usual dynamic of prompt and response.

Photo Elicitation: Reflection in the Field

Even though the search design emphasises participant control, it also demanded researcher flexibility in practice. For example, one participant's film was determined unusable due to a flash malfunction. Another participant decided not to use the film camera at all, opting instead to send digital photos via WhatsApp. The

third participant used both analog and digital formats. As Postma argues, visual research "can offer a more authentic representation of participants' narratives" when participants are free to create and share images on their own terms (Postma 2006: 351). These divergences were not treated as methodological shortcomings. On the contrary, they aligned with the principle that the methods should adapt to the needs and preferences of the participants. In this sense, the research design aimed to give them control over what to show, how to show it, and how to interpret it. This was not only an ethical concern, but a methodological one. By allowing for a method that was forgiving in both structure and flexibility, constraint and freedom, I aimed to position participants not as objects of study, but as co-creators of the research. This choice resonates with Harper's (2012) claim that "photo elicitation radically redefines the sociological interview" by producing a shared space of inquiry (Harper 2012: 156).

Ethics of Looking: Positionally

Ethical engagement in this project centres on collaboration, reflexivity, and consent. As Pink (2011) argues, "the relationships we develop with the people we work with to produce ethnographic knowledge do not involve our extraction of information from them, but the co-production of knowledge" (Pink 2011: 22). Working with a stigmatised research population requires a research environment rooted in mutual respect.

My own presence as a researcher, and the presence of the recording equipment, remained active elements in this process. For example, my initially methodology included filming. Instead, I opted for an audio recorder during fieldwork, to reduce the sense of surveillance and allow for a fluid exchange. Nevertheless, the act of documenting still carries weight. I am still conducting research about sex workers, and this framing inevitably places me in a position of power in relation to those I speak with. Therefore, through participant-led photo elicitation, I made an effort to give room for participants to guide, reframe, and even resist the structure of the research encounter. This shifting of authorship cannot be total, but it was present.

Consent

Given the precarious legal conditions affecting some participants' working situations, verbal consent was prioritised over written consent to accommodate their comfort, safety, and need for anonymity. This applied both to participants involved in the photo elicitation interviews and to others I spoke with throughout the broader fieldwork. Informed consent was a continuous, reflexive process throughout, and in cases where written consent wasn't feasible, I maintained verbal check-ins throughout our engagement and the research intentions.

Multimodal Output

As mentioned before, this thesis unfolds through a multimodal approach that synthesises a written methodological article with an interactive audiovisual ethnographic work in the form of an interactive book.

The interactive book consists of a printed publication accompanied by a digital, interactive PDF. The digital format features audio materials embedded within the text, offering the viewer a non-linear navigation of

participant stories. This structure disrupts fixed chronological narrative order, affirming Pink's suggestion that "sequential order should not be the dominant narrative" and that restructured versions of a visual ethnography may be "equally ethnographically rich" (Pink 2011: 17). This aligns with Marcus's call, as cited by Pink (2011), for a "non-hierarchical text" that treats images and words as holding "equal, although different, authority" (Pink 2011: 15).

The structure of the digital output resonates with visual anthropologist De Musso's (2021) understanding of interactivity in ethnographic practice, specifically through its use of "multilinear narratives," which "allow the ethnographer to show how ethnographic knowledge is made... not by ordering media in a singular account" (De Musso 2021: 148). This non-linearity decentralises authorship and allows meaning to emerge through the viewer's engagement with the material, through linking, clicking, and sequencing. This externalises "mental processes of reflection, problem solving, recall and association" (De Musso 2021: 146).

The curatorial and design choices of the interactive PDF mirror the photo elicitation sessions themselves. For example, on page 57, the photo layout reflects a participant's stream-of-consciousness associations. From page 18 to page 21, the editing of the photo follows a participant's way of guiding me from visual detail to full-frame interpretation. Others preferred to move across multiple images at once instead of discussing them individually. By reframing the interface as a site where ethnographic expression and interpretation occur simultaneously, the interactive book aims to engage with the understanding that "anthropological insight and ethnographic images are the result of a constant mutual interaction between the ethnographer and the research participants" (De Musso 2021: 144-150). This is also evident from the design choices made, such as using different coloured pages for the participants and myself as ethnographer.

Traces and Impressions

Inspired by interactive projects like Feral Atlas (Tsing et al. 2021) and Bear 71 (National Film Board of Canada n.d.), which present research in user-directed, dynamic formats, this output adopts a similar interactive structure to engage readers. Feral Atlas (Tsing et al. 2021) assembles ethnographic and scientific insights into an expansive digital field, where users navigate "field reports" through a digital interface. It insists on the situatedness of knowledge, inviting users to build connections across material entanglements and disciplinary boundaries. Bear 71 (National Film Board of Canada n.d.), on the other hand, uses interactive documentary storytelling to trace the movements of a tagged grizzly bear in the Canadian Rockies. The viewer becomes both observer and participant, raising questions about ethics, control and how visibility is managed. This format mirrors the ethos of my ethnography, centring participant control and resisting linear narratives, while enabling audiences to engage with the themes of self-stigma and visibility in a way that is both reflexive and personal.

