© *Academy of Management Journal*
2026, Vol. 00, No. 00, 1–35.
https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2023.1415

CONSTRUCTING AGENCY UNDER PERSISTENT PRECARITY: SHAME, ANGER, AND COMPASSION IN THE SELF-NARRATIVES OF THAI SEX WORKERS

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How do individuals construct a sense of agency under persistent precarity? By studying a group of Thai sex workers whose lives are marked by poverty and stigma, we examine how individuals in persistent precarity construct different forms of agency, or agentic orientations, through self-narratives. We identify three narrative profiles with distinct agentic orientations: passive fantasizers, who convey shame and little agency; empowered victims, who channel anger into self-oriented agency; and compassionate carers, who exude acceptance and empathy and construct other-oriented agency. These agentic orientations are rooted in how individuals recount and connect their early life and current work experiences through recurrent emotional themes—shame, anger, or compassion—shaped by early encounters with influential institutions such as family (parents), community (Isaan), and religion (Buddhism). Building on these findings, we theorize a process we call cross-temporal emotional threading, through which individuals draw on core emotional threads to link their precarious experiences across time, enabling coherence in their self-narratives and shaping the construction of different agentic orientations. We further show that these agentic orientations manifest in distinct work behaviors and income levels. This study advances theoretical understanding of agency construction and contributes to research on persistent precarity, self-narratives, and the meaning of work.

Precarity is broadly defined as a working and living condition characterized by insecurity and instability (Allan, Autin & Wilkins-Yel, 2021; Tsing, 2015). In recent years, management scholars have paid increasing attention to this concept, largely in response to the weakening of traditional organization-based protections accompanying the rise of the gig economy (Ashford, Caza & Reid, 2018; Cropanzano, Keplinger, Lambert, Caza & Ashford, 2023). They have raised important questions about how individuals who are accustomed to stable employment associated with formal organizational membership adapt to a more precarious working life (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019). However, for many, especially those at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid, precarity has been a defining, persistent condition. As the structural drivers of precarity continue and expand, more individuals are likely to find themselves not simply adjusting to temporary instability, but living with sustained, long-term precarity. This calls for deeper investigation into how people navigate not episodic but persistent precarity.

Social scientists beyond management scholars have long studied how individuals cope with persistent precarity. A review of research on this topic across disciplines suggests two primary directions. One highlights how systemic marginalization—shaped by such factors as race and class—produces enduring disadvantages in work and life outcomes (e.g., Kalleberg, 2000, 2009, 2018). The other focuses on how individuals and communities develop

We are deeply grateful to associate editor Ann Langley for her exceptionally thoughtful and developmental guidance throughout the review process. We also thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which substantially strengthened this manuscript. We appreciate the valuable feedback received from seminar participants at Boston College. Finally, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all of our informants for their trust and willingness to share their experiences—this research would not have been possible without them.

Accepted by Ann Langley

strategies to actively manage or attempt to escape persistent precarity (e.g., Pongeluppe, 2024; Weiss, Lounsbury & Bruton, 2024). Although these two streams have developed largely independently, taken together they underscore a common theme of agency. Despite the diverse ways of defining what is perhaps one of the oldest concepts in the social sciences, agency is generally understood as the capacity of individuals to shape the circumstances in which they live (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Lukes, 1973; Mead, 1938). Overall, studies from these two streams—with the former emphasizing a lack of individual agency and the latter showcasing a strong presence of individual agency—imply that a key factor shaping how individuals cope with persistent precarity is their sense of agency. However, they have offered limited insights into how some individuals come to possess a sense of agency under persistent precarity while others do not.

Meanwhile, a growing body of research has studied individuals' self-narratives in challenging conditions, including those characterized by persistent precarity, suggesting that self-narratives can serve as a critical venue for people to express and construct a sense of agency (e.g., Anicich, 2022; Griesbach, 2025). Studies from sociology indicate that variation in the degree of agency reflected in self-narratives stems from differences in structural factors and the cultural discourses available to them (e.g., Lamont, 2009, 2019; Sharone, 2014, 2024). For instance, Sharone's (2014) comparative study of U.S. and Israeli jobseekers found that different features of the labor-market institutions were associated with the distinctions in these jobseekers' narratives—with U.S. white-collar job seekers blaming themselves, whereas their Israeli counterpart blamed the system. Other research, however, suggests that a sense of agency can itself be constructed through individuals' own interpretations or storytelling (e.g., Maitlis, 2009; Shepherd, Maitlis, Parida, Wincent & Lawrence, 2022). Even under similar structurally challenging conditions, individuals can construct markedly different self-narratives that convey varying forms of agency (e.g., Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2023; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). These findings point to the need for a better understanding of the process through which individuals construct varied senses of agency in their self-narratives under persistent precarity.

Research on narratives in identity work offers useful insights. This line of research suggests that individuals craft distinct narratives by selectively drawing on elements from their narrative repertoires (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), of which an important part includes their memories and interpretations of personal histories (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993). For individuals living in persistent precarity, a particularly salient component of their narrative repertoire may be their recollections and interpretations of earlier experiences of precarity. In other words, how these individuals remember and make sense of their past experiences of precarity may shape how they perceive their current and anticipated future experiences of precarity, thereby informing the construction of different senses of agency in their self-narratives. However, we still know little about how this process unfolds. Therefore, our research asks, how do individuals in positions of persistent precarity draw on past and present experiences to construct different senses of agency through their self-narratives? In addition, how do these different constructions of agency relate to individuals' behaviors and outcomes at work?

We believe these questions warrant attention from management scholars for two primary reasons. First, as the global labor market continues to shift toward contingent and informal arrangements, more workers are experiencing precarity not as a temporary disruption but as a defining and enduring condition of their working lives. Because a sense of agency plays a key role in shaping how individuals navigate such conditions, and self-narratives provide a feasible venue for examining these processes, it is critical to understand how agency is constructed through self-narratives. Second, examining variation in the construction of agency through self-narratives can shed light on why individuals facing similar structural constraints respond in different ways and experience divergent outcomes in work and life (Nurmohamed, Kundro & Myers, 2021; Steiner & Amabile, 2022).

To examine these questions, we studied a group of sex workers in Thailand who grew up in poverty and continue to endure insecurity and instability as adults engaged in prostitution—an activity that is both illegal and stigmatized. This represents a fitting context for our inquiry, as precarity has been a persistent feature of these individuals' lives since birth. Drawing on ethnographic field data collected from 2017 to 2024 in a red-light district in Bangkok, along with a total of 152 in-depth interviews with 85 sex workers and relevant stakeholders, we identified three narrative profiles, which we labeled "passive fantasizers," "empowered victims," and "compassionate carers." Each group constructed a distinct agentic orientation in their self-narratives: passive fantasizers conveyed little or no agency, often relying on idealized fantasies of future change; empowered victims exhibited strong

but self-oriented agency, directed toward asserting control and manipulating others to achieve personal gain; and compassionate carers also showed strong agency, but theirs was other-oriented, directed toward providing care for others. These agentic orientations related to their material outcomes, as empowered victims and compassionate carers earned higher incomes, albeit in different ways, compared to passive fantasizers.

Furthermore, we found that sex workers constructed these divergent agentic orientations by drawing on retrospective narratives of early life experiences and aligning them with narratives of their current and anticipated future work lives. In particular, distinct emotional tones emerged as they narrated these experiences across time, which appeared to be influenced by their recounted experiences with parents, their local community, and religion (i.e., Buddhism). Passive fantasizers expressed shame, blamed themselves for their early life challenges, and mentioned little influence of Buddhism; empowered victims conveyed anger, blamed others, and recounted negative experiences with parents and Buddhism; and compassionate carers exuded calmness, peace, and acceptance, recalling positive experiences of Buddhism. These emotional tones seemed to serve as anchors and threads that shaped how individuals interpreted and connected their experiences of precarity from past to present, fostering the construction of their respective agentic orientations. Building on these findings, we theorize a process we call cross-temporal emotional threading—a process through which individuals anchor on core emotional threads to weave together experiences across time, thereby sustaining coherence and continuity in their self-narratives. For individuals in persistent precarity, cross-temporal emotional threading represents a key process leading to the construction of varying degrees and forms of agency.

AGENCY IN PERSISTENT PRECARITY

Coping With Persistent Precarity

The term "precarity," translated from the French *précarité*, became widely used in the 1980s by social activists and academics as welfare state provision in Europe weakened (Han, 2018). It refers to the condition where one is living a "life without the promise of stability" (Tsing, 2015: 2), often driven by work that fails to provide such stability. Anthropologist Clara Han (2018: 332) describes precarity as "the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning," indicating that socioeconomic conditions can make certain groups especially vulnerable to precarity. Indeed, philosopher Judith Butler (2004, 2012) emphasizes that precarity involves the socioeconomic and political conditions that create an unequal distribution of vulnerability; she distinguishes it from precariousness, which she defines as the common human experience of vulnerability due to our fundamental dependence on others.

Precarity in working life can manifest in three interrelated forms (Allan et al., 2021). First, individuals may feel insecure about the continuity of their employment, which is common among those with temporary or unstable contracts (Henson, 1996). Second, workers may feel uncertain about their safety and security at work, especially when work exposes them to risks of injury, harassment, or abuse, such as in hazardous or stigmatized occupations (Choudhry & Fang, 2008; Jermier, Gaines & McIntosh, 1989). Third, even those with stable employment may feel insecure and constantly fear they cannot meet their own or their loved ones' basic needs due to inadequate or erratic wages (Osterman & Shulman, 2011). Allan and colleagues (2021) refer to these three manifestations of precarity as precarity of, at, and from work, respectively. A salient example encompassing all three dimensions is illegal sex work, where workers often lack employment protections, face daily safety threats, and earn irregular income (Weitzer, 2009; Williams, 1999).

Our review of existing scholarship on precarity, especially persistent precarity, suggests two main directions. One stream adopts a structuralist lens, documenting the macro-level drivers and the predominantly negative consequences of precarity (Kalleberg, 2000, 2009, 2018). In particular, certain social groups are historically marginalized and disadvantaged, rendering them stuck in persistent precarity. In the United States, for example, these include Black, Native American, immigrant, and transgender workers (Austin, 2013; Hyman, 2018; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Nadal, Davidoff & Fujii-Doe, 2014). These populations tend to fare worse in objective and subjective workplace outcomes such as income and job satisfaction (Allan, Tay & Sterling, 2017; Chang & Lui, 2010), and suffer from worse physical and mental health (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief & Bradley, 2003; Mai, Jacobs & Schieman, 2019; Sverke, Hellgren & Naswall, 2002). In short, this stream of work highlights the constraints imposed by structural conditions and the physical and psychological toll of a working life in persistent precarity, calling for

structural reforms to address the challenges of systemic inequality.

The other stream focuses on how individuals or communities actively navigate precarity. This line of work adopts a more agentic perspective, documenting adaptive personal and collective strategies utilized to constructively manage, or even escape, persistent precarity (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Pongeluppe, 2024; Weiss et al., 2024). For instance, Ashford and colleagues (2018) propose that to thrive amid precarity, gig workers must develop a set of cognitive and emotional capabilities, as well as attributes such as resilience, proactivity, and relational support systems. Petriglieri and colleagues (2019) emphasize the importance of creating a personal holding environment. Others have examined how people at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid engage in collective organizing to safeguard community members from disastrous outcomes (e.g., Weiss et al., 2024), or seek to be emancipated from a life of hardship through employment or entrepreneurship (e.g., Chatterjee, Shepherd & Wincent, 2022; Pongeluppe, 2024; Rogers, Corley & Ashforth, 2017; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021). These studies underscore the importance of individual and community agency, resilience, and resourcefulness in regaining control and overcoming challenges associated with living under persistent precarity.

Together, these two streams reveal the central role of individual agency: the former emphasizes a lack of individual agency and even a sense of fatalism, focusing solutions on structural reforms rather than individual adaptation, whereas the latter highlights a strong sense of individual agency. Although these studies suggest that the presence or absence of agency is key to shaping how individuals cope with persistent precarity, they offer limited insight into how and why individuals come to experience different degrees of agency. In a related and growing body of work, researchers have examined the subjective interpretations and lived experiences of individuals in precarity (e.g., Griesbach, 2025; Sharone, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2022). Within this research, self-narratives emerge as a critical resource through which people make meaning of their circumstances and construct a sense of agency, or not. We therefore turn to research on self-narratives, with particular attention to their relationship with agency construction.

Constructing Agency through Self-Narratives

Self-narratives are the stories individuals construct to interpret and organize their lived experiences (Atkinson, 1998; Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993). In choosing how to tell their stories, individuals already exercise a form of agency, though they may not always recognize it (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Frankl, [1946] 1985; McAdams, 2001). People's self-narratives can signal different degrees of agency, conveying the extent to which they see themselves as active shapers of their life circumstances as opposed to passive recipients of events. These self-narratives, in turn, can reinforce individuals' sense of agency. In this way, the relationship between self-narratives and agency may be best understood as mutually reinforcing: self-narratives both reflect individuals' sense of agency and serve as resources for constructing it.

