

The Normalization of Sin

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Abstract

This paper discusses the normalization of sin, specifically sex work. One question that emerges is how do some behaviors come to be seen as sinful, and then once those behaviors are accepted as sinful, how do they become normalized (ie., become socially acceptable again)? After identifying a gap in the existing literature pertaining to the lack of acknowledgement for the role of institutions in driving change, I seek to fill that gap by using pattern-matching to determine how closely aligned sex work is to the phases of Normalization Process Theory. Ultimately, I am expecting to find that, according to the phases of Normalization Process Theory, sex work is becoming normalized.

I. Introduction

Sin covers a variety of different behaviors in American society. Sin can include sex work, drug use, and gambling, among others. One question that emerges is how do some behaviors come to be seen as sinful, and then once those behaviors are accepted as sinful, how do they become normalized (i.e., become socially acceptable again)? This question is important because there are several factors driving normalization and stigmatization, and some of those drivers might have underlying intentions. For example, the Christian right has been extremely successful in stigmatizing several different kinds of sin. They stand to gain moral high ground and thus power. Several segments of society have been trying to reclaim and normalize these stigmatized sinful behaviors with varying degrees of success.

I analyze the normalization of sex work because it is one of the modern day sins that has resisted legalization and is still rather stigmatized in American culture. Sex work is defined as receiving “money or goods in exchange for consensual sexual services.”¹ Sex work includes a variety of different services: stripping, exotic dance, erotic massage, content-subscription services (like OnlyFans), escort services, pornography, cam services, telephone services, street prostitution, and indoor prostitution. Sex work is seen as a moral issue and is often left to state and local governments to regulate.² As a result, there are a patchwork of approaches to sex work. The differing approaches to sex work may affect normalization in various ways. For example, the difference between decriminalization and legalization, and those who push for those two different approaches, may reveal certain ideas that are culturally- and morally-held in American society. In this project, I analyze theories of normalization in my literature review, discuss my

¹ Open Society Foundations. “Understanding Sex Work in an Open Society.” Open Society Foundations. Last modified April 2019. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society>.

² Ditmore, Melissa Hope. “Legal Frameworks.” In *Prostitution and Sex Work*, 31-36. N.p.: ABC-CLIO, 2010.

analytic framework of Normalization Process Theory, operationalize each variable of the aforementioned theory in my methods section, and discuss my findings.

II. Literature Review

In this literature review, I seek to understand how ideas and institutions work to normalize sin. Normalization is the process through which an act or concept becomes embedded in society.³ The concept of normalization is important in many disciplines as scholars try to determine why some phenomena phase in and out of society. For example, some sins have become normalized to varying degrees. Gambling is still illegal, but it is widely accepted in many areas. Sex work, conversely, is illegal and still rather stigmatized. The key question that scholars seek to address is: how and why do these phenomena become embedded in society? Is the process of normalization driven by individuals? By institutions? By mass media? The process of normalization is crucial for thinking about society critically and determining what is allowed in society. Understanding normalization can help identify the driving forces behind commonly accepted (or stigmatized) practices.

Sociologists, historians, philosophers, psychologists, and political scientists have all developed theories to tackle this issue. Some of the more well-known theories are theories of individual action, institutionalism, and Normalization Process Theory. Ultimately, I argue Normalization Process Theory is the best starting point for understanding normalization; however, this theory does not quite account for the role of institutions in the process of normalization. In order to strengthen this theory, the role of institutions should be considered at each stage of the Normalization Process Theory.

a. The Theory of Planned Behavior

³ May, Carl and Tracy Finch. "Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices: An Outline of Normalization Process Theory." *Sociology* 43, no. 3 (June 1, 2009): 535–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509103208>.