In addition, interactive ethnographic project The Long Day of Young Peng (Pia 2019), is a point of inspiration for the output of my thesis. The Long Day of Young Peng (Pia 2019) adopts a user-directed, nonlinear structure to foreground reflexive engagement and participant agency. In anthropologist Pia's (2019) nonlinear interactive narrative, players navigate one day in the life of Peng, a young Chinese migrant, making choices that shape their experience. The work presents original ethnographic material, including field

notes, photographs, interview excerpts, and video (Pia 2019). In a similar vein, this thesis envisions an interactive PDF that invites audiences to engage with audio clips from photo elicitation interviews, participant-generated photographs, drawings and short texts extracted from ethnographic field notes. Rather than presenting findings as fixed or linear, users navigate fragments of participant narratives, echoing the "multiple-choice mechanism" Pia employs to mirror lived choice and contingency (Pia 2019). In all examples the ethnographic data presented are not a definitive account, but a participatory space in which knowledge emerges through navigation and interpretation by the user.

Focusing the Lens: Relationality

Ethnographic Vignette - Memory in Focus

“Is there one you’re curious about?” Tika asked, spreading the photos out across the wooden table between us.

We were sitting in my living room, the afternoon light filtering in through half-closed blinds, casting soft, slanted shadows across the floor. A pot of herbal tea steamed quietly between us, its scent mingling with the faint sweetness of a vanilla-scented IKEA candle that lingered in the room. I scanned the photos she had laid out. Some were softly out of focus, most taken from a slight angle, as if she had been deliberately casual in their framing. Then one caught my eye: a close-up of the inside of a coin pusher machine. Plastic tokens and small silver coins on the edge of a moving platform, glinting under harsh fluorescent light. The machine’s transparent casing and mirrored interior warped the arcade surroundings into a swirl of bright reflections, turning something mechanical into something strangely intimate.

“This one,” I said, pointing. “What’s the story here?”

She grinned. “Do you know what it is?”

I squinted at the image. “Isn’t that one of those machines in an arcade? You drop coins in and try to knock the others off the edge?”

Her face lit up. “Yes! I love that you recognise it.”

I smiled. I’d never played one, but I’d seen them often in long, hypnotic livestreams on TikTok, where people bet in real time and send digital tokens just to watch coins fall in satisfying stacks. I always thought it was absurd, yet weirdly captivating. In hindsight, it was funny she’d asked if I recognised it. Maybe she assumed I wouldn’t. Maybe it was a generational thing.

“It’s just my guilty pleasure,” she said, with a little laugh, half-sheepish, half-proud. There was something disarming in her honesty. I had expected the photo to hint at something related to her work, maybe an analogy about spending or control. But her answer swerved elsewhere.

“Why guilty?” I asked.

“Because it’s pointless. I just lose money every time,” she shrugged. “But it’s fun.”

“But where did it start? Is it just about the game, or…” I let my voice trail off, waiting for her to interrupt my assumption.

“It’s because of my dad,” she said, her tone softening. “He always used to say, ‘You’ll never get a dubbeltje.’” She paused. “I think he meant it literally, like I’d never earn anything. But also… that I wouldn’t amount to much, you know?”

She traced the edge of the photo with one finger. “Now I’ve got my own dubbeltjes. And I can blow them all in a machine if I feel like it.”

There was a joking ease in her voice, a lightness that felt half-playful, half-defensive, like humour used to soften the edges of something sharper. What had seemed like a casual snapshot turned out to be a small archive: of childhood memory, resistance, indulgence, and autonomy reclaimed.

“It’s also about the game,” she added. “The timing. I like that part too.”

“Strategic thinking?” I asked.

“Exactly!” she said, brightening. “It’s weirdly meditative. Like… calculated chaos. That feeling of hitting it just right.”

We sat in silence for a few beats as she flipped through the rest of the stack. Then I gestured back at the photo. “You know, seeing it next to this one,” I pointed to a close-up of puzzle pieces “you’ve taken a few pictures of collections.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Same with these two,” she said, lifting a small cluster of prints: a photo of bottle caps sorted into plastic bags in the back seat of her car, and another of feathered shuttlecocks gathered into bins after badminton practice. “I always collect them. The feathers I give to artists I know, they’d just be thrown away otherwise.”

“They’re all little collections,” I said.