Some studies, particularly in sociology, suggest that patterns of agency in self-narratives are rooted in broader sociocultural discourses (Ayala-Hurtado, 2022; Lane, 2011; Pugh, 2015; Sharone, 2014; 2024). For instance, workers in Western societies often internalize responsibility for their precarious conditions, blaming themselves when things go wrong and placing the burden of adaptation squarely on their own shoulders. This reflects the influence of neoliberal discourses that promote self-reliance and personal adaptability in the face of structural instability (Lamont, 2009, 2019). Such a neoliberal cultural narrative is adopted not only by knowledge workers but also by those in marginalized and stigmatized occupations, such as sex workers (Strega, Janzen, Morgan, Brown, Thomas & Carriere, 2014). Specifically, sex workers in developed economies often describe their participation as a matter of personal choice, or at least the best available option under constrained circumstances, emphasizing agentic decision-making and personal responsibility for managing the risks and challenges inherent in their work (Daniel, Lamb & Campbell, 2025; Lucas, 2005; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021; Sanders, 2004, 2005). This body of research suggests that variations in the sense of agency expressed in self-narratives are shaped by individuals' structural conditions. For example, Sharone (2014) found that institutional contexts influence the narratives of U.S. and Israeli job seekers. More recently, Griesbach (2025) examined four occupation groups who experience different types of temporal (stochastic vs. seasonal) and spatial (distant vs. unstable) uncertainties. She found that these occupational features are associated with different "positioning stories" workers produce to justify their engagement in insecure work.

While the levels of agency reflected in self-narratives may be rooted in sociocultural discourses or shaped by structural forces, research beyond sociology has shown that individuals can also actively

develop agency through their self-narratives. In particular, existing research on self-narratives in contexts of precarity emphasizes how, even under the harshest conditions, individuals can leverage self-narratives to develop and sustain a sense of control and find meaning. One notable study, by Shepherd and colleagues (2022), examines how ragpickers in Mumbai, India made meaning of their life and work while being trapped in difficult, dirty conditions, tainted by the nature of the work, the physical work environment, and their social caste (see also Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). It shows that ragpickers combined a sense of helplessness with a positive sense of survival, destiny, and hope—thereby achieving "functional ambivalence" or "the simultaneous experience of opposing orientations toward their work and lives" that enabled "both the acceptance of external forces and a sense of agency" and "facilitated their ability to carry on" (Shepherd et al., 2022: 1681).

Furthermore, research has shown that individuals can exhibit markedly different self-narratives even when facing the same challenging conditions, and not all of these narratives contribute to a sense of agency (e.g., Jiang, Zhao-Ding & Qi, 2025; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). For example, Jiang and colleagues (2025) find that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds express different degrees of agency toward starting their own businesses when presented with such an opportunity. More broadly, research on narrative identity and life stories has documented variation in the agency conveyed in narratives of people who have undergone similar adversity (Adler et al., 2015; Lind, Ture, McAdams & Cowan, 2024; McAdams, 2001). Yet, what remains less understood is how individuals come to construct such divergent senses of agency through their self-narratives while navigating a shared condition of persistent precarity.

Research on narratives in identity work suggests that individuals draw not only on culturally and structurally available discourses but also on their personal histories to craft coherent stories about themselves, connecting who they used to be, who they are now, and who they may become (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McLean & Syed, 2016; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) introduce the concept of narrative repertoires, which consist of not only the culturally shared metaphors and institutional scripts available to individuals, but also their personal anecdotes and storytelling tools (e.g., styles, tactics). The authors argue that individuals select different elements from their narrative repertoires to reconstruct their identities during work role transitions. This perspective has roots stretching back to early personality theorists such as Silvan Tomkins (1987), who proposed that each individual has their personal guiding scripts to organize their life experiences, and that these scripts usually have their origin in early childhood scenes. This line of work thus suggests that individuals in persistent precarity may construct different senses of agency by drawing on their personal histories in distinct ways, particularly in how they recall and interpret their past experiences of precarity. However, we still lack a fine-grained understanding of this process.

Meanwhile, research on narrative identity and sensemaking highlights the potentially critical role of emotions in shaping self-narratives (e.g., Jiang et al., 2025; Maitlis, 2020; Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013; McAdams, 2001; Vough & Caza, 2017). Much of this work considers emotions as targets that individuals must contain or manage—a process that itself requires a sense of agency. It emphasizes the importance of regulating emotions, particularly negative emotions, and treats individuals' ability to do so as an expression or marker of agency (e.g., Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Jiang et al., 2025). In this view, effective emotional regulation both reflects and reinforces a strong sense of agency, whereas difficulty in regulating emotions is associated with diminished or even absent agency. Other research suggests that the emotional valence of past experiences can influence individuals' narrative construction, with negatively valenced events often having a greater and more enduring impact (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne, McLean & Lawrence, 2004). Yet, in this line of work, the primary source of influence is generally the event itself rather than the emotion per se. Thus, it remains unclear whether and how emotions themselves—not merely the ability to regulate them or the events with which they are associated—inform the construction of agency within self-narratives. By examining how individuals in persistent precarity construct agency through their self-narratives, we hope to shed light on the specific role that emotions may play in this process.

METHODS

Research Context

We studied a group of sex workers in Thailand for whom precarity is the norm rather than a new predicament. Two factors established the precarious nature of their lives: *poverty* in early life and *prostitution* in adulthood. First, all sex workers in our study were born into and raised by poor families in the northeastern region of Thailand known as Isaan, which has the

largest population of all regions and where average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is the lowest in the country (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2018). Compared to the Thai mainstream, the residents of Isaan have distinct characteristics in terms of historical background and political stance, which often put them at an economic disadvantage. Historically, Isaan was situated at the heart of territorial wars among the ancient kingdoms of Thailand (Ayutthaya), Laos (Lan Xang), and Cambodia (Khmer Empire), making it a site of constant geopolitical conflict that continues even into the present. The average income of Isaan residents is estimated to be around 15% of those in Bangkok (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2018). Given the significant economic gap, it is common for Isaan people to migrate to Bangkok to find jobs. As natives of Isaan, the sex workers in our study lived in poverty throughout childhood, which for some has continued into adult life. To this day, even though some have escaped poverty through sex work, they still bear the responsibility of sending money home to support family members living in poverty in Isaan.

The second factor underpinning the precarity of their lives is prostitution. The sex industry in Thailand, with "the image of the Thai sex worker as a subservient caretaker and exotic beauty" (Singh & Hart, 2007: 161), is renowned worldwide, attracting hordes of sex tourists from abroad. Sex services are especially prevalent in tourist destinations, leading to the observation that, "Sex is not sold everywhere in Bangkok, but it is available in enough places and enough kinds of places at a low enough price to confirm the First World view that the whole city is an erotic theme park" (Bishop & Robinson, 1998: 7). There are approximately 800,000 to 2 million sex workers across Thailand who provide sex services to random customers in dance clubs, nightclubs, go-go bars, karaoke bars, massage parlors, streets, hotels, public parks, or online settings (Panyasuppakun, 2018). Relevant reports indicate that the sex industry represents a significant part of Thailand's national economy, contributing 10%–12% of GDP (Boonchalaski & Guest, 1998; Panyasuppakun, 2018). The proportion is likely to be higher when considering the indirect economic effects.

Given its prevalence, it is unsurprising that many women from Isaan consider prostitution as a form of work when they move to Bangkok; they typically find work in massage shops owned by fellow migrants from Isaan. As in many Asian countries, sex work in Thailand provides a more lucrative career than other labor-intensive alternatives (Hoang, 2015). Importantly, in Thailand, sex work remains illegal and bears a social stigma (Bishop & Robinson, 1998), putting sex workers at risk of being arrested, fined, or physically and mentally abused by customers, brothel owners, the police, and even other citizens. Although sex work can alleviate the financial insecurity that permeated these women's lives back in Isaan, they continue to endure risks of physical and mental harm that trap them in a life without security and stability (Tsing, 2015). On this, one sex worker lamented, "There are several Isaan sex workers who went missing while doing this work after being tricked by foreign criminal clients. But we still have to do this to make a living."

Data Collection

The first author collected the data used in this study. The entire data collection process spanned from 2017 to 2024. It was divided into four phases reflecting the evolving research focus, as described below. Table 1 summarizes the data collection process and types of data collected in each phase.

Initially, the first author was interested in understanding the Thai sex industry after getting to know a nun who is an activist for Thai women, especially sex workers. Through the activist's introduction and snowball sampling, the first author interviewed 20 people between November 2017 and March 2018 that included eight former sex workers, four directors of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working for sex workers' welfare, two government officials, three owners of nightclubs and go-go bars, two civic activists, and one doctor specializing in HIV and AIDS. The purpose of these interviews was to develop a general understanding of the sex industry in Thailand. Given that no specific research focus was determined after analyzing these data, the project was put on hold and no new data were collected for over a year.

The study was revived toward the end of 2019, when an unintended opportunity prompted the first author to focus on Thai sex workers of poor origins. At the time, the first author was formally ordained as a Buddhist monk in a Thai temple located in deep Isaan near the Mekong River. As a monk, he learned that many Isaan women went to Bangkok to become sex workers. Although his ordination was unrelated to this study, the experience deepened his understanding of their hometown environment, as well as Thai culture and rural lifestyle.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, most sex workers temporarily stopped working and returned to their

TABLE 1
Data Collection Process and Data Sources

	Phase 1	Phase 2 (First Author's Monkhood)	Phase 3	Phase 4
Period (year/month)	2017/11–2018/03	2019/11–2020/07	2020/10–2021/02	2021/06–2021/08; 2024/04–2024/05
Target sample	Various stakeholders	None	Masseuses born and raised in poverty (i.e., from Isaan)	Masseuses born and raised in poverty (i.e., from Isaan)
Data sources	*Observation:* None *Formal interviews:* Former sex workers: 8 NGO directors: 4 Government officials: 2 Night club owners: 2 Go-go bar owner: 1 HIV/AIDS doctor: 1 Human rights activist: 1 Nun and activist: 1	*Observation:* Masseuses' hometown and living conditions: 30 hours (Ob2) *Formal interview:* None *Informal interviews* Masseuses: 11 Masseuses' parents: 10	*Observation:* Masseuses' workplaces in Bangkok: 5 hours (Ob3) *Formal interviews (with survey):* Masseuses: 11 (from Phase 2) + 15 *Informal interviews:* Masseuses: 11 (from Phase 2) + 15 (same as above) Non-Isaan masseuses: 5 Massage shop managers: 5 Massage shop owners: 4	*Observation:* Masseuses' workplaces in Bangkok: 112 hours (Ob4) *Formal interviews (with survey):* Masseuses: 17 (from Phase 3) + 15 *Informal interviews:* Masseuses: 13 (from Phase 3)
Number of new interviewees	20	11 masseuses + 10 masseuses' parents	15 masseuses + 5 non-Isaan masseuses + 9 massage shop managers and owners	15 masseuses
Number of interviews	20	21	66	45

Note: 85 interviewees in total = 20 stakeholders + 41 masseuses + 10 masseuses' parents + 5 non-Isaan masseuses + 9 massage shop managers and owners 152 interviews in total.

hometown in Isaan. Some regularly visited the temple and chatted with the monks, including the first author, who could speak the local Isaan dialect. It was in this way that trust was established with the first author, and they began to share details of their work and life stories. With the permission of the abbot, the first author conducted in-depth informal interviews with 11 sex workers or masseuses, who regularly visited the temple.[1] He also visited their homes, where he observed their living conditions and interviewed their parents. This unique field experience allowed the first author to gain deep insights into the poor upbringing of Isaan-born sex workers, and shifted the research focus from industry-level dynamics to individual-level narratives.

The third phase began following the end of the first author's monastic life in July 2020. He returned to his academic institution and began collecting data from Isaan-born sex workers in Bangkok. This process can be further divided into three steps. First, he reconnected with the 11 masseuses he had got to know well during his monkhood, visited the massage shops they worked at, and observed their working conditions. During his visits, he conducted informal interviews with four massage shop owners, five shop managers, and five non-Isaan-born masseuses to understand their perceptions of and experiences with the Isaan-born masseuses.[2] Second, through snowball sampling from the 11 informants, he interviewed 15 additional Isaan-born masseuses, asking about their life trajectories, including their upbringing, early life experience in Isaan, journey to Bangkok, thoughts and feelings about their work, and future plans. When analyzing these interviews, together with those conducted in Isaan in the second phase, he observed distinctive patterns regarding how the masseuses talked about themselves, their sex work, and their male customers. Third, in light of these emerging patterns, he conducted formal interviews with each of them, which allowed us to gather deeper and more refined narrative data on the masseuses' views of themselves, sex work, and male customers. We consider these interviews formal because besides following a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A in Additional Materials), the first author distributed an open-ended survey to each masseuse, asking her to reflect on three questions: (1) How do you view yourself (i.e., self)? (2) How do you view your work (i.e., sex)? (3) How do you view your customers (i.e., men)? The rest of the interview focused on unpacking their answers. During this phase, the first author collected a total of 66 interviews and conducted five hours of field observation.

In the fourth phase, additional data were collected for four main purposes. First, given the limited amount of time spent on field observation in the previous phase, the first author decided to conduct more observation to better understand the masseuses' daily life and work behaviors. In the summer of 2021, he worked in one massage shop as an errand boy for three weeks, four or five days a week, from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., resulting in 112 hours of field observation. During this time, he ate and chatted with the masseuses frequently. Second, in 2024, the second author joined the project and both authors decided to follow up with the existing masseuse participants to examine whether their narratives had remained stable or shifted. The first author was able to conduct formal interviews (i.e., via surveys) with 17 of them. Third, because our analysis showed that some narratives were underrepresented in our sample, we decided to purposefully sample additional masseuses who held those narratives by asking existing participants for referrals. Specifically, we asked whether they knew anyone whose views were similar to or different from their own, and whether they could connect us. As a result, the first author recruited 15 more masseuses who were participants' ex-coworkers, and conducted formal interviews with each of them. Also in this phase, the first author conducted quick check-ins with 13 masseuse participants through either in-person meet-ups or phone calls to gather missing information. Finally, to ensure the income information self-reported by the masseuses was objectively validated, we decided to contact shop managers to obtain the monthly income rankings of each masseuse in their respective shops. The first author collected these data from six massage shops, where he maintained ongoing contact with the shop managers and owners. Through these contacts, we obtained

[1] Because sex services are often provided in conjunction with, or under the guise of, massage services in Thailand, we use the terms "sex workers" and "masseuses" interchangeably to refer to our participants.