There has been debate over whether normalization originates at the individual level or collective level. While there does not seem to be literature stating that individuals single-handedly drive normalization, the role of individuals cannot be ignored. In order to understand the relationship between individuals and normalization, I will focus on the Theory of Planned Behavior, as well as critiques of this theory.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) attempts to explain the relationship between intention and action.⁴ Scholars of planned behavior posit that subjective norms drive intentions, which in turn drive behavior. Scholars have identified some factors that can affect each stage of this theory. For example, attitudes towards behaviors and perceived behavioral control can affect subjective norms and intentions.⁵ An understanding of these terms is helpful in determining the relevancy of this theory to normalization. Attitudes towards behaviors are defined as whether an individual has a positive or negative evaluation of a certain behavior.⁶ Subjective norms are defined as perceived societal pressures to perform a behavior.⁷ Perceived behavioral control is the perceived difficulty of performing a behavior, and it typically accounts for past experiences, as well as perceived obstacles.⁸

Some scholars have identified shortcomings in this theory. For example, the Theory of Planned Behavior does not account for moral norms, belief salience, past behavior/habit, perceived behavioral control versus self-efficacy, self-identity, and affective beliefs.⁹ For the purpose of this literature review, I am most interested in the role of moral norms. Moral norms

⁴ Ajzen, Icek. "The Theory of Planned Behavior." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50 (1991): 179-211.

⁵ Ibid. at 182.

⁶ Ibid. at 188.

⁷ Ibid. at 188.

⁸ Ibid. at 188.

⁹ Conner, Mark, and Christopher J. Armitage. "Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior: A Review and Avenues for Further Research." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 15 (1998): 1429-64. <https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1998.tb01685.x>.

are defined as “one’s own socially determined and socially validated values attached to a particular behavior.”¹⁰ This suggested addition to the TPB is helpful, especially in relation to the normalization of sin. Some studies have determined that moral norms can be a significant predictor for intention.¹¹ This is relevant because it illustrates that when people make decisions to engage or not engage with certain practices, socially validated values about that decision can influence behavior. In relation to sex work, this can be seen in existing moral norms (sex work is sinful) and whether or not those norms actually play a role in the decision to engage in sex work. While this theory does have relevancy, it is lacking in connecting individual action to institutions. This theory is, however, extremely useful in understanding how norms can inform individual decisions.

b. Institutionalism

Among institutionalists, there is debate over what the role of institutions are in society. The literature consists of four main strands of institutionalism: rational choice, historical, sociological, and discursive institutionalism (also referred to as constructivism).¹² For the purpose of this literature review, I will focus on historical institutionalism and discursive institutionalism because they are the most relevant when considering the normalization of sin and thinking about sin.

Historical institutionalists (HIs) focus on how institutions have changed over time and what those changes can reflect about society.¹³ In order to do this, HIs engage in process tracing to observe the changes in institutions. The difficulty with this approach to institutionalism is that

¹⁰ Manstead, cited in Conner and Armitage. “Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior.” 1442.

¹¹ Conner and Armitage. “Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior.” 1443.

¹² Schmidt, Vivien A. “Taking Ideas and Discourse Seriously: Explaining Change through Discursive Institutionalism as the Fourth ‘New Institutionalism.’” *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577390999021X>.

¹³ Orren and Skowronek. “The Institutional Turn: Rethinking Order and Change over Time.” In *The Search for American Political Development*. 78.

it does not explain the changes; it merely shows that an institution has changed. HIs have even been critiqued as “merely telling stories.”¹⁴ Historical institutionalism is not without merits; it is certainly helpful to establish when an institution has changed, as well as factors of time periods that were present when the institution changed. However, the critiques are valid as well. It is helpful to know why an institution changed to evaluate the efficacy of those factors (for example, whether the change occurred from within the institution or outside of the institution). As far as the role of institutions, HIs assert that “the definition of interests and objectives is created in institutional contexts and is not separable from them.”¹⁵ This understanding, however, does not account for the role that individuals play in shaping interests and objectives or the role of individuals in shaping institutions themselves.

Discursive institutionalism is an important counterbalance to historical institutionalism. Ideas are inherently difficult to define and operationalize, especially when trying to determine how normalization works. However, discursive institutionalists try to determine how ideas influence social change.¹⁶ Historical institutionalists view changes as slow and incremental and pushed by external shocks.¹⁷ Discursive institutionalists try to determine when institutions exercise power versus when individuals change institutions.¹⁸ The main difference between historical institutionalism and discursive institutionalism is the interplay between institutions and individuals. Discursive institutionalists posit that “[i]n order to advance their interests, social groups construct institutions which in turn define social roles for the groups to which individuals

¹⁴ Thelen, Kathleen. “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 369-404. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.369>.

¹⁵ Zysman, John. “How Institutions Create Historically Rooted Trajectories of Growth.” *Industrial and Corporate Change* 3, no. 1 (1994): 243-83. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/3.1.243>.