“I think I just like that… collecting things. Not in a hoarder way,” she laughed. “More like… gathering.”

“Gathering what?”

“Memories. Meaning, maybe.”

The hum of the recorder filled the pause that followed. Outside, the muffled sound of traffic drifted through the window. A cloud passed, and a sudden shaft of light illuminated the photo spread on the table like a soft spotlight. I realised then how she had taken the lead in our session, not just in telling her story, but in structuring it, curating it through fragments. Arranging the photos not randomly, but with a kind of quiet intentionality, as if she were offering me chapters to read in an autobiography made of images. What began

as a conversation about a guilty pleasure opened a door into her family history. One she hadn't shared before. And from there, the conversation shifted to a shared reflection unfolding in real time.

The photograph of the coin pusher machine appeared to me almost incidental at first. The longer we talked, the more it came into focus as something layered. Spread out on the table between us, it became part of a visual language through which we communicated not only through memory, but a sense of relational meaning. This vignette captures one of the many conversations I had with Tika, a sexual service provider for people living with disabilities, who agreed early on to contribute to my research. The photographs, laid out in the way Tika arranged them in front of me during this session, are visible on page 60 of the interactive book that accompanies this written thesis. What began as a reflection on a hobby unfolded into a memory about her father, her sense of worth, and the quiet defiance of choosing how to spend her own money. This process of uncovering meaning, as relational and image-led, anchors the concerns of this chapter.

Framing Trust

In my research, relationality was not a static condition but a dialogical process that unfolded through the shared act of engaging with images. Rather than simply responding to a researcher's questions, participants used their photographs to introduce, withhold, and redirect meaning on their own terms. This aligns closely with Harper's description of photo elicitation, arguing that photographs elicit deeper forms of engagement by tapping into memory and embodied experience in ways that verbal interviews alone often cannot (Harper 2002: 23). What Harper (2002) describes as a method that "connects 'core definitions of the self' to society, culture and history" (Harper 2002: 14) unfolded in real time as Tika traced her own narrative through the images she had arranged, curated, and led me through a story of economic control, familial judgment, and autonomy.

Crucially, this interaction reflects Harper's belief that "when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs, they try to figure out something together" (Harper 2002: 23). This moment with Tika is built on the trust and familiarity that had formed over the course of our fieldwork relationship: slowly, through informal check-ins, phone calls, shared presence, WhatsApp messages and accompanying Tika on several go-alongs during her work days. Until this point, Tika had not spoken much about her family. That this memory surfaced now, through a photo she had selected, highlights what Harper (2002) describes as the photograph's capacity to "retrieve something that has disappeared," leading to "deep and interesting talk" (Harper 2002: 23). The memory did not come from a direct question, but through a visual association activated by her own storytelling, on her own terms. It shifted the dynamic of the session and the research more broadly. Not toward detachment, but toward a mutual process of reflection. In this sense, photo elicitation not only reshaped the structure of the conversation but reconfigured what could be shared within it, and when.

Where Images Take Us

In my research, relationality was not a static condition but a dialogical process that unfolded through the shared act of engaging with images. Harper (2002) writes extensively about photo elicitation as a method that taps into a different mode of human consciousness. While his work highlights this evocative potential, my context diverged. The memories that surfaced during photo elicitation were often emotionally complex and frequently painful, surrounding experiences of stigma and violence. These were not simply recollections of the past, but memories refracted through layers of self-doubt, shame, and the social marginalisation associated with sex work. This emotional depth was not inherently positive; it also revealed unresolved trauma, sites of fear, and vulnerability.

One participant, for example, brought up a traumatic incident after we had discussed a seemingly unrelated photograph of a costume. At first, the conversation centred around performance, pride and drag. But this train of thought led him to talk about the risks of expressing oneself out in the open, especially when working behind a window in the red light district. From there, he recalled being held at gunpoint by someone who had tracked his location through his work. As Harper explains, “photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness” (Harper 2002: 21). This memory had not been evoked by a literal image of the incident, but by an associative path opened through the photo of the costume.

As we continued, the participant explained that he had never reported the incident to the police. When I asked why, he said he knew he wouldn’t be taken seriously. This was not just a practical assumption, but a deep internalised belief: “as a sex worker, I don’t deserve to be taken seriously.” Here, relationality moved beyond interpretation and into reflection. Together, we examined not only what had happened, but how he had come to frame his own worth in relation to institutional power. The photo became the entry point into this reflection, and the relational structure of the interview allowed it to be processed together out loud.