[2] It is important to note that the motivations for entering sex work differ between non-Isaan-born and Isaan-born masseuses. Isaan-born masseuses are primarily driven by survival needs, such as food, clothing, and rent, or by the need to support their parents back in Isaan. In contrast, non-Isaan-born masseuses often seek to earn money for additional desires, such as purchasing luxury products and undergoing plastic surgeries that are unaffordable with income from other jobs. Isaan-born masseuses tend to find it harder to leave sex work compared to non-Isaan-born masseuses due to the formers' need to survive and the latent discrimination encountered in other lines of work.

income rank information for 30 masseuses relative to their colleagues within each shop.

Our entire dataset consists of 152 interviews with 85 interviewees, and notes from a total of 147 hours of field observations. Interviews were conducted in Thai—specifically in the Isaan dialect for Isaan-born masseuses—and translated into English for analysis by the first author. Throughout the data collection processes the first author informed all interviewees that the interview data would be used anonymously and confidentially for an academic research project, and received their verbal consent. The first author recorded 43 interviews from 31 key informants. For the others, he took extensive notes and wrote down important quotes immediately after each interview. We based our data analysis primarily on interviews with the 41 Isaan-born masseuses, and used other field data to contextualize and interpret their narratives, as well as to triangulate our findings.

Data Analysis

We employed a narrative analytic approach (e.g., Bloom, Colbert & Nielsen, 2021; Fivush, 2008; Maitlis, 2022; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Below, we describe the data analysis process as involving five main steps. In practice, however, the process was highly iterative, as we frequently moved back and forth between steps to deepen our understanding of the data and strengthen our conceptual model (Josselson, 2011; Reissman, 2002, 2008).

The first step aimed to deepen our understanding of each masseuse's daily life and the context in which they lived. We reviewed interviews with sex workers, massage shop owners, managers, parents, and other experts, as well as fieldnotes, to develop a more empathetic understanding of these masseuses' socioeconomic reality, from childhood to adulthood. This was akin to the phase of "attending" proposed by Reissman (2002, 2008), during which our goal was to sensitize ourselves as researchers to the individuals in focus, and the social environment they lived in.

Starting from the second step, we concentrated on the self-narratives of the 41 Isaan-born masseuses in our sample. We reviewed interviews with each of them in their entirety. As we did so, we summarized the narratives of each one, focusing on their current work narratives, and noted distinctive features using first-order codes. These codes directly or closely reflected participants' own language, encompassing "discrete data segments ranging from a few words to several paragraphs" (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005: 43). Wherever possible, we grouped first-order codes concerning similar content into second-order codes, such as "views about sex, work, and men customers," to more systematically structure and organize our data. From this process three forms of agency, or agentic orientations, emerged, which we further analyzed in the next step.

The third step involved performing "within-group" analysis to accurately capture the essence of each pattern. We consolidated the summary narratives of each individual participant within the same group into a brief description of the typical way in which individuals in that group narrated their story (see Maitlis, 2022; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). This analysis revealed distinct emotional tones and agentic orientations, which informed our labeling of the three groups, respectively, as, "passive fantasizers," "empowered victims," and "compassionate carers." These labels reflect the intertwining of emotions and agentic orientations evident in the masseuses' accounts of work. Passive fantasizers expressed shame and demonstrated very limited agency. Empowered victims conveyed anger and exhibited strong self-oriented agency, using their work as a means to reclaim control over their circumstances. Finally, compassionate carers expressed gratitude and empathy, and approached their work with high other-oriented agency, treating their labor as a genuine form of service to others.

Yet, while we could categorize 34 of the 41 masseuses into one of these three groups according to the emotion and agentic orientation patterns emerging in their work narratives, those of the other seven were less straightforward.[3] Specifically, the narratives of four masseuses showed characteristics of both passive fantasizers and compassionate carers, and those of three masseuses showed characteristics of both passive fantasizers and empowered victims. To illustrate, one masseuse stated,

> I don't think I am proud or ashamed of myself. But actually, I am ashamed … I think sex is an extension of massage. I don't have any special thoughts on it. Just do your job with good mind … good service … [Customers] are pitiful people who just need some relaxation. (C17)

Her account suggested a feeling of shame, which was a key emotional feature of passive fantasizers, yet it also indicated a sense of appreciation toward sex

[3] These seven masseuses were identified as A1, B12, C17, D18, G30, I35, and J39. The letter denotes the code assigned to the massage shop, and the number denotes the code assigned to the masseuse.

work and pity for her customers that were aligned with the work narratives of compassionate carers. In cases like this, we perused their narratives multiple times and categorized masseuses based on the dominant narratives they conveyed. By "dominant," we refer to the narrative that appeared most frequently, was discussed in greater depth, and was expressed with stronger emphasis. Based on this criterion, the masseuse quoted above was classified as a compassionate carer. We further examine and discuss these complex, or "blended," cases later in the paper.

In the fourth step, we continued the within-group analysis but focused more on reviewing their retrospective narratives of their early life experience in Isaan, seeking to identify latent connections between this segment of their narratives and their narratives of current working life as sex workers. During our initial interviews, the masseuses gave detailed accounts of their early lives in Isaan, reflecting on their experiences with family, peers in the community, and religion (i.e., Buddhism). Their enthusiasm in sharing their experiences of those early years, along with the richness of the content they provided, indicated the importance of conducting a more in-depth analysis of this part of their narratives. Moreover, research on narrative identity work suggests that these memories and interpretations of past experiences constitute important parts of people's narrative repertoire (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). To capture how participants drew on these elements to construct their current work narratives, we created narrative maps (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), documenting the way each masseuse constructed narratives to "impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives" (Reissman, 2002: 218). It was at this stage that we noticed the recurrent emotional threads connecting masseuses' retrospective narratives and current work narratives. For 34 masseuses, we found consistent patterns. Eight masseuses, however, shared attitudes about early life experiences and Buddhism that seemed misaligned with others that had similar work narratives.[4] We will discuss these cases as we report our findings.

The fifth step involved exploring how different narratives and the associated agentic orientations related to the masseuses' behaviors in the workplaces and income. We categorized their income levels as below average (low), average, or above average (high) based on three sources of data. First, we made inferences on income from the self-reported information provided during interviews. While four participants voluntarily disclosed their income in exact figures, the rest offered comparative assessments, describing their perceived financial situation relative to others. In most cases we triangulated their self-reported assessments with contextual details to infer income levels. For example, masseuses who mentioned renting apartments in affluent districts of Bangkok, or owning a German vehicle, mostly described themselves and were categorized as above-average earners, even though a few self-reported as average or below-average. Conversely, those who reported working daily to make ends meet or living at their workplace mostly described themselves and were categorized as below-average earners, even though a few perceived themselves as average or above-average. The remaining participants provided neutral responses, emphasizing neither financial struggles nor successes, stating that their income was consistent with the market average. Second, we drew on data from observations and informal conversations, during which additional indicators surfaced. These indicators included, for instance, the brands of clothing they wore, and whether they had private health insurance, owned a luxury car, or rented apartments in Bangkok over a long-term period. Third, given the largely subjective nature of the above data, we also used income rankings provided by managers from six massage shops to corroborate our classifications. These rankings reflected each masseuse's monthly income relative to others in the same shop, offering an additional means to verifying their self-assessments. In instances where their self-reported income levels conflicted with the manager-provided rankings, we relied on the ranking data as the more objective indicator. Despite three exceptions, we observed a general pattern, with empowered victims mostly faring above average, passive fantasizers below average, and compassionate carers at the average income level.[5]

As mentioned earlier, a portion of our data were collected while the first author was ordained as a Buddhist monk in Isaan. During this period, he engaged in in-depth conversations with masseuses who visited the temple, which pivoted the current

[4] These eight masseuses' IDs are A7, C14, D20, F27, G30, H33, I34, and I36.

[5] Exceptions include three empowered victims (F27, H32, J39) who self-reported earning an average, rather than above-average, income. However, we were unable to verify the accuracy of these self-assessments, as income rank data from their respective massage shops were not available. It is plausible that these empowered victims' self-reported income levels were biased, influenced by their higher income aspirations.

research to focus on individual narratives. His role as a monk could have shaped both the data collected and his interpretation of it. Specifically, the masseuses often approached him as a spiritual figure whom they expected to listen to them attentively and offer Buddhist teachings. This expectation also encouraged them to share deeply reflective narratives, often framed in Buddhist terms. However, it might have also inhibited expressions of skepticism or discontent toward Buddhism, given the reverence typically accorded to monks. Notably, after the first author left his monkhood and resumed interviews near the masseuses' workplaces in Bangkok, several participants voiced their frustration with hometown temples and monks—sentiments that had not surfaced earlier. Furthermore, while the first author initially interpreted the narratives largely through a Buddhist lens, his perspective broadened after leaving monastic life and collaborating with the second author. Together, they began to analyze the data in relation not only to Buddhist values but also to the masseuses' recollection and interpretation of their early experiences with family and local community.

FINDINGS

Our findings reaffirm that sex work, despite its economic significance, is highly stigmatized in Thailand, with Isaan women involved in sex work often perceived as having lower status. One Isaan masseuse who has worked in Bangkok for over a decade said, "The most insulting thing I heard from one of my Bangkok friends was that because of people like me, Thai women have to prove at foreign immigration offices that they are not illegal [sex] workers." The nun and activist working on behalf of sex workers further highlighted the deep-seated stigma, noting that prostitution in Thai society is commonly viewed as "a hotbed of sexually transmitted diseases." An NGO director remarked, "Some sex workers often commit crimes, both small and large, contributing to the negative image of Thai women." A former sex worker reflected on societal attitudes, stating, "Many ordinary Thai women consider sex workers shameful." This aligns with Bishop and Robinson's (1998: 160) description: "Buddhism explicitly prohibits the practice of prostitution, and Thai culture, operating within institutionalized Theravada Buddhism, most certainly stigmatizes sex workers."

Although all 41 Isaan masseuses had shared the persistent precarity of growing up in poverty and engaging in illegal, stigmatized sex work, our study identified three narrative profiles marked by distinct agentic orientations: passive fantasizers (n = 12), empowered victims (n = 16), and compassionate carers (n = 13). Table 2 provides general demographic information about each masseuse. Interestingly, factors such as age, marital and parental status, and tenure did not appear to correlate with their narrative profile. Moreover, masseuses working in the same massage shop often exhibited different narrative profiles, indicating that these variations were driven by factors beyond demographic and organizational differences.

Our analysis revealed that masseuses drew on their childhood experiences in Isaan to make sense of their current work lives. Below, we describe the narratives of each group, starting with their current work narratives and associated agentic orientations, followed by retrospective accounts of early life experiences. We also explored their workplace behaviors and income. Table 3 features illustrative data from three masseuses representing each narrative profile (for illustrative data from all 41 masseuses, see Online Appendix B). We summarize the defining characteristics of the three narrative profiles in Table 4, which we used as a guide for detailing our findings.

Passive Fantasizers

Current work narratives. When talking about themselves, this group exuded strong feelings of shame. They were aware of the stigma attached to people doing sex work: "I am embarrassed to tell anyone about this [me doing sex work]. It is a shame" (A3p),[6] and "Who would not be ashamed of this? Few of us will tell our friends what we are doing" (C15p). They described how, when working, they separated their soul from their body. One said, "My body is in the same space with the customer, but my soul is not there. I mean I am no longer myself when I do the work" (B11p). Others explained, "I just remove myself when I am working. Then the moment quickly passed" (A7p), and "I try to forget this situation [that I am doing sex work] when I work. I am telling myself that I am not here. I am thinking I am in the southern sea" (C15p). Such comments convey a form of dissociation, whereby the individuals disconnected themselves from the physical and emotional experiences in life (Cardeña, 1994; Holmes et al., 2005). For these masseuses, dissociation seemed to be a crucial coping tactic that enabled them to carry on in work that they

[6] The last letter (in lower case) denotes the respective narrative group, p referring to passive fantasizers, e empowered victims, and c compassionate carers.