¹⁶ Cox and Béland. “Urban Political Development and the Politics of Ideas.” In *How Ideas Shape Urban Political Development*. XI.

¹⁷ Thelen, Kathleen. “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics.” 387.

¹⁸ Cox and Béland. “Urban Political Development and the Politics of Ideas.” In *How Ideas Shape Urban Political Development*. XI.

belong.”¹⁹ Other theories have either avoided discussing ideas for practical reasons (ideas are difficult to operationalize), or not fully accounted for the role of individuals in shaping institutions, making it seem that institutions occur in a vacuum. Discursive institutionalism, however, has merit, especially in the discussion of ideas and normalization. It accounts for individuals and how those individuals shape institutions.

c. Normalization Process Theory

Normalization Process Theory (NPT) is a three-stage theory about how practices become embedded in society. The working definition of normalization as set forth by proponents of this theory is that normalization is “the work that actors do as they engage with some ensemble of activities (that may include new or changed ways of thinking, acting, and organizing) and by which means it becomes routinely embedded in the matrices of already existing, socially patterned, knowledge and practices.”²⁰ Before discussing the stages of normalization, it is useful to first discuss what exactly is meant by “practices.” A practice in NPT is a set of “beliefs, behaviors, and acts that manipulate or organize objects and others.”²¹ For the purpose of applying this theory to the normalization of sex work, the practice is a set of beliefs and behaviors that manipulate people. For example, there are beliefs that sex work is bad and sinful. These beliefs manipulate people into not talking about sex work or not participating in sex work. The manipulation of objects is not applicable here, and as such, will not be discussed.

The first step of NPT is that some processes and practices become ingrained as people work, both collectively and individually, to implement the practices in society. The next steps focus on how implementation occurs. According to NPT scholars, there are four aspects of

¹⁹ Dilworth and Weaver. “Idea, Interests, Institutions, and Urban Political Development.” In *How Ideas Shape Urban Political Development*. 4.

²⁰ May, Carl and Tracy Finch. “Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices: An Outline of Normalization Process Theory.” *Sociology* 43, no. 3 (June 1, 2009), 540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509103208>.

²¹ May and Finch. “Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices.” 542.

implementation. The first is coherence, meaning that the practice has a set of socially defined ideas about the meanings and uses of the practice. Without a set of defined ideas about what exactly the practice is, it is very difficult to implement or normalize the practice. Another important aspect of coherence is specification. There may be differences in a communal understanding of a practice and in an individual's understanding of a practice. When it comes to internalizing a practice, this idea of specification raises a question: which definition becomes internalized and reproduced? NPT scholars posit that the internalized understanding is often the communal understanding because the practice's meaning is typically learned, shared, and experienced by people in specific social contexts.²² In other words, while individuals have their own thoughts and ideas shaped by and anchored in personal experiences, those thoughts and ideas are not shaped in a vacuum. Thoughts and ideas are bounced around, discussed, and debated with others. This leads to the next part of coherence, which is that in order for a practice to be socially defined, people have to collectively invest meaning in the practice.²³

The next part of implementation is cognitive participation. This stage involves symbolic and real engagements, such as initiation, enrolment, and legitimation.²⁴ Initiation means that there is some kind of work done to make the practice happen. As people are engaging in the practice, they seek to bring others into the practice, which is known as enrolment. Legitimation requires institutionally shared beliefs. In order for beliefs to become shared throughout an institution, there must be work done to determine procedures and define engagement with the practice. Finally, activation occurs, which is when the practice is operationalized.

A large part of NPT is collective action. Practices do not become normalized because people just start doing those practices; they become normalized because people interact with

²² May and Finch. "Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices." 543.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. at 543-544.

each other to integrate the practice. NPT scholars recognize several different kinds of integration, but the most important for understanding the normalization of sin is contextual integration and relational integration. Contextual integration focuses on how a practice becomes incorporated into a social context, and relational integration focuses on the way that practices are understood within networks of people around the practice.²⁵

The final element of NPT is reflexive monitoring. This stage refers to participants' continuous evaluation of a practice. One way to see the evaluation is through appraisal. There can be communal appraisal and individual appraisal. Communal appraisal tends to be an organized procedure of assessing institutional production and interpretation.²⁶ Individual appraisal relies on unsystematic practices of judging the value and outcomes of a practice.²⁷ Both kinds of appraisal can lead to reconfiguration, which is a reassessment of the value of the practice.