Importantly, the image opened a space not only for disclosure but for self-re-evaluation. As Harper (2002) notes, “as someone considers this new framing of taken-for-granted experiences they are able to deconstruct their own phenomenological assumptions” (Harper 2002: 21). In this case, the participant began to confront the logic that kept him silent, that internalised stigma which whispered that some forms of violence don’t count if they happen to a sex worker. The relational structure of the photo elicitation interviews made space for nuance. The photograph did not ‘solve’ this belief, but it allowed us to sit with it, unpack it, and name it. Photo elicitation allowed for the articulation of contradiction: autonomy and risk, pride and shame, expression and repression. These were not simply narratives of victimhood or empowerment, but layered, non-linear expressions of lived experience.

The Weight of Witnessing

While the photo elicitation process often opened up ethnographic rich, meaningful dialogue, I am also aware of its ethical and emotional weight. The method proved a capacity to evoke deeply personal and sometimes painful memories, as I experienced throughout my interviews. Some of these memories involved isolation, violence or the internalised weight of stigma. As a researcher, facilitating this process meant holding space

for vulnerability while being mindful of the uneven power dynamics at play. As Burris et al. (2023) caution, “changes in confidence, empowerment, solidarity, and awakening consciousness among participants... can be measured... but not all moments in need of social change are so readily primed” (Burris et al. 2023: 1130). In other words, while photo elicitation can create space for reflection and even transformation, it does not have to guarantee safety, healing or systemic change.

There were moments in the interviews where participants reached painful realisations about their relationship to work, institutions, or their self-worth without a clear sense of what to do next. In these moments, I was reminded that the participant led methods also demand ethical care. At times, this meant allowing myself to step outside the role of the ethnographer. In these moments, I was not only the ethnographer looking with an analytical eye, but also a person sitting across from another person. In some moments, participants did not need to hear my ethnographic interpretations, they simply needed someone to bear witness. Listening, without analysis, became a form of care. These instances underscored for me the ethical responsibility embedded in empirical research.

The photo elicitation method provided a process through which participants could encounter and work through their own experiences in real time. Through relational dialogue, memories emerged not just as content, but as active sites of emotional negotiation, and spaces where self-stigma was questioned, articulated and sometimes reframed. During the photo elicitation interviews, participants often moved between past and present, from aesthetic choices in photographs to reflections on institutional violence, pride and shame. This fluid movement showed that self-stigmatisation is not a fixed state, but an experience shaped by a dynamic social context, memory, and ongoing relational meaning-making.

Adjusting the Exposure: Photovoice

Ethnographic Vignette - the Whorearchy

“How nice to run into you again! It’s nice to see a familiar face,” Nadine beamed, her voice soft but clear with delight.

We were standing in the central library in The Hague, on one of those gloomy February afternoons. I had been shadowing my interlocutor Tika that day. She was being interviewed for the Den Haag Vertelt project, which represents stories from “*Haagse Helden*” (The Hague Heroes). Nadine had stopped by unannounced, just to say hi to Tika. The two of them knew each other through shared circles of work. I had met Nadine briefly before, during a destigmatisation workshop she co-facilitated. We didn’t speak much then, but she later told me my bold frames are easy to recognise.

“Small world,” I smiled.

We wandered upstairs and found an open table near the windows on the second floor. The library was livelier than usual that day because of the Den Haag Vertelt event. People moved between the floors with purpose, lingering by displays, chatting in corners. The escalators buzzed steadily in the background, and children’s voices echoed playfully from somewhere deeper in the building. I explained that I had been following Tika as part of my visual ethnographic research. Talking about how I am interested in how sex workers reflect on self-stigma, especially through interview methods like photo elicitation, Nadine leaned in, intrigued.

“But you’ve heard about the ‘Hoerarchie,’ right?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. An older couple shuffled past our table as they browsed the bookshelf behind her.

“Vaguely,” I admitted. “You might have mentioned it in the workshop. Remind me?”

She raised her hand in the air and drew an invisible triangle, her fingers hovering as if tracing a mental map.

“It’s this thing we talk about. A kind of unspoken ranking among sex workers,” she said. “At the top you’ve got the high-class escorts.” She moved her finger down the side of the triangle. “Then, somewhere in the middle, maybe online work. And at the bottom window sex work, street work. The stuff people judge.”

I opened my mouth to ask something, but she cut me off before I could.

“High-class escorts,” she said, then gave a short scoff. “It’s funny actually, because there’s nothing high class about it. In the end, it’s the same sex as the window sex worker. Just packaged differently.” Her tone was dry, almost amused, but there was a sharpness behind it. A critique not only of the hierarchy itself, but of the illusions it rests on. The triangle she’d drawn in the air wasn’t just an internal ranking; it was a façade, one that sustained distinctions without real difference.

“Where does that put you in the triangle then?” I asked gently. Her eyes dropped for a moment.