TABLE 2
General Information on 41 Isaan-Born Masseuses

Massage Shop ID	Masseuse ID	No. of Years as Masseuse	Age	Has Child(ren)	Marital Status	Interview Timing[a]	Observation[b]	Narrative Profile[c]	Income Rank[d]
A	1	4	23	Y	Divorced	P2/3/4(3)	Y(I,B)	Passive fantasizer (*c*)	7
	2	11	37	Y	Divorced	P2/3/4(7)	Y(I,B)	Compassionate carer	4
	3	5	31	Y	Divorced	P3(4)	Y(B)	Passive fantasizer	5
	4	14	41	Y	Divorced	P3(2)	Y(B)	Compassionate carer	2
	5	6	35	Y	Single	P2/3/4(6)	Y(I,B)	Compassionate carer	3
	6	11	36	N	Married	P3/4(2)	Y(B)	Empowered victim	1
	7	4	29	Y	Divorced	P4(2)	Y(B)	Passive fantasizer	6
B	8	9	31	N	Single	P2/3/4(5)	Y(I)	Compassionate carer	3
	9	12	37	Y	Divorced	P4(3)	N	Empowered victim	1
	10	8	30	N	Single	P2/3/4(5)	Y(I)	Compassionate carer	4
	11	3	23	N	Single	P3/4(4)	N	Passive fantasizer	6
	12	12	42	N	Married	P3/4(2)	N	Compassionate carer (*p*)	5
	13	3	30	Y	Single	P3/4(2)	N	Empowered victim	2
C	14	7	29	Y	Single	P2/3/4(5)	Y(I,B)	Compassionate carer	2
	15	8	28	Y	Single	P2/3/4(4)	Y(I,B)	Passive fantasizer	4
	16	4	28	N	Single	P2/3/4(4)	Y(I,B)	Compassionate carer	1
	17	15	42	Y	Single	P3/4(3)	Y(B)	Compassionate carer (*p*)	3
D	18	9	39	Y	Single	P3(3)	N	Empowered victim (*p*)	2
	19	2	24	N	Divorced	P3(2)	N	Empowered victim	1
	20	9	31	Y	Divorced	P2/3/4(4)	Y(I)	Passive fantasizer	5
	21	10	39	N	Single	P3(4)	N	Empowered victim	3
	22	8	33	Y	Single	P3/4(3)	N	Compassionate carer	4
E	23	3	29	Y	Single	P2/3/4(5)	Y(I)	Empowered victim	3
	24	10	37	Y	Divorced	P4(2)	N	Compassionate carer	2
	25	3	23	N	Divorced	P3(2)	N	Empowered victim	1
	26	7	34	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer	4
F	27	5	26	N	Single	P2/3/4(5)	Y(I,B)	Empowered victim	NA
	28	8	29	N	Divorced	P4(1)	Y(B)	Empowered victim	NA
	29	5	26	Y	Divorced	P4(2)	Y(B)	Empowered victim	NA
G	30	5	29	N	Single	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer (*c*)	NA
	31	12	30	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer	NA
H	32	11	33	Y	Single	P3(2)	N	Empowered victim	NA
	33	8	36	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer	NA
I	34	5	29	Y	Divorced	P3(3)	N	Empowered victim	2
	35	8	31	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Empowered victim (*p*)	1
	36	10	34	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer	4
	37	9	33	Y	Divorced	P4(1)	N	Passive fantasizer	4
J	38	11	41	Y	Divorced	P3(2)	N	Empowered victim	NA
	39	8	37	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Empowered victim (*p*)	NA
	40	12	39	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Compassionate carer	NA
	41	9	28	Y	Single	P4(1)	N	Compassionate carer	NA

[a] Number(s) after *P* represent the phases when masseuses were interviewed; number in parenthesis represents single-spaced pages of notes resulting from the interviews.

[b] *Y* and *N* denote whether observation of this masseuse was conducted (*Y* = yes, *N* = no); *I* and *B* in parentheses indicate whether observation was conducted in Isaan or Bangkok, respectively.

[c] Seven masseuses' narratives reflected an additional, but less dominant, narrative profile, which we indicate in parentheses (*p* = passive fantasizer; *c* = compassionate carer).

[d] Six massage shop managers provided income rank information for masseuses working in their shops; number represents the income rank among masseuses in the respective shop.

TABLE 3
Illustrative Quotes for Masseuses' Retrospective Early Life Narratives, Current Work Narratives, and Work Outcomes

Masseuse ID	Retrospective Early Life Narratives	Current Work Narratives	Work Behaviors and Outcomes
Passive Fantasizers			
A1	"I struggled a lot during my school years because I was stupid and found it hard to adjust. That's why things were difficult for me back then. I transferred schools often. All my friends were nice—it wasn't their fault. It was just me. I wasn't someone who stood out. I wasn't pretty, I wasn't ugly, and I wasn't good at studying. I was just an average person." "I didn't think much about Buddhism. I went to temples, listened to the monks' teachings, and made a lot of donations, but I think I was just following what everyone else was doing without really thinking deeply about it. To me, what mattered more than Buddhism were the people around me."	"I'm not the kind of person who stands out much. I feel like I'm just forgotten." "This is just a job to make a living." "Life is just like an old boat drifting on a river." "I don't think having a goal matters much. Just live." "Just because we do this kind of work doesn't mean we don't know love. We understand how others see us, but we still want to love in our own way." "One day, a good man will come along. Even if he's a customer, it won't matter to me." "I had a really beautiful friend who worked with me. She moved to Dubai a few years ago, and it's such an amazing city. I think she's successful now—she doesn't have to do this work anymore and is living happily and comfortably. She visits Thailand sometimes and always brings me lovely gifts. I wish I could have a customer like that in my life. Isn't that my only hope? [Laugh]"	She mentioned struggling financially, often not earning enough, constantly running out of money, and occasionally needing to borrow from others to get by. • Self-report income level: Low • Income ranking in their shop: 7/7
B11	"My parents disciplined me and my sisters harshly. Looking back, we didn't do anything wrong, but they scolded us as if we had done something very wrong... Since then, I think I developed a habit of blaming myself. So, I think I became a person who never [expresses] my own preferences and opinions properly... I thought I was somehow useless … When my mother was mad at me, she always said that 'I did not want you to be born.' She talked as if my birth was my fault. Honestly, I really wanted to leave my family as early as possible." "To be honest, I don't have any special memories on Buddhism."	"I don't think I am special... It doesn't really matter to know what I like or dislike. It is more important how my family and friends see me than how I see myself … I am not proud of myself because people around me don't see me that way … I know I am ugly... I know I am not perfect." "I am trying not to think too much since I moved to Bangkok. I just do what I can do here … When I do the work, I recite a mantra that I am not there. I talk to myself 'I am not here. I am on the beach right now, where the breeze is blowing. This is the beach. I am going to rest and then go have a cocktail later.' The good thing about this job is that I don't have to do anything. My customers do it all. I am [physically] there, but my soul is not there." "Well, my hope maybe [is] that there might be good customers among others coming to this shop. If one of them really loves me, I would quit this job and live with him … I believe in love too and [want to] live a happy life someday."	"I don't make a lot of money … but I don't want to make a lot of money doing this. It's too damaging to my body." • Self-report income level: Low • Income ranking in their shop: 6/6

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Masseuse ID	Retrospective Early Life Narratives	Current Work Narratives	Work Behaviors and Outcomes
D20	"My mom and dad fought a lot because of me. I think that it was my fault. If I had studied better, my mom would not have always been so angry … I was not that smart, so I made a lot of mistakes. I think that's why a lot of people hated me. One time, I spilled my food while I was eating. My dad yelled at me really loudly, like, 'What are you good at?' I still remember the moment. I just accidentally spilled it, but I still don't know if it was that bad."	"I can't proudly tell anyone about this job." "Sex is what keeps me here in Bangkok. It is my last hope. There is not much for me to make money here. Before, I worked all day at a restaurant in a shopping mall and I was paid 400 baht ($10) a day. No one can live in Bangkok with that amount of money. This job helped my situation. It is really my last hope." "I hope a handsome customer [will] walk [up] to me and fall in love with me [laugh]. And then we go and live in his country together … I like Asia, so I would like to settle down in Japan or Korea if possible. Actually, most of my customers are Korean or Japanese. We often go out to eat and drink together … One of my friends went to Japan, got married, and is doing really well. She was really lucky [laugh] … I want to be like that before I get too old."	When talking about work and money, she showed low energy, simply saying, "My salary is not good." When asked if she's doing anything to earn more income, she said she has little motivation to do anything more. According to her manager, she drank heavily at least twice a week, which often led to friction with her coworkers and manager. • Self-report income level: Average • Income ranking in their shop: 5/5
Empowered Victims			
D19	"When I was young, I had a habit of not trusting people around me. My parents divorced, and my boyfriends had other women. I really trusted them, so when I found out the truth, I was shocked. That's why I think I couldn't trust people … So, at some point, I stopped trusting people … I didn't want to be influenced by others since I was young. Instead, I wanted to fight against them... My friends, they were not my friends anymore, they were dishonest, fake, [a] bad influence … It's not because of us that Thailand has a bad image. Don't blame us, blame those in power." "I didn't really like going to temples. I just didn't want to be influenced by something else. It felt just not right … Honestly, I didn't really enjoy going to temples. Also, there were a lot of corrupted monks in my hometown, so I didn't like going to temples even more. Buddhism doesn't have a good image for me … I do not	"Many people don't know this, but we are victims of other people. Some of us were abandoned by [our] families. Before you blame us, think about why we have to do this and why we are so unhappy." "When I first started this work, I did not know there was [a] much easier way to make money. I was asking myself why I had worked so hard before. Since then, I have decided to use my physical appearance as much as I [can] and become rich so that people who ignore me … look up to me … Sex is nothing but a way of satisfying [sexual] craving … One of the good things about being born a woman is that men have stronger sex cravings than we do. Thank goodness." "I know I need to work hard because I have bigger dreams … I cannot live like this. I do not have money for now. I do not have [a] good education … So, I need to work hard." "I know Isaan people are really working hard. But I realize that some of them are just not	"You know I make far more money than you. I am probably in the top 5% in this industry … It's impossible to make a lot of money by teaching students. Students don't have money [laugh]." • Self-report income level: High • Income ranking in their shop: 2/5

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Masseuse ID	Retrospective Early Life Narratives	Current Work Narratives	Work Behaviors and Outcomes
	know why my parents had the belief … I know they worked hard all days. After the work, they went straight to the temple to help with the temple work. Every morning, they [woke] up at 4:00 a.m. and offered food to monks. If they had paid that much attention to me, I would not have ended up like this … [It] meant I was not a priority for them. I hated that. The monks got all the attention and love I deserved."	smart. They just work without thinking. We need to think and decide what to do. In Bangkok, we have more opportunities here. We need to use them … but I don't give anyone [an] easy smile. You need to think about how to attract rich customers and get them to spend more money. That is important." "[Men] are just slaves of desires. Other than that, what can I say about them? They are only interested in having sex with me … They may think they are using me, but it is exactly the opposite. I am the one who uses them."	
F28	"At first, I liked going to temples. I think I also liked monks there. But at some point, I realized that my parents cared more about the monks than me. They often said, 'If you were a man, you would have been a good monk...' It is not my fault to be born a woman, right? I still have a hard time understanding my parents. Just because you pay money to a temple does not mean that you will go to heaven. I do not have many memories with my parents in my childhood because the monks took them away."	"When I lived in my hometown [in Isaan], I [was] never … treated properly by people around me. People staring at me rudely or ignoring me [was a] daily occurrence. My parents didn't pay much attention to me either … So I think my personality has been shaped by the others who look at me like that." "This is what I can do best [laughs]. This job has made me a lot of money, yes. I could never make this money working 12 hours a day in my hometown … I chose this job without thinking too much … Later, I watched YouTube and studied how to [perform sex services] well, and I also asked customers about their [feelings]. Now I really think of it as work."	Her manager from massage shop *F* said, "She focuses on attracting customers through some kind of customer manipulation. She is good at her job and is professional … She sometimes hates [customers] when she cannot control them. She gets angry easily when things do not go … as she intended." • Self-report income level: High • Income ranking in their shop: NA
F29	"My parents weren't bad people, but they were so busy with other things that they didn't really take care of me. It's not like anything terrible happened to me, but I always felt like I was on my own." "I hate Buddhism. My parents were too devoted to it, and they gave everything to the temples. They didn't take care of me because they were so focused on their religion. I can't stand it."	"I just hate people—customers, the Thai government, everyone. There's so much wrong in this world, and it's hard not to feel angry about it." "I think sex is for men, not for women. Sure, women have sexual desires too, and they want to have sex. But not as much as men. I think men are biologically designed to want sex more and more. For men, sex is something they enjoy purely for their own desires. Women don't enjoy it unless they really love their partner."	She brings high energy and determination to her work. She even calls out loudly to attract customers on the street—setting her apart from her more passive peers who just wait in the massage shop for customers to come in. • Self-report income level: High • Income ranking in their shop: NA

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Masseuse ID	Retrospective Early Life Narratives	Current Work Narratives	Work Behaviors and Outcomes
		"The people who come here are all abnormal. They all have wives and girlfriends—you know that, right? I pretend not to know and treat them like curious customers, but are they morally normal? No. It's impossible for me to take care of them from the bottom of my heart or feel any real emotion toward them. If I did, I think that would be an even bigger problem."	
Compassionate Carers			
A2	"Overall, I think I grew up without much difficulty. My parents worked hard, so we worked hard too. I think I was happy in my hometown. Now, I came here because I needed to make money [laugh]." (However, our observation indicated that she experienced significant financial difficulties growing up.) "There were so many fun things to do at the temple I went to when I was young. I really liked the dogs and cats there. I fed them, took them for walks, and played with them … I went to the temple often … The monks there were really nice. I enjoyed talking to them. I always wished the monks to be healthy and they wished me happiness and told me many good stories."	"I'd put it this way: each and every one of us living in this world is precious. It doesn't matter what our job is, what our social status is, or what we look like—we're all truly valuable. I genuinely believe that." "We all have the right to be happy, and we also have a duty to help others find happiness. Even the unhappiest person can find joy, and even the happiest person can't truly be happy if they can't help others discover happiness." "Like many other jobs, my work is valuable because it brings happiness to others." "Most of the people who come here are those who've never truly been loved, at least that's what I think. It's really sad. Everyone has the right to be sincerely loved, but for some reason, they didn't find that in their own countries. That's why they come here. Of course, most of them come because they want sex, but they also want someone to talk to, someone to share their feelings with. I can feel that."	Unlike most compassionate carers, she shared that she does not make much money. However, her salary was considered mid-range in the shop by her manager. • Self-report income level: Low • Income ranking in their shop: 4/7
A5	"The environment I grew up in my hometown was not so affluent. My parents farmed and ran a small humble street restaurant. It was hard to live day to day, but we were happy... If you ask me why I think that way, I would want to say we didn't want much... When I was young, my family didn't want much indeed. I think we thought it was okay to just live like that. Everyone had a hard time, but I think we thought, 'No matter what, let's	"We always have potential to flourish. We are all the same humans. I think of myself in that way too. Whatever I do for a living, it doesn't matter much. What matters is that we should realize that we are so valuable that others are equally valuable. Everyone is valuable." "You should never think of this work as dirty. Of course, there are many worthy jobs in the world. But there are also jobs that someone must fill... My job is something that makes someone happy. Even though I am not their	"We should take care of our customers with our hearts and services. Otherwise, they would have nowhere to go. I think this caring mindset is important to really serve them." "Well, I never focus on making a lot of money doing this job. I think I make about average." • Self-report income level: Average • Income ranking in their shop: 3/7