As soon as the question left my mouth, I wondered whether I had overstepped. Even though her tone had been open and engaged, and I knew she spoke publicly about her work, there’s always a fine line between curiosity and intrusion. I didn’t sense any resistance from her, if anything, she seemed eager to explain, but I still found myself momentarily uncertain. How do you ask about someone’s place in a hierarchy that is, at its core, about exclusion?

“Oh,” she laughed, quickly. “The sex work I do is bad enough as it is. I’m fat, and most of my clients have a fat fetish. So I don’t think I even make it onto the triangle.”

We both paused. Her eyes flickered back up to mine, and she flashed me a warm smile.

“I think it just creates a lot of competition amongst us,” she said more softly this time, gesturing with both hands as if smoothing out the space between us.

In that moment, something about the “Hoerarchie” became tangible. Not just a concept, but a lived, felt structure. I could see it mapped in her gestures, in the shift in her voice, in the self-conscious shrug that followed. The triangle became a weight that shaped how sex workers positioned themselves and each other within a system already marked by external stigma.

“Do you see each other as colleagues?” I asked.

Nadine hesitated, her gaze shifting briefly to the window behind me. The harsh fluorescent lights overhead cast a glare across her forehead, exaggerating the tension in her expression.

“It’s complicated,” she said. “We do and we don’t. You work for yourself at the end of the day.”

We sipped the lukewarm coffee as the sounds of the library shifted around us. Nadine leaned back, repositioning her weight in the stiff plastic library chair, its legs scraping slightly against the linoleum floor. I remember how Nadine’s hand moved in the air when she drew the triangle. Her index finger paused at each invisible tier, assigning value through gesture alone. We exchanged WhatsApp before we left. I invited her to sit down for a proper interview sometime soon, explaining that I wanted to give her the space to speak in a setting away from the crowd and noise of the library. She seemed grateful, nodding as she agreed.

In this vignette, the name “Nadine” is a pseudonym, used to protect the participant’s identity and ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical research practices. Nadine, an online sex worker, reflects on the hierarchical structures within sex work, structures that appear to mirror and refract broader social stigmas. It

marks a subtle shift in how narratives around stigma, sex work, and hierarchy are negotiated and shared. Her gestures, tone, and pauses are part of how the “whorearchy" is communicated, not only as a social structure, but as an embodied and lived experience. The drawing Nadine made with her finger was later revisited and visually rendered in collaboration with her for the audiovisual output of this thesis, as can be seen on page 13 of the interactive book.

In this moment, Nadine is not responding to a fixed research prompt, nor is she explaining a concept in abstract terms. This moment aligns to a certain extent with the practice of photovoice, a participatory method first developed by Wang (1999), which allows people to “identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang 1999: 185). What unfolds in the vignette, even in the absence of a photograph, reflects a similar principle. Nadine captures a moment mid-air, tracing meaning initially through gesture rather than image, but exercised the same authorial intent and narrative control when revisited later together. What Nadine offers is not just a commentary on the hierarchy, it is a visual and verbal mapping of how self-stigma operates relationally and socially, inside and outside the bounds of formal research settings.

The exercise of photo elicitation did more than generate images; it shaped the interviews themselves. As participants had already spent time producing the photographs, like deciding what, why and when to shoot, they naturally began the conversations with stories already attached to those images. As Wang and Burris (1997) write, photovoice “is intended to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues” (Wang & Burris 1997: 370). In this case, it promoted intimate one-on-one dialogue where participants not only explained their visual choices, but also reflected on what might be beyond the frame, or what they felt while capturing the image.

Meaning-Making Through the Lens

One way the photovoice revealed itself was through patterns that only gained meaning in dialogue. For instance, Tika often photographed nature and trees while travelling for work. The collection of these photographs on page 56 of the accompanying interactive book, spread out in the same arrangement as they were laid before me on the table during our conversation. What initially seemed like a recurring visual motif became clearer through her narration. It was not necessarily about the trees themselves, but the light filtering through them. It was the atmosphere, not the object, that she sought to capture, as it revealed the way she finds calm within the disjointed logistics of her work travel. These moments illustrate how “participants can reflect on their personal and community strengths and concerns” when using their own photographs (Wang & Burris 1997: 369). In Tika’s case, her collection of images became an archive of what grounded her in her work: a way of seeing, as much as a subject to be seen. While these photographs did not explicitly address self-stigma, they revealed how Tika makes space for calm and continuity within the routines of her work. Rather than confronting self-stigma, the images offered insight into what sustains her.

This reflexive process extended into the ways participants thought about and performed representation. As Wang (1999) argues, photovoice allows participants “to control the photographic process in order to express,

reflect and communicate their everyday lives" (Wang 1999: 186). In doing so, participants became active co-creators of the research. The provision of point-and-shoot film cameras allowed participants to structure their visual stories over time. This autonomy did not end with the developed roll of film. Many participants continued to send additional images via email or WhatsApp, showing themselves in diverse contexts: digital correspondence with clients, everyday domesticity, or media recommendations. In doing so, they expanded the field of representation beyond the frame of the camera. Their inclusion of informational, relational and transactional imagery reflected an awareness of their own multiplicity and a desire to shape how I, as an ethnographer, understood their world.

Emergent Narratives

This expansion of representational space was not just a matter of method, as it also opened up space for unexpected narratives. The relational nature of photo elicitation facilitated instances where participants began to reflect on emotions and motivations they had not articulated before. As the structure of the photo elicitation interviews were led by them, moments of vulnerability often unfolded organically. This happened frequently in the interviews, not in therapeutic terms, but in quiet moments of recognition.

One participant, a retired stripper, reflected on a photograph related to her performance costumes and began talking about the creative expression she experienced while working. She recalled choosing her sex work persona, "the girl next door," for the first time as her work uniform. However, as our conversation unfolded, she told me about her time working in Ibiza, reflecting on high earnings and the intense pace, which she later described as resembling factory-style labour. She was recognising that when the work became solely about financial gain, she began to lose her sense of fulfilment and connection to the creative aspects that initially drew her to the profession. In that moment, she paused and acknowledged that this reflection was emerging for the first time within the interview itself, which can be heard on page 28 of the interactive book.
This moment of self-recognition captures the function of photovoice as a tool for "critical consciousness," where people shift "from learners to emerging leaders and social actors" (Wang & Burris 1997: 185). She confronted a layered motivation: initial joy in performance and creative sexual expression, which was later overshadowed by financial necessity. During the photo elicitation, she recognised how these changes shaped her relationship to sex work and self. As Strack et al. note, photovoice "uses deductive (observed) rather than inductive (hypothesis-driven/theoretical) construction of knowledge" (Strack et al. 2022: 222). In practice, this meant allowing the images and the participants to guide the direction of inquiry, rather than imposing analytical categories or observations as a researcher too early. The narratives that emerged were often non-linear, associative, and emotionally textured.

Developing Images: Visual Reflexivity

Ethnographic Vignette - Off the Record

“Thank you so much, that included the interview,” I said, reaching across the small desk to stop the recorder.

“I’ve stopped the recording now,” I confirmed to Maryo. The red light blinked off. She nodded slightly, the big gold ring on her index finger catching the overhead light as she reached for her glass of water.

Maryo is a social service provider at SHOP Den Haag, but also as “ervaringsdeskundige” ; someone with lived experience. She had once “danced in clubs,” a phrase she preferred over “stripping,” though she acknowledged she was part of the broader umbrella of sex work. She accepted the term, she told me during our photo elicitation. Her language held care, a kind of choosing of how to be known, of what to name. We were sitting near the reception, in the middle of a mid-day lull. She had taken over phone duties while the secretariat was away, so we conducted the interview between occasional rings and greetings. SHOP felt lived-in: the organised clutter of papers, the comforting smell of coffee lingering in the air, and the gentle flow of comings and goings.

“Really, that was it?” she asked as I began packing up. “Did you get what you needed?” Her long bangs shifted as she tilted her head toward me. Her look that day was bold, as always. Bold, chunky jewellery clinked gently as she moved, her yellow kitten heels perfectly matching her bright yellow shorts and blazer. She said she dressed for the sun today, its first full appearance in weeks, and it showed. Her presence lit up the room like the morning light.

I nodded. “Yes, more than enough.”

“Well, if you say so,” she smiled. “I hope you can take something out of it. Happy to be part of it.”

I refilled her water glass and then mine. The photo elicitation itself had felt fluid and open, almost conversational. It was only at the moment I reached over to stop the recording that something subtly shifted. A small, familiar pause that always came at the end of a recorded conversation. It’s when the recording starts that an invisible line is drawn between participant and researcher, between shared reflection and structured inquiry. I’m the one in charge of pressing record, of deciding what gets documented. But once it’s off, that line softens again. We’re just two colleagues, two people talking. That shift quiet but distinct had become more familiar to me. Not tense, but charged with the weight of roles temporarily suspended. However, our conversation didn’t end when the recorder did. I leaned back into the hard chair.

“Your input has really helped me shape my research, and I’m grateful for it.” I paused, gesturing loosely. “Have you ever done something like this before?”

“No, never,” she replied quickly. “This was really a one-of-a-kind experience.”

“How was it for you?” I asked, curious about her view. Not just of the content, but the format.

“Very interesting. And fun, actually.”

She paused. “Usually when people interview me, especially when I give tours through the Red Light District, they always ask the same thing: ‘Have you ever had a bad experience with a client?’ or ‘What’s the worst thing that happened to you?’” She mimicked the voices with a half-smile, but her eyes stayed serious.