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Masseuse ID	Retrospective Early Life Narratives	Current Work Narratives	Work Behaviors and Outcomes
	just live like we [are].' I just thought of it that way and it felt comfortable." "My parents took me to the temple whenever they had time, although they were not that religious. We used to go to the temple as if we were just going on a picnic … I spent a lot of time there and met good monks. Being at the temple made me feel peaceful and made me feel good … I think I just liked the atmosphere there. That is why I think I became interested in Buddhist thought."	girlfriend, I always try my best … When you think about money first, you never have the good mind to offer good service. I think hospitality spirit is important, as our work makes others happy … Sex is the best activity to make people relaxed. It also produces a lot of good hormones. The more sex you have, the better your life will be." "They are perhaps pitiful people who are perhaps more pitiable than disabled people … They just have not met good partners yet. I think they are the ones we need to be taken care of … I mean they came here for sex, but they also have emotions and a desire to be loved by women. Some of them are really emotional but they are just unloved yet."	
B8	"I went to the temple often. I spent a lot of time there … Buddhism really taught me a lot."	"Everyone has the potential to do things well and be happy. I believe that no one in this world should be neglected. I am precious, and you are precious. Everyone is precious. We must live with that kind of mindset." "Sex is something that gives us pleasure, but sometimes it's dangerous. It is something we have to be careful about … I agree with the idea that sex can be a commodity … Sex is also an expression of love." "Well, if you think about my clients, they are not really that bad. You have to listen to their stories. Of course, some of them have wives and partners. But I don't think their partners really love them. Well, there is something wrong with their relationship, I can't say. So where and who can they get love from? I don't know if I am justifying myself by doing it, but someone has to do it. I feel bad for men who don't get love from their wives."	She exudes a calm demeanor, finding joy in the smallest things. One day, she received a small bottle of perfume from a Chinese customer, a gesture that deeply moved her. When asked whether she had received gifts before, she replied, "What touched me most was that he went to the airport two hours early just to pick it up. He said he didn't know what I liked." She added, "If I provide [a] genuine service to my customers, they will be moved beyond the service charge—just as I was touched by this small gift." • Self-report income level: High • Income ranking in their shop: 3/6

TABLE 4
Key Characteristics of the Three Narrative Profiles in Persistent Precarity

	Passive Fantasizers	Empowered Victims	Compassionate Carers
Current Work Narratives			
View of self	Shame	Victim	Valued and flourishing being
View of sex work	Enables survival, provides hope for love and a new, better life	Enables exploitation of men to gain power	Enables enhancement of people's well-being and happiness
View of customers	Potential saviors who may one day rescue them from the reality	Slaves of their own desire that deserve to be exploited	Unfortunate people who have never been loved, especially by women
Retrospective Early Life Narratives			
Attitude about early life challenges	Blaming themselves for the challenges they confronted	Blaming others for the challenges they confronted	Accepting and forgiving those who hurt them
Attitude about Buddhism	No strong attitude owing to little memory of exposure to Buddhism	Negative, owing to memory of parents' extreme devotion to Buddhism and neglect of child(ren)	Positive, owing to pleasant memories associated with Buddhism
Core emotional threads	Shame toward themselves, despair about reality, fantasized hope	Anger, hatred toward others, empowered	Calmness, acceptance, compassion
Agentic orientations	Low or absent agency	High self-oriented agency	High other-oriented agency
Work Behaviors and Outcomes			
Behaviors	Low motivation and passive approach at work	High motivation, and actively yet subtly exploiting customers at work	Genuine care for customers and avoidance of overworking
Income	Mostly below average	Mostly above average	Mostly average to above average

perceived as deeply shameful. Despite feeling shame, they knew that their work earned money that enabled them to survive: "I am doing this because I need to make money" (A3p).

However, beyond viewing sex work as a means to survive, they also harbored hopes of being able to find and "express love" (E26p). As one said, "Just because we have this kind of job does not mean that we do not know love. We know how others view us. But we still want to love in our ways" (A1p). We came to understand that these hopes were more like fantasies, as they began to talk about the possibility that someday a man, likely one of their customers, would rescue them from the reality they were mired in. As one said,

> I believe there will be someone who sees me for who I am, neither through my job nor through my poor reality. I do not care if he is my customer. What matters to me is whether he truly loves me. If he loves me truly, he will rescue me. (C15p)

Another had the same dream: "I hope a handsome customer would walk to me and fall in love with me [laugh]. And then we go and live in his country together" (D20p). These fantasies seemed to be fostered by the dramas or movies that they spent lots of time watching online when they did not have work (Ob3,4).[7] Note that this group expressed a preference for foreigners as their ideal saviors, not necessarily because they expected foreigners to be wealthier than local customers, but because such men could provide a path to escape from Thailand. One indicated, "I am not so interested in becoming rich. I would rather go and live somewhere where no one knows me. Yes, it would be better if it is not Thailand" (C15p).

Such fantasies were closely tied to these masseuses' motivations for entering the sex industry. All of the Isaan masseuses we interviewed cited money as the primary reason for their involvement in sex work, and the majority also cited shelter, noting that living in massage shops allowed them to avoid the cost of renting apartments. However, those we categorized as passive fantasizers mentioned additional motivations, including the opportunity to meet foreigners, to learn foreign languages, and to move to other countries. One masseuse, who had entered sex work relatively recently, explained, "I didn't intend to work

[7] Ob3 (Ob4, Ob3,4) signifies that the data come from observations made during Phase 3 (Phase 4, Phase 3 and 4) of data collection.

here from the beginning … I realized that this was the only way to achieve what I wanted, meet foreigners, learn their languages, and ultimately live in their country" (A1p). Similarly, another said, "Our customers are mostly Japanese. I really want to live there … Learning Japanese costs a lot of money … I can make Japanese friends here and learn Japanese for free" (D20p). For these women, doing sex work is shameful on one level, but on another, it is seen as the only viable pathway to meet their imagined foreign benefactors and escape their current reality.

Altogether, this group's work narratives were marked by a strong sense of shame and a limited sense of agency to change their circumstances. They developed fantasies that sex work would bring them a "savior," who could offer them a dream life with not only material security but also love. As one masseuse poignantly shared,

> I do not think there are many meanings to this job. It is not something to be proud of telling someone … I am just trying to make money from this work … Well, even though I do this work, there must still be someone [a foreigner] who will love me. (E26p)

Retrospective early life narratives. Like the other masseuses in our study, this group spoke of many challenges they experienced in their early life back in Isaan. These challenging early life experiences related to growing up in poverty, being bullied at school, or suffering from domestic violence. Importantly, while three of the 12 passive fantasizers in our sample also expressed hatred toward others for causing their miseries (A7p, G30p, H33p), and one simply focused on recounting the difficulties (I36p), this group generally showed a tendency to blame themselves for these challenges, which reinforced their sense of shame. One claimed, "I was bullied because I was not pretty" (G30p); another said, "My mom and dad fought a lot because of me. I think that it was my fault. If I had studied better, my mom would not have always been so angry" (D20p). Another recounted, "When I was young, I was very timid. I did not know what I was good at. At the time, all I thought about was how other people viewed me … I always felt unconfident" (H33p). When others pointed to them as a source of blame, they seemed to accept it and never questioned or challenged it. One described: "My mom said that she got divorced because of me. Knowing that my existence disappointed my mom was really difficult for me, but I felt that when I was a kid" (A3p).

Besides the tendency to blame themselves for their life challenges, they differed from the other groups in that they did not mention any notable experience of Buddhism in their narratives, with two exceptions. Most members of the other two groups, as indicated later, described how they had encountered Buddhism in their early life, which was expected as Buddhism is an important part of life for most Thai people (Song, 2020). Passive fantasizers, however, did not seem to recall having significant exposure to Buddhism growing up, or being influenced by its religious teaching. They tended to downplay the influence of Buddhism, for example saying simply, "Since I did not go to the temple often, I did not really adopt any Buddhist thinking." Two passive fantasizers (D20p, H33p) shared positive memories associated with Buddhism involving interactions with monks, visiting temples, and learning about Buddhist teachings. They suggested they were influenced by Buddhist teachings but still were pessimistic and convinced that they might only be rescued by a "rich, good-hearted customer" rather than by Buddhism.

Without Buddhist teachings as a guiding philosophy, this group seemed to draw directly on scripts defined by others in their community to make sense of their reality. This was evident in how they talked about themselves in relation to others. For example, one noted, "As I live my life, I realize that it is important what other people think of me regardless of what I think of myself" (E26p). Another stated, "My existence is a reflection of the community I belong to" (C15p). These women had adopted and internalized views of their community. Given that sex work is highly stigmatized in their local community, they continued to carry a deep sense of shame in their work narratives. The strong influence of their community seemed to have accustomed them to passively following others' wills rather than pursuing independent initiatives. This tendency was illustrated in the following account:

> Well, to be honest, I do not think I have ever been used to doing things on my own. I often feel a sense of burden when I have to take action or do something new by myself. Even when I was young, I think I tended to follow what others told me to do without much question … I think I was taught that asking questions was somehow wrong … In fact, I chose this job because one of my close friends recommended it. That is why I feel my life lacks excitement. (B11p)

Work behaviors and income. Members of this group exhibited a passive attitude and approach at work. They fantasized about being rescued from their present predicament by a savior, most likely a customer, but they did not actively try to attract or please customers. Instead, they waited passively, hoping he would come from a foreign country. To cope with the

disappointment of their hopes not being realized, they consumed alcohol heavily after work, which often led to tensions with their managers (Ob3,4). A shop manager even shared that she regretted having hired them, saying, "It is hard to manage them. I feel I am not their boss, but a babysitter." However, the managers felt an obligation not to fire them due to their shared connection to their Isaan hometown. Overall, although these women were unhappy and dreamed of escape, they showed little initiative or agency to change their circumstances.

Given their passive stance, the women in this group tended to earn less, with their income falling below the average for all masseuses in our sample. One who had worked in the same massage shop for 12 years said, "The income here is much better than other jobs, but I do not make more than other masseuses" (G31p). Another mentioned, "I don't think I make as much money as other masseuses. I guess I am not very popular" (B11p). Across the massage shops in our study, the lowest income levels consistently belonged to those categorized as passive fantasizers. Not only did they perceive their earnings as lower than the industry average, but shop managers, who kept monthly income records, also ranked them near the bottom within their respective shops.

Empowered Victims

Current work narratives. The empowered victims expressed a strong sense of anger and hatred toward others. They referred to themselves "an abandoned being" (B9e) or "a being that no one cares [about]" (B13e), even invoking such terms as "sex toy" (E25e) and "slavery" (B13e). They saw themselves as victims of other people and society. One even stated that it was others' fault that she had to do sex work: "This is not my fault. Society makes me like this. So do not blame me. Blame the people who made me like this" (B9e). Another said, "People point fingers that we spread all the sexually transmitted diseases, but we are the victims… The reality is that when we say we are the victims, no one listens. No one thinks about our rights" (D21e). They spoke of being victims with anger and hatred, which seemed to fuel an urge to revenge or prove their power, especially through their work.

When talking about sex, they described it as "men's desire" (B13e) or "sexual craving" (A6e) that could be legitimately exploited. One expressed pride in making a living from exploiting men's sexual desire:

> Look at the people who come here. They all have wives and girlfriends. It is dirty work, yes, but are they not also just as dirty? All I do is to use my looks to exploit their desires. That is how I live and who I am. I will continue to live like that to be successful, and I will show them how I survived. (D18e)

They viewed men as "slaves of desire" (B13e) who deserved to be exploited. As one noted,

> There is one thing I have realized after doing this job for over 10 years. Sex is money. That desire never goes away. The fortunate thing is that men's desires are much stronger than [women's]. And because I was born as a woman, I can take advantage of it. (J39e)

That is, they felt empowered by sex work, seeing it as a means to exploit male customers and demonstrating strong agency to regain personal control through this work. One claimed,

> I was not really a bad person—the world makes me be like this. In this world, I should be a bad person because there are many bad people who exploit you. I suffered [as a child] when I had no strength or knowledge. But not now. I can control [customers] by using my power. (J38e)

Retrospective early life narratives. This group recounted similar difficulties in their early lives in Isaan. However, unlike the passive fantasizers who blamed themselves for these difficulties and expressed shame, the empowered victims blamed others and continued to show anger and hatred. For example, when explaining why her previous marriage failed and ended in divorce, an empowered victim said it was because her ex-husband never trusted her (B9e), while one of the passive fantasizers said it was because she was no longer sexually attractive (A7p). The following quote from the former masseuse seemed to suggest that her ex-husband had made her lose trust in all men: "I do not believe any man. I made a mistake at the time since I did not realize the truth. Honestly, he married me just to use me for his pleasure" (B9e). Another in this group also noted cynically, "Let's just be honest. Don't all men get married for free sex? My boyfriend at the time also went to another woman because of that. It is that simple" (E23e). When talking about their experience of school, these masseuses blamed their school teachers for not giving them enough attention (A6e), blamed friends for being a bad influence (D19e), or blamed the Thai government for failing to provide support to the Isaan region (D21e). This tendency to identify an external target as the culprit for their personal predicament emerged as a clear feature of this group.