“I’m glad you didn’t ask those questions,” she said. “I’ve heard them so often. We talked about a lot of different things instead.”

I was struck by how relieved she seemed. It reminded me again of how methods are not neutral. The kinds of questions we ask, how we frame experience, make something possible, and they can also close things down. That day I had used photo elicitation: she had taken the pictures herself earlier in the month, and I brought the freshly developed set with me in a paper envelope. Like with my other participants, I didn’t look at the photos beforehand. I wanted to meet them with the same surprise and curiosity they had. It also gave the participant control; what to show, what to speak about, how to make meaning of it.

The shift from camera to audio had been a late-stage decision. Initially, I had planned to film these sessions, but the camera began to feel like it took up too much space. Its presence somehow louder than I wanted it to be. There wasn’t a lens to reflect you when you stared into it too long. The field recorder lays on the table, lower than a camera would be positioned, feeling less intrusive and commanding perhaps. A camera would typically be placed at eye level or from above, framing the movements, dictating the space. In contrast, the field recorder almost felt like an animal bowing down or curling up in a corner of the room, humble and unassuming. Without the lens, people didn’t talk to it, they talked to me. The absence of the camera allowed the conversation to breathe, and the frame no longer shaped the narrative before it could even unfold. With just the audio, something opened up, a subtle shift that created room for a different kind of intimacy and trust.

But even without the camera, there remained a sense that the moment was being solidified, captured. Whether it’s a camera or a field recorder, when something is recorded, it’s preserved. Frozen, in a sense. That’s always a tiny bit uneasy, for everyone involved, no matter the circumstances. It's a feeling that lingers, something that you just have to get used to. But by switching from the camera to the field recorder, I felt I could exercise a degree of control over that discomfort, making it less about the gaze of the lens and more about the words shared between us. It felt like a conscious choice to ease that tension, allowing for a more fluid, natural exchange, where the participant was less concerned about how they were being framed and more about what they were saying.

I mentioned this change to Maryo, explaining how the camera had felt like an extra layer of distance, and how I hoped the audio recorder might feel less imposing.

She nodded, impressed. “It’s really special you have a “voelspriet” like that.”

I smiled. Voelspriet; like the antennae of an insect, or a sensor for feeling out the atmosphere. It was a word I hadn’t thought about much before, but it stuck with me. It felt like a small gift. We continued talking casually for a few more moments, the conversation flowing easily, until a phone on the reception desk interrupted us with a sharp ring. We both chuckled. As she reached over to answer the call, I began to shuffle the photos back into the envelope.

“Yes, I’ll make sure she rings you back… No worries, thank you for calling, ok, bye bye.” She hung up, placing the phone back in its cradle with a soft click.

As I stood up to leave, I slid the envelope across the table toward her.

“These are for you,” I said.

“Really?” she looked surprised.

“Yes, of course. They’re your photos.”

This vignette captures a closing scene of my photo elicitation session with Maryo, a social service provider at SHOP Den Haag and an “ervaringsdeskundige”: someone with lived experience. Maryo is a retired stripper, and she comfortably locates herself under the umbrella term of sex work. This chapter explores how moments like this opened up a space for visual reflexivity and co-authorship. Maryo’s question “Did you get what you needed?” was not just about the interview’s content, but about her role in the process. Her awareness of being both a contributor and a subject reflected a shift in authorship that the method made possible. When she later remarked that she was glad I had not asked the usual questions about “bad experiences,” she was not only affirming the tone of our conversation but recognising the agency she had exercised within it.

This vignette underscores the way photo elicitation invites participants not only to reflect but to re-situate themselves, both within their own lives and in relation to me. This encounter resonates with Pink’s (2011) observation that "it is not solely the subjectivity of the researcher that may shade his or her understanding of reality, but the relationship between the subjectivities of researcher and informants that produces a negotiated version of reality" (Pink 2011: 5). In this moment with Maryo, that negotiation was quiet but present: in her awareness of how she had been framed before, in the questions she asked me, and in her appreciation for not being forced to retell her pain. The co-authorship here was not just about controlling the content of what was shared, but about shaping the conditions under which sharing could happen.

Self-Narration

One of the most consistent findings throughout my fieldwork was how participants used the photographic process to explore themselves beyond the immediate framing of sex work. For example, one participant's contribution to the photo elicitation contains no images related to his time in sex work. Instead, CJ, an ex sex worker, shared photographs of his creative process designing carnival costumes, an artistic practice he takes deep pride in. During the photo elicitation session, this focus on costume design became an unexpected bridge. We moved from talking about the confidence required to 'just stand there' in carnival ensemble, to his reflections on having done window sex work, and how that, too, required a similar kind of courage. This moment is documented in the audio fragment on page 87 titled *"Ik durf er te staan"* of the interactive book. This kind of self-narration through images resonates with Pink's (2011) understanding of visual reflexivity, where photographs are not neutral or self-evident, but layered visual spaces in which "a number of different meanings may be invested" (Pink 2011: 10). In this setting, the photograph served less as a static representation of CJ's life and more as a prompt that anchored a subjective process of interpretation that unfolded between us.