Furthermore, except for one who did not mention Buddhism (I34e), and another who had some ambivalence (F27e), masseuses of this group tended to

remember a negative experience of Buddhism. Many suggested that they experienced parental neglect as a result of parents' strong religious devotion. Most people in Isaan are Buddhist, and some are so devout that they give most of their already limited income and time to local temples. Devout Buddhists firmly believe that offering as much money and voluntary work as possible to local temples will be viewed as merit-making and ensure a good afterlife following reincarnation. The mother of a masseuse in this group stated:

> Yes, I really believe in afterlife and reincarnation. If you do not believe that, you are not a Buddhist. When you contribute good things to the temple and monks, the temple will become better, and then you will expect a good life in the afterlife too … It does not matter what happens now. You see, there is no possibility of living better in the present life anyways. No matter how hard we try, we will be the same. Since you were born this way, there is no room for improvement … But my belief towards the temple is sincere, and I think I deserve to live happily in the afterlife.

She seemed to have put her faith in the afterlife, giving nearly everything she had to the temple as she had no hope of changing her present life. Strikingly, many masseuses in this group suggested that they had at least one parent who exhibited this view and behavior. According to their accounts, their parents—usually their mothers—were extremely busy making a living, yet even in their limited free time they chose to volunteer at the temple rather than spend time with their children. As youngsters, these individuals recalled being often left at home alone, feeling neglected, while their parents volunteered at the temple. One said:

> When I think back to my childhood, it was not that pleasant. The thing is, my parents were very religious. Every day they went to a Buddhist temple, worked, and woke up in the morning to make an offering. I liked it at first, but I started to hate temples more and more because my parents [went] there even when I needed them. Their priority was the temple, not me … Temples are all fake businesses. They make money by attracting ignorant people. (H32e)

One seemed to have recognized that her parents' lack of attention toward them might be the reason they developed persistent feelings of anger and hatred we identified in her present work narrative:

> In my time alone, I tried to do things on my own. I really wanted my parents' attention, but they paid little attention to me. Without their attention, whenever I tried to do something, it always did not work out. I think I just began to hate everything. (B13e)

They remembered being neglected because of their parents' religious devotion, and this memory seemed to propel them to not only develop a dislike for Buddhism, but embrace values that were opposite to Buddhist teachings such as compassion, non-attachment, and reincarnation. Another expressed disapproval of Buddhism in a similar way:

> At first, I liked going to temples. I think I also liked monks there. But, at some point, I realized that my parents cared more about the monks than me. They said, "If you were a man, you would have been a good monk … " It is not my fault to be born a woman. I still have a hard time understanding my parents. Just because you pay money to a temple does not mean that you will go to heaven. I do not have many memories with my parents in my childhood because the monks took them away. (F28e)

This resentment toward Buddhism, combined with deep dissatisfaction with their families and hometowns, was closely tied to these masseuses' motivation to move to Bangkok at a relatively young age and enter the sex industry quickly. While masseuses in the other two groups typically entered sex work after trying various jobs in Bangkok, such as restaurant servers, dishwashers, hotel staff, or other forms of labor-intensive work, empowered victims moved directly into massage shops through contacts with shop managers who also came from their home regions (Ob3,4). This suggests a strong desire to become independent and gain financial power as quickly as possible without any concern about the shame. Their sense of liberation is reflected in their own words: "No one knew me in Bangkok. I felt really free … I felt I could do whatever I wanted without worrying about what others think of me" (B13e), and "I was thinking that there were no monks watching me in Bangkok. My family also does not nag at me … My massage shop offered a sleeping space for me when I first started this work. I was happy" (A6e).

Work behaviors and income. Masseuses in this group exhibited high agency at work to maximize their personal gains. They were observed to intentionally manipulate customers, increasing customers' willingness to pay higher prices for their services and ensuring those customers would return and spend more (Ob3,4). They varied their makeup and used different tricks to appeal to different customers (Ob3,4). Their goal was not to make a one-time profit but to continually exploit their clients. One masseuse proudly stated, "Now I don't have to wait for

customers. My customers follow me" (D18e). Another boasted about her ability to gain client loyalty:

> Now I don't need to work here. Even if I leave this massage shop, my regular customers would find and support me. But honestly, I am not satisfied. I want more loyal customers who show more loyalty. There is still a long way to go. (H32e)

Some had even moved to other countries in Asia or Europe to earn more money through sex work (Ob3,4), while none of the masseuses in the other two groups had made such international moves.

According to massage shop managers' monthly income records, women in this group consistently ranked at the top in their respective shops. In addition, we found that several owned luxury cars (D18e, D19e); rented apartments in affluent areas of Bangkok (A6e); and traveled abroad, often to Europe or Australia, nearly every year (D18e, E25e). Even more striking, some received regular remittances from overseas customers that far exceeded their monthly earnings from the massage shops (B9e, B13e, D18e, D19e). Massage shop owners were eager to recruit masseuses with this profile because they knew how to generate significant profits from customers. One owner remarked, "We have superstars. The profits from the customers they bring in are huge. It is our job to recruit masseuses like them because we can make money from their customers. Honestly, they have more power than me."

Compassionate Carers

Current work narratives. Members of this group conveyed an unusual aura of acceptance, calmness, and peace. When talking about themselves, they emphasized the unique value inherent in all human beings: "We are precious because all beings are essentially precious" (B12c); "Everyone has the potential to do things well and be happy" (B8c); "All people are born capable of doing at least one thing well" (D22c); "The important thing is to know your strengths and maximize them, because everyone is good at one thing at least" (C16c). They particularly expressed self-acceptance in domains such as their "appearance," "education level," "how we talk," "how we act," "how we dress," or "hobbies." For example, one shared her conviction to remain true to herself regardless of others' opinions:

> I know how [Bangkok people] think of us … I know we do not fit into their ways of thinking and acting. I admit that we are not well educated, we speak differently from them, and we behave differently. But even though we are different from them, they are not above us. I do not want to imitate them by erasing myself. I do not want to change myself into someone else … No matter what other people say about my job and no matter what they say about my behavior, I will remain as I am. (B10c)

Others in this group were aware of the stigma attached to sex work and to Isaan people who "speak differently" and "behave differently," yet they were unfazed and continued to believe in their own value. To them, sex work represented an extension of the regular massage services, a perspective that initially surprised us and raised questions about whether they deliberately elevated the status and value of their work. However, we came to understand this perspective after learning more about massage work in the Thai context, where traditional massage has long been regarded as a professional service that requires significant therapeutic and medical expertise. Wat Pho, a renowned temple in Bangkok, even offers a prestigious massage training program and awards certificates. This group viewed traditional massage practices and sexual services as integrated, considering sex as a form of "therapy," "care," "treatment," or "a way of reenergizing" (B10c, C17c). They described sex work as valuable and important in enhancing others' well-being and happiness. One said, "Like many other jobs, my work is also valuable because it brings happiness to others" (A2c). Another stated, "It is an important job that someone has to do for others' well-being … and their happiness" (B12c). One described sex as part of the holistic care she provided to customers:

> Some may find discussing sex too sensitive. However, from my experience in this profession, I have come to see it differently. Sex is not the sole service offered here; it is part of a broader care package. What truly matters is ensuring [clients] feel nurtured … There are countless entertainment and massage venues in Bangkok. Why do they choose us? It is not just about sex … They seek a sense of genuine care. We are emotional beings, not animals. (D22c)

When discussing their male customers, these masseuses exhibited empathy and compassion. One remarked, "They are those who grew up without being loved by their parents. In fact, they really need emotional healing … Do not think of them in a bad light" (C16c). Another shared a similar sentiment:

> These men come to Thailand and visit our humble massage shop. Many may have been estranged from their parents or overlooked by women … They might never have a chance to meet good women because

> they might not look good, or might be poor … But when you actually get to know them, you will find that they are not bad people … They are only pitiable people … If we do not sincerely take care of them, who will take care of them? (D22c)

Their attitude to male customers distinctly set them apart from the other two groups. The first author noticed that a regular customer at one massage shop saw a different masseuse each time (Ob4). When he inquired about how the masseuses viewed that customer, a passive fantasizer had little recollection of him (e.g., A3p). An empowered victim, on the other hand, commented, "Yes, I remember him. He keeps coming even as he is getting too old. Quite funny, really" (A6e). In contrast, a compassionate caregiver overheard and remarked separately, "He might be someone who never truly experienced love from anyone. Maybe his wife passed away … I am not sure, but it seems like he needs emotional therapy. Visiting us might be his last resort" (A5c).

As such, the compassionate carers showed a strong sense of agency to provide genuine care for their customers. As one emphasized, "We don't just offer sex. We greet our clients with a warm smile, provide comfort, and genuine care that you won't find in robotic service shops" (C17c). Another said: "Every aspect of our work has a purpose. There is no such thing as meaningless work. My role is meaningful. It is about bringing joy and relaxation. I am proud of the care I provide" (J40c). The quote below highlighted the therapeutic aspect of sex, which they felt proud of providing:

> Massage is therapy. Sex is also a type of therapy. To provide good therapy, you need to know a lot and keep learning … I think I am an important person who provides important and professional services. There are many times when I feel rewarded while doing this work … I realized that many men come here for emotional comfort rather than just sex. You must give them good care. (C14e)

Retrospective early life narratives. The compassionate carers also brought up their challenging upbringings, mentioning similar experiences, such as being abused by family members (C17c) or ostracized by their local community (E24c). However, they expressed forgiveness and empathy, commonly noting, "It is not [the abusers'] fault" (e.g., C17c, E24c), or "There must have been a reason why they did that" (B10c). One admitted having a sense of shame and bitterness about the difficulties she experienced growing up, but said she was "coming to terms with my past and trying to see things positively" (C14c). A massage shop owner said of these masseuses, "They have already mastered anger control." One masseuse explained how she was able to avoid anger thanks to Buddhism,

> There is no need to harbor anger toward anyone in our everyday life. Everything that is supposed to happen will happen anyway. That is what I have learned from Buddhism. It is out of our control. So, there is no need to be upset. (B10c)

Similar to the empowered victims, Buddhism had played a significant role in the lives of these masseuses and their families in Isaan. However, they remembered a notably more positive experience of Buddhism and fondly recalled frequent visits to local temples during childhood. They recounted how their parents took them to temples to play, relax, and learn, which seemed to enable them to naturally absorb Buddhist teachings. One shared, "Almost all of my good memories come from the time I spent at the temple with my parents. I vividly remember visiting the night market held there every weekend, enjoying delicious food, and having fun conversations" (B8c). While their parents or other family members were often the first to introduce them to Buddhism, these positive experiences did not always involve their parents. One recounted the joy of being with the animals and monks at the temple,

> There were so many fun things to do at the temple I went to when I was young. I really liked the dogs and cats there. I fed them, took them for walks, and played with them … The monks there were really nice. I enjoyed talking to them. I always wished the monks to be healthy and they wished me happiness and told me many good stories. (A2c)

These masseuses described the local temple as a playground (A2c, B8c, B12c, D22c), library (C14c, J40c), resting place (E24c), or quiet sanctuary (D22c, J41c) where they spent many happy times. Such natural exposure to religion, recalled through casual visits to temples, appeared to foster an appreciation of Buddhist teachings, as one participant noted:

> Yes, my parents are Buddhists. On our days off, we mostly spent time at the local temple … However, although we were very close to Buddhism, I don't think my parents were deeply involved in any serious religious activity at the temple. All I could remember is that we occasionally met the monks and listened to a few sermons … My parents rarely talked about Buddhism on regular days at home. I liked going to temples because I liked the calmness at the temple and the kindness of the monks … For me, temple was a quiet space to calm my mind. (D22c)

Another similarly noted that she was exposed to Buddhist teachings naturally by spending happy times in the local temple as a child:

> When I was young, my younger brother was a monk, so our family visited the temple often. But we did not discuss Buddhism much. We just spent time talking and playing there. The temple was like a playground to me. Honestly, I did not engage much in worship, but I did learn valuable lessons from the monks' wise words. It was a great time. (E24c)

Their positive memories seemed to have reinforced their beliefs in Buddhist teachings, fostering a profound sense of compassion and enabling them to approach life challenges with equanimity and empathy. For instance, one recounted an incident from when she first started at the massage shop, where she was subjected to verbal abuse by a customer that escalated into a physical confrontation involving the shop manager. Reflecting on the incident with a serene smile, she remarked, "It was just an unfortunate occurrence" (C16c). She went on to explain, "[The customer] was just a pitiable man. The violence might have been his unique way of expressing anger. I was only worried about the anger in his mind" (C16c). In addition to compassion, these masseuses embodied the Buddhist principle of modesty, or the Middle Path (*Majjhimāpaṭipadā* in Pali, the language of the texts of Theravāda Buddhism), which advocates avoiding extremes. One of them explained:

> For me, the teaching of the Middle Path is the most meaningful. It says that when we refrain from being greedy for what lies immediately before our interests, we can then see something deeper and more meaningful … So, we should live diligently but not pursue too much. I believe that is the right way of life. (J40c)

This view was evident in their behaviors at work.

Work behaviors and income. It seemed that these masseuses could have earned more, but they consciously chose not to, which aligns with the Buddhist principle of modesty. They often finished work and returned home earlier at night than other masseuses, once they had earned the amount they had set as a target for the day (Ob3,4). One said, "Many masseuses argue with customers over prices and tips. That is because they want more. For me, I am satisfied with what I have … I think [seeking more] is not logical since it only creates more obsession" (B10c). This group indicated their belief in the virtue of modesty through remarks such as, "When we seek more satisfaction than we can handle, it always creates negative outcomes" (D22c), "Having too much always leads to problems" (E24c), or "It is not logical to seek more than you can afford" (A4c). When asked about her income, one respondent emphasized her priority to provide genuine care to customers and avoid overworking herself:

> Let me ask back why you want to know that. I admit that money is important in life, but money is not everything. A happy life does not come from money. I do this work because I need money, but I do not want to cheat others [out of] money, and I do not want to overwork myself for money. I think the important thing is to truly care for my customers and do my best. (C16c)

Despite not prioritizing income, these masseuses were earning average or above-average wages in the shops where they worked. For instance, in Massage Shop *A*, three out of seven masseuses were categorized as compassionate carers, and their incomes ranked second, third, and fourth, respectively. In Massage Shop *B*, three such masseuses ranked in the middle among the six masseuses we interviewed. Notably, in both shops, the top earner was an empowered victim while the lowest earner was a passive fantasizer. The other massage shops we studied showed similar patterns. The decent income earned by compassionate carers was likely driven by their genuine care for customers. As one shop manager explained:

> [C16c] is always smiling and shows a positive attitude toward her customers … She has the most regular customers in our shop … Of course, we all know what is happening here, but I believe they gain much more from her than physical pleasure.

What May Explain The "Not-So-Clean" Cases?

As noted earlier, seven of the 41 masseuses could not be neatly categorized as passive fantasizers, empowered victims, or compassionate carers, as their narratives blended elements from multiple narrative profiles. Upon further analysis, we discovered two reasons that may help to explain these inconsistent or contradictory narratives: (1) the external shock of the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted their work continuity while offering space for deep self-reflection and exposure to new influences, and (2) negative encounters with extremely disrespectful or violent customers that reshaped their perceptions of work.

First, four of these seven masseuses (A1p, B12c, C17c, G30c) simultaneously expressed sentiments associated with passive fantasizers—such as "work shame" or "indifference toward Buddhism"—and sentiments typical of compassionate carers—such as "work pride," "mercy," and "a Buddhism-inspired

work attitude." Based on our analysis, we conjecture that they might have been in the middle of a transition from passive fantasizers to compassionate carers. This transition appears to have occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown, when massage shops in Bangkok were shuttered and the masseuses were forced to return to their hometowns. This extended break from work may have enabled a process akin to what Kross and colleagues (2023: 446) term psychological distancing, defined as "the process of mentally moving away from what is experientially available in the here and now," fostering deep self-reflection. During this period, the masseuses were exposed to influences from local institutions, especially Buddhism.

A telling observation occurred while the first author was serving as a monk. Each morning, one of the masseuses (B12c) walked barefoot to the temple and offered modest food and supplies. After witnessing this repeatedly, the first author asked her about this behavior and came to understand that she viewed this daily act of donation as a form of meditation—her own ritual mirroring the monks' morning meditation. It seemed to be a way for her to let go of or forget something. During a later conversation, she tearfully shared: "When I was working [in the massage shop], I just worked like a robot. So, I didn't have time to think … I think I just wanted to escape … I wanted to have someone to save me." She went on to say, "Now, I am trying to find some meaning in this work and put in effort … At the end of the day, I think every work is valuable." Yet, traces of shame persisted; she remained hesitant to speak openly about her job. Still, this case illustrates how an external shock like the COVID-19 lockdown can force individuals to step away from their routine, creating the conditions for self-reflection and new institutional influences that may help them reframe and find meaning in their work (Schabram, Bloom & DiDonna, 2023).

The second set of outlier cases involves three masseuses (D18e, I35e, J39e) whose narratives straddle the categories of passive fantasizers and empowered victims. Yet, their prevailing emotional tone was not one entirely of passivity or shame, but also of victimization and aggression. They also expressed strong, negative views of Buddhism, which further distinguished them and led us to classify them as empowered victims. A striking commonality among these three respondents was their repeated exposure to unusually disrespectful, and often violent, customers. While much of our analysis focused on family relations, these cases suggest the importance of examining dyadic interactions at work, such as those between masseuses and random customers. All three women recounted experiences of humiliation and degradation at the hands of customers. One reflected, "I was never treated like this before I came to this work … I now realize that I have to exploit [customers] before they use me" (I35e). Another said more explicitly, "I laugh at myself for thinking customers would rescue me. How naïve I was in the beginning! What a fool I was to expect love from those who come here" (J39e). While they did not necessarily recall parental neglect as other empowered victims did, their experiences with customers seemed to have played a formative role, aligning with previous research suggesting that sex workers' interactions with clients can significantly shape their perceptions of the work and workplace (Bernstein, 2007; Weitzer, 2009). In these three cases, we still observed elements of shame (a hallmark of passive fantasizers), but the repeated encounters with unusually rude or violent clients appeared to push them toward a more hateful and aggressive stance, strengthening a desire for, and an agentic orientation toward, revenge, and exploiting customers in return.

A Model of Narrative Construction of Agentic Orientation at Work in Persistent Precarity

How do individuals construct a sense of agency in persistent precarity through self-narratives, and with what implications for work outcomes? Our analysis identifies three narrative profiles, characterized by distinct emotional tones, forms of agency or agentic orientations, and patterned work behaviors that are associated with different income levels. We refer to these narrative profiles respectively as passive fantasizers, empowered victims, and compassionate carers. Although we empirically examined how sex workers in Thailand constructed different agentic orientations at work through their self-narratives, we conceptualize these constructions as more general narrative patterns that may arise in other settings of persistent precarity.

Individuals categorized as passive fantasizers exhibit little to no agency. They narrate their lives through a lens of shame and self-rejection. Shame, an emotion that involves negative evaluations of the self and is associated with withdrawal and avoidance (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007), pervades their accounts of both past and present experiences of precarity. To cope, they often engage in dissociation—an experience of mentally detaching themselves from their daily tasks (Cardeña, 1994; Holmes et al., 2005)—so they can continue performing what they consider as degrading work. Alongside this withdrawal, they craft

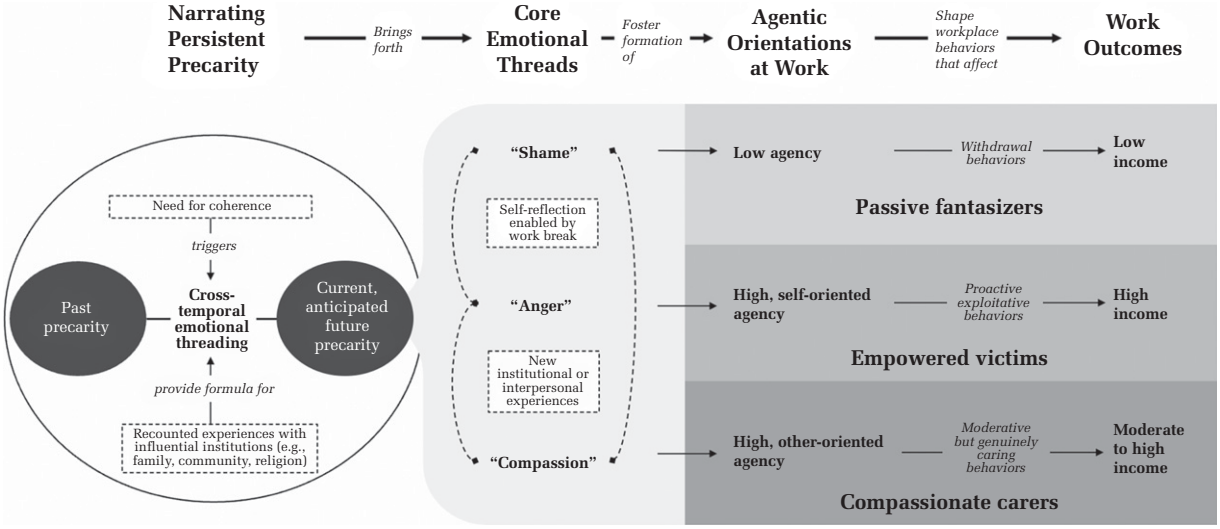
elaborate fantasies of future rescue by a benevolent other (e.g., a benefactor, romantic partner, or employer), which, according to prior research (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Laughlin, 1970), function as defensive imaginings that preserve a sense of meaning and hope in an otherwise bleak situation. At work, this narrative of limited agency translates into minimal initiative and a tendency to endure rather than to shape their circumstances. Because they spend little effort improving their work circumstances or performance, they tend to earn below-average income relative to others in similar jobs. In our setting, those who narrated themselves in this way often spent hours watching fiction dramas or consuming alcohol after work—activities documented by prior research as methods people use to cope with and escape from the distressing reality of their work and life (Dill-Shackleford, Vinney & Hopper-Losenicky, 2016; Grunberg, Moore & Greenberg, 1998; Seeman & Anderson, 1983). They rarely developed repeat customers, and their incomes were consistently ranked near the bottom among masseuses in the same workplaces.

By contrast, individuals categorized as empowered victims show high, self-oriented agency directed toward realizing personal benefits. They narrate themselves as victims of unjust others and systems, externalizing blame for their hardships onto specific people, organizations, or institutions. This sense of victimhood fuels anger and resentment, which, as suggested by prior research (Hemenover & Zhang, 2004; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006), can increase desire to change one's circumstances, perceived control, and risk-taking, fostering an agentic stance. In particular, these individuals' agency is strongly self-oriented, aimed at maximizing personal gain and restoring a sense of power. They tend to describe their work as a legitimate arena for "turning the tables" on more powerful actors, justifying exploiting counterparties (e.g., employers, customers) as a form of revenge and empowerment. This can translate into vigilant monitoring of opportunities, strategic impression management, and active cultivation of profitable relationships. As such, empowered victims tend to earn above-average income. In our study, masseuses in this category often subtly manipulated male customers, and strategically attracted and established long-term relationships with wealthy clients, which caused them to rank among the highest earners in their workplaces. These behaviors have also been observed in prior research on sex workers (Hoang, 2015; Sanders, 2005),

A third group, categorized as compassionate carers, display high, other-oriented agency directed toward benefiting others. Their narratives are suffused not with shame or anger but with acceptance, peace, and empathy. This ethos may be rooted in specific spiritual or philosophical teachings that individuals draw from in making sense of their past and present precarity. In our setting, masseuses in this category were deeply influenced by Buddhism. To them, Buddhism represented not just a religion but a daily practice toward cultivating compassion, modesty, and inner peace. Compassionate carers often see themselves as professionals who can use their work to enhance others' well-being, making their agency strongly other-oriented. At work, this agentic orientation shows up as reliable, high-quality services driven by genuine care for others. Precisely because their care fosters trust and repeat patronage, they typically achieve average or above-average income compared to peers. In our context, compassionate carers did not maximize earnings to the same extent as empowered victims. Instead, they set self-imposed limits on how much they earned and how long they worked, but still earned more than passive fantasizers and sometimes a comparable amount to empowered victims while maintaining a sense of integrity and purpose.

Building on these findings, we develop a theoretical model of how individuals in persistent precarity construct distinct agentic orientations at work through self-narratives (see Figure 1). As individuals narrate their persistent precarity, including both past, as well as current and anticipated, future precarity, the very act of crafting a self-narrative generates a need for coherence, which triggers a process we call cross-temporal emotional threading. We conceptualize cross-temporal emotional threading as the linking of temporally distant life experiences through recurrent, core emotional threads that provide coherence and continuity in one's self-narratives. Rather than treating past and present as separate domains, individuals weave them together by interpreting both through the lens of the same core emotional threads. Importantly, our data suggest that how individuals remember formative experiences with influential institutions such as family (e.g., parents), local community (e.g., Isaan), and religious institutions (e.g., Buddhism) provides the formula that shapes their emotional threading. In conditions of persistent precarity, our findings reveal three types of emotional thread—shame, anger, and compassion—that can be evoked as individuals make sense of their past, present, and anticipated future experiences. Once evoked, individuals anchor on these core emotional threads to interpret past, present, and anticipated future precarity, giving rise to distinct agentic

FIGURE 1
A Model of Narrative Construction of Agentic Orientations at Work in Persistent Precarity



orientations. In particular, shame-based emotional threading produces self-negating stories and minimal perceived agency; anger-based threading fosters self-assertive narratives and high, self-oriented agency; and compassion-based threading supports narratives infused with empathy and cultivates high, other-oriented agency. In addition, these core emotional threads can shift under certain conditions. Our analysis of the "not-so-clean" cases indicates that when individuals engage in self-reflection enabled by a break from work, or when they are exposed to new institutional or interpersonal experiences that challenge their existing perspectives, they may evoke different core emotional threads, which foster a different agentic orientation.