Fragments and Frames

Participant reflections during the photo elicitation sessions often revealed how visuals can become tools for self-definition, allowing individuals to navigate and negotiate multiple aspects of self-stigma. Tika, for instance, shared during our photo elicitation session that she often makes it a point to mention her job as a social worker when being formally interviewed. The audio recording titled "*Als seks zorg wordt, maar geen work mag zijn*" of this moment is included on page 68 of the interactive book. During our conversation, she recognised that by doing so, she was actively asserting that sex work did not negate the other parts of her identity. In narrating her photographs to me, she was also narrating herself to herself. This act of narration, mediated through the photographs, illustrates how visual reflexivity emerged through the participant's own process of meaning-making, not just as a response to my questions, but also as a mode of self-articulation.

At the same time, I became increasingly aware that this kind of reflexivity is not neutral. The image, while open to interpretation, also carries political weight, particularly when silence or fragmentation become part of what is communicated. Media theorist Marks (2000) reminds us that "the recollection-image has the power to falsify history… They are volatile treasures… because if they can be made to speak they can activate the process of memory" (Marks 2000: 51). In this sense, the photographs shared with me were not just expressive but also selective. Some stories were gestured toward but never fully told. These gaps are not failures of disclosure but reflections of what is at stake when participants decide what to share and what to protect. As an ethnographer, I also made choices to withhold certain details, such as omitting geographical locations, in respect to the safety of my participants and ethical concerns. Visual reflexivity in this context meant recognising the photograph not just as a tool of narration, but as a site of negotiation where memory, visibility and power collide.

These insights lead us back to the guiding concern of this chapter: how photo elicitation functions as a site of visual reflexivity. By engaging visually with their own photographs, participants were not simply reflecting

on past experiences, but performing a kind of interpreting and reinterpreting what those images meant in the presence of another. They build alternative narratives, articulate buried tensions, which often surprised themselves in the process. Through image-making and shared reflection, photo elicitation opened space for participants to reclaim authorship over their stories, navigating away from stigmatising scripts and toward more complex accounts of the self in relation to stigma.

Looking Again: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how participant-led photo elicitation can contribute to understanding sex workers' experiences of self-stigmatisation. What emerged most clearly from the fieldwork is that the photo elicitation exercise did not simply produce new "data," but established conditions for something deeper: a safe space of relational, reflective co-authorship. Central to this was the participant led structure of the method.

Time and Trust

The sessions and outcomes were possible because a foundation of mutual trust had already been established throughout my broader ethnographic engagement. My positionality, as someone informed about sex work and being connected to SHOP, further supported a sense of trust. These sessions demanded a commitment from participants: to shoot a roll of film, to record, to be recorded, to reflect, and to meet again. That time frame participant led photo elicitation introduced, created the space for trust to grow and commitment to be established. The visual component added another layer, as it gave participants room to approach their experiences in non-linear, relational, reflexive ways other own terms. By foregrounding participant-led image-making, this research aims to position the method itself as a site of ethical and epistemological importance: when researching a stigmatised profession, the methodological choices should be critically examined as a possible conduit of stigma.

Stigma operates on many levels and is fluid. It cannot be fully avoided, but it can be confronted. In this research, I did not presume to eliminate stigma, but I worked to prevent reproducing it through my design and make room for complexity. That meant making personal and positional efforts to be as de-stigmatising as possible, from the language I used, to the relationships I built, to the format of the interviews.

Future Implications

This thesis also has broader implications for research on self-stigma, especially in communities where visibility can be both risky and empowering. It suggests that methodological design must be as ethically considered as the questions being asked. In this way, the research aims to echo what Nencel (2017) called the "epistemological privileging of sex workers" in recognising them as experts of their own lives, and centring that expertise in how knowledge is created (Nencel 2017: 94)

In conclusion, this thesis argues that ethical responsibility in research with stigmatised communities should not be limited to consent forms or anonymity. It should extend into the methodology themselves. The hope is not to speak for sex workers, but to hold space for them to speak with, and sometimes to themselves, in ways that reflect the texture, weight and variation of their own lived realities.

Ultimately, I was not just researching self-stigma, I was asking how stigma could be talked about at all. In doing so, it showed that methods are not just tools, they are conditions through which certain kinds of lived experiences become visible and shareable, or not.

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