These agentic orientations, in turn, are associated with different patterns of work behaviors and outcomes under persistent precarity. When agency is low, individuals tend to withdraw or disengage through, for instance, dissociation or fantasy, investing little effort in work, which subsequently limits their earnings. When individuals exhibit high, self-oriented agency, they tend to engage in opportunistic or exploitative behaviors that can generate substantial gains but may involve relational or reputational risks over time. When individuals enact high, other-oriented agency, they typically deliver reliable, high-quality work grounded in genuine care for others; although they do not actively maximize every financial opportunity, they often benefit from the trust and loyalty brought by their efforts and are able to earn decent income. In essence, our model proposes that cross-temporal emotional threading, driven particularly by the need for narrative coherence and the emergence of core emotional threads involving shame, anger, or compassion, underlies the construction of distinct agentic orientations at work under persistent precarity, and that these agentic orientations shape how individuals behave at work and the outcomes, especially income, they achieve.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

Coping with persistent precarity. Research on persistent precarity has largely developed through two separate streams: one that highlights structural marginalization and the constraints it imposes (e.g., Kalleberg, 2000, 2009, 2018), and another that highlights the adaptive strategies individuals enact to navigate these conditions (e.g., Pongeluppe, 2024; Weiss et al., 2024). Across both streams, agency is implicated as a critical factor shaping individual outcomes in persistent precarity, and is treated as either constrained or present. Our research advances the literature on how individuals cope with persistent precarity by showing that individuals in persistent precarity do not simply possess more or less agency; rather, they can construct different forms of agency, or agentic orientations, through their self-narratives. Specifically, we identify three agentic orientations: minimal agency as in passive fantasizers, self-oriented agency as in empowered victims, and other-oriented agency as in compassionate carers.

More importantly, we illuminate *how* individuals facing the same structural constraints come to develop these different agentic orientations and cope with persistent precarity in strikingly divergent ways. By analyzing how individuals narrate persistent precarity, we show that these agentic orientations arise through a shared process we call cross-temporal emotional threading, in which people anchor on a core emotional thread to weave together life experiences across time. Three types of core emotional threads emerged from our data: shame, anger, and compassion. These core emotional threads, shaped by individuals' unique recollection of past experiences with influential institutions, provide coherence in self-narratives and a lens through which individuals interpret their experiences, thereby fostering a particular agentic orientation. In addition, the core emotional threads and associated agentic orientation may be altered if individuals encounter new institutional or interpersonal experiences and engage in deep self-reflection during breaks from work. Our model thus suggests that the differences in how individuals cope with persistent precarity may be rooted in the emotional threads they use to weave together self-narratives across life chapters, which give rise to different agentic orientations that shape work behaviors and outcomes.

Agency in self-narratives. While research in sociology posits that the degree of agency conveyed in self-narratives is shaped by sociocultural discourses and other structural factors (e.g., Lamont, 2019; Sharone, 2014), a parallel body of research in management and psychology highlights that individuals can *actively* construct a sense of agency through their own self-narratives (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2022). Our study adds to this literature by showing that individuals can not only construct a sense of agency, but also construct *qualitatively different agentic orientations* even when they live within the same structural realities. In particular, our model suggests that individuals anchor on specific emotional threads evoked by their unique recollection of past events to interpret life experiences across time to achieve a sense of coherence, and the emotional threads foster divergent agentic orientations.

In so doing, our findings enrich our understanding of the role of emotions in agency construction in self-narratives. Rather than focusing on the ability to regulate emotions as reflection and reinforcement of agency, our research highlights emotions as the foundational raw materials that become the common lens through which individuals view their experiences across time and foster the construction of particular agentic orientations. Moreover, while prior research emphasizes the role of prior events, especially events that trigger negatively valenced emotions, in shaping individuals' narratives (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne et al., 2004) our research suggests that the influence may lie not in the events, but in the emotions that persist even after the events. These emotions become threads that individuals use to craft a coherent self-narrative, setting the tone for the development of their agentic orientations.

The meaning of work in precarity. Our study also contributes to the literature on the meaning of work by extending existing insights on how individuals make meaning of work under persistent precarity, in at least two ways. First, we show that the sources from which individuals in persistent precarity draw meaning from their work are not uniform but highly differentiated. The passive fantasizers endure shame and draw meaning from fantasy, specifically the idea of romantic salvation. The empowered victims find meaning in reversing the asymmetries of power and implicitly exploiting others at work. Finally, compassionate carers derive meaning from enacting care-driven service, inspired by higher-level value systems such as the religious teachings from Buddhism. These divergent sources of meaning complicate existing assumptions and findings that workers engaging in precarious labor are concerned primarily about income or rely on "functional ambivalence" to carry on (Kalleberg, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2022). Instead, our study highlights how the meaning of work is perceived and constructed heterogeneously in deeply personal ways for those living under precarity.

Second, we contribute to calls to recognize the role of spirituality more broadly in meaning making at work (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Smith, Lawson, Barbosa & Jones, 2023; Vu & Burton, 2022) by showing how spiritual ideologies—in this case, Buddhist teachingscan influence how individuals make meaning of their work. Much of the existing research on spirituality and work meanings has centered on callings, which typically draw individuals into noble, service-oriented professions (Bloom, Colbert & Nielsen, 2021; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2023). This line of work traces back to Max Weber's ([1905] 1930) notion of the Protestant ethic, in which work serves to sustain a holy life and ultimately glorify God. Our research expands this understanding of religious influences on work meanings by extending it to other spiritual systems—Buddhism, in particular. In Buddhism, there is no concept of a calling or a Creator God. Still, our

findings from a Buddhist context demonstrate that spirituality can profoundly shape the meaning of work in the absence of a divine calling or inspiration from the existence of God. The compassionate carers in our study, influenced by Buddhist principles of compassion, non-attachment, and modesty, certainly do not view sex work as their calling. Yet, they still find meaning in their labor through these spiritual teachings. This suggests that spirituality and religious belief can serve as powerful interpretive frameworks that allow individuals to reframe precarious, even illegal and stigmatized, work as a site of dignity, service, and purpose, beyond simply motivating the pursuit of a particularly noble occupation.

Practical Implications

Our findings offer practical insights and guidance for individuals navigating the challenges of living under precarity themselves, organizations committed to supporting them, and policymakers. Clearly, the narratives of people whose working life is characterized by uncertainty and instability, particularly when such conditions persist, are varied. On the one hand, listening to and understanding these narratives, including the underlying emotional threads and the resulting agentic orientations, enables individuals to assess their perspective, thus giving them more control over their own narratives and preparing them to navigate their circumstances more effectively (Frey, Bernstein & Rekenthaler, 2022). Examining the experiences of workers who have endured long-term precarity provides valuable insights into the working life that is increasingly becoming the norm for many. This awareness can help individuals psychologically brace themselves for what they may encounter in a world where persistent precarity is on the rise. With such foresight, individuals can more accurately recognize their emotions and the emotions' impact, cultivate a more proactive approach to their working lives, and develop their own agency in the face of challenges.

On the other hand, understanding these narratives and their implications for agentic orientations, as well as work behaviors and outcomes, allows readers to develop a more critical perspective on the different narrative profiles. What are the positive and negative implications of holding each type of these narratives? In what ways can they be framed as either beneficial or detrimental? For example, while compassionate carers may appear to be the most subjectively and mentally well-off, they may also be acquiescing to structural positions that entail forms of oppression. Their other-oriented agency can trap them in persistent precarity—conditions from which empowered victims actively seek to escape. In this sense, Buddhism may operate as a paradoxical meta-social fabric, shaping individuals' attitudes toward accepting broader social structures and systems. The compassionate carers in our study, deeply influenced by Buddhist teachings, embraced contentment and acceptance as central virtues. While this ethos fosters other-oriented agency, it can also inadvertently discourage efforts to resist and challenge constraining social structures. By contrast, the empowered victims, disillusioned with and critical of Buddhism, actively pursued material success, channeling hatred and anger into self-oriented agency to achieve upward mobility on the social ladder. This contrast invites a more critical discussion on the complex social functions of religions and spiritualities in shaping individual agency, as well as the implications of different agentic orientations for individual and social outcomes.

Boundary Conditions, Limitations, and Future Research

Our theoretical model proposes that a key process underpinning how individuals in persistent precarity construct distinct agentic orientations through self-narratives is cross-temporal emotional threading, whereby they weave narratives of past, present, and anticipated future precarity together through a recurrent, core emotional thread such as shame, anger, or compassion. Although our model is grounded in a deeply contextualized study of Thai sex workers, we conceptualize it as describing general patterns of narrative construction of agentic orientations that may arise in other settings of persistent precarity. At the same time, the transferability of our insights is shaped by several boundary conditions, which we discuss below.

The first boundary condition concerns the influence of Buddhism. Our study shows that the emergence of compassion-based emotional threading, and consequently, an other-oriented agentic orientation, was deeply intertwined with participants' prior exposure to Buddhist teachings and practices. Buddhism provided them a moral compass around compassion and equanimity and an interpretive repertoire for making sense of hardship and cultivating acceptance. This religious backdrop shaped how individuals remembered formative experiences and how compassion emerged as a stable emotional thread over time. As such, we may not observe, or may observe less saliently, the emergence of compassionate carers in

contexts where there is no influence of Buddhism. However, Buddhism is not the only possible source of influence for individuals to embody compassion. We expect similar compassion-based narratives to arise in other settings where individuals have access to institutionalized value systems that promote compassion (Dutton, Lilius & Kanov, 2007; Dutton, Workman & Hardin, 2014; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline & Maitlis, 2011; Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton & Frost, 2008). For example, we might see such narratives among migrant service workers who, despite facing systemic marginalization in the countries they work at, draw on other religious traditions, such as Catholic teachings, or on the ethos of professional caregiving to engage in their work with care, compassion, and a higher purpose to serve others (e.g., Ho, Chiang, Leung & Ku, 2018). Conversely, in organizations or communities where such value systems are weak or absent, compassion-based emotional threading and the resulting other-oriented agency may be less likely to take shape.

The second boundary condition concerns the stigma attached to particular social groups. The shame-based, low-agency orientation we observed among passive fantasizers emerged within a group of sex workers from the Isaan region—a context in which strong stigma is associated with both the occupation and their place of origin. Such heightened stigma can amplify the sense of shame felt by these participants both as a present emotional experience and as a lens through which they recounted their past. In other contexts of persistent precarity where stigma is weaker or absent, such as among social workers or professional gig workers, shame may not surface as a core emotional thread, and the low-agency orientation may be less likely to develop.

Our third boundary condition concerns when an anger-based emotional thread will emerge and translate into collective, rather than merely individualized, actions. Consistent with prior research, the anger expressed by empowered victims in our study was triggered by perceived injustice or victimization (Jasper, 2011; Lazarus, 1991), an experience likely shared by individuals in many other forms of persistent precarity. However, in contexts where persistent precarity is viewed as fate rather than as injustice, as in the case of ragpickers in Shepherd et al. (2022), anger may not become a dominant emotional thread. Moreover, in our model, anger fosters self-oriented agency that encourages personal acts of revenge or subtle exploitation of more powerful actors, rather than collective efforts to pursue change. We suggest that whether anger can drive collective mobilization depends on individuals' perceived feasibility of collective action and systemic change. In our study, empowered victims did not seem to view such action as feasible. In other contexts, however, where collective action is more feasible or institutionally supported (DeCelles, Sonenshein & King, 2020), empowered victims may be more likely to organize and mobilize collectively. Taken together, these boundary conditions highlight the need for future research to examine additional contexts of persistent precarity to assess the generalizability of our model.

Beyond these boundary conditions, our study has at least two additional limitations that could inform directions for future research. First, we did not examine shifts in core emotional threads and agentic orientations because the majority of the accounts appeared to remain constant and stable throughout our research period. Our analysis focused primarily on the existing narratives rather than the dynamics of how they might evolve over time. Yet, the "not-so-clean" cases in our data suggest that such shifts are possible and may be triggered by factors such as self-reflection enabled by breaks from work or new institutional or interpersonal experiences. Future research could employ multiwave interviews, diary methods, or ethnographies over longer durations to examine whether and how emotional threads and the associated agentic orientations change, what triggers such shifts, and why some shifts "stick" while others dissolve.

Second, as indicated earlier, some masseuses' narratives reflected elements of two distinct narrative profiles, and several others reported narratives and work outcomes that did not align neatly with the predominant patterns we identified. In fact, the ragpickers studied by Shepherd and colleagues (2022) seem to exhibit characteristics of both passive fantasizers and, to a lesser extent, compassionate carers: they described feeling stuck and helpless while also expressing acceptance, hope, and a sense of purpose in supporting their families, especially their children. This suggests that the patterns in our typology may be better conceptualized as spectrums rather than discrete categories. We encourage future research to continue refining the model to deepen understanding of the nuanced ways in which individuals construct and express agentic orientations through self-narratives under persistent precarity, and how these orientations relate to their experiences and outcomes at work.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we analyzed the self-narratives of a group of sex workers in Thailand who live in

persistent precarity, and identified three patterns with distinct agentic orientations: passive fantasizers with little agency, empowered victims with self-oriented agency, and compassionate carers with other-oriented agency. By theorizing cross-temporal emotional threading as the key process underpinning agency construction through self-narratives, we offer insights into why individuals in persistent precarity enact their working lives in distinct ways. As precarity becomes an increasingly common and long-lasting reality, we hope this study encourages further research on how individuals build and sustain agency and meaning in working lives that no longer offer the promise of stability.

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