The overarching theme of NPT is that individuals do work to make a practice a practice. They initiate a practice. They then talk with others about that practice or encourage others to join the practice. As more and more people recognize the practice, beliefs become institutionally shared. This theory recognizes that individuals form ideas, but in order for ideas to become normalized, ideas have to become institutionally-held beliefs. Ultimately, individuals and communities can check norms by reconfiguring ideas about the value and utility of practices. This theory is helpful in identifying the overlap between individuals and communities when normalizing a practice. It is also helpful in understanding how an idea shifts from one person to the collective and becomes normalized.

²⁵ May and Finch. "Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices." 544-45.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at 546.

²⁷ *Ibid.* at 546.

Scholars in the field that NPT was originally created for have identified that NPT closes some gaps between research and implementation.²⁸ They have also acknowledged that NPT is a strong theory in identifying connections between groups, as well as giving consideration to the system as a whole, rather than one group in a system.²⁹ However, this theory is not without shortcomings. First, it was developed for the technology implementation field to explain why certain technologies become adopted while others do not. It is not entirely applicable to the field of political science. However, the stages of NPT do have value and can be applied at a higher level to political science. While sex work and technology are not the same, there is overlap in the ideas of communal appraisal and reconfiguration, or cognitive participation. Additionally, this theory does not entirely account for the role of institutions. While the original developers of NPT broadened their theory to be sociological, a gap exists in the literature of actually applying this model to other fields outside of technology implementation. In order to strengthen this theory and apply it to the field of political science, the role of institutions should be considered in each stage of NPT, especially given the discourse of institutionalist theorists that institutions might drive change, rather than individuals.

III. Analytic Framework

The analytic framework I will use is Normalization Process Theory as conceptualized by May and Finch. Due to the encompassing nature of this theory (in comparison with individual action or institutionalism), I will be using it to track the process of normalization, specifically through the implementation stage. The reason for using this theory is that it is meant to identify the roles that individuals play in institutions during the process of normalization. There are four

²⁸ Murray, Elizabeth, et al. "Normalisation Process Theory: A Framework for Developing, Evaluating and Implementing Complex Interventions." *BMC Medicine* 8, no. 63 (October 20, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1741-7015-8-63>.

²⁹ Murray et al. "Normalisation Process Theory." 8.

main variables of this theory. The first is coherence, which is broadly defined as the work that is done to normalize a practice.³⁰ In this case, work will be defined as the construction of beliefs, and indicators will be examined in the table below. The next variable is cognitive participation, which aims to determine who does the work of constructing beliefs.³¹ The third variable is collective action, which seeks to determine exactly how beliefs are constructed.³² The fourth variable is reflexive monitoring, which aims to clarify how the construction of beliefs are understood by society.³³

Now that each step of NPT has been explained, I have operationalized each step and determined indicators of each variable. So far, these are loose interpretations and will be further refined in the Methods section.

Concept	Operationalized
Coherence - construction of beliefs	→ Elite opinion → Practitioner opinion
Cognitive participation - who does the work of constructing beliefs?	→ Presence of sex work advocacy organizations → House of Representatives
Collective action - how does the work get done?	→ Passing federal laws → Congressional hearings
Reflexive monitoring - how are the beliefs understood and assessed?	→ Public opinion polls

For the operationalization of coherence, I will focus on two main aspects: elite opinion and practitioner opinion. Elite opinion will be defined as the opinions of politicians and elected officials. Practitioner opinion will be defined as the opinions of sex workers. To measure

³⁰ May, Carl and Tracy Finch. "Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices: An Outline of Normalization Process Theory." *Sociology* 43, no. 3 (June 1, 2009), 542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509103208>.

³¹ Ibid. at 543-544.

³² Ibid. at 544.

³³ Ibid. at 545.

coherence, I will analyze the language used in federal bills, as well as the language used by sex work advocacy organizations. The purpose of the coherence stage is to observe how elites and practitioners talk about sex work. The purpose of analyzing the language politicians use in federal bills is to capture how elites frame sex work through an institution (the House of Representatives). The House of Representatives will be used to capture the beliefs of elites (politicians), specifically because the House of Representatives is designed to be the more representative of the two legislative bodies. Using the House of Representatives will hopefully better capture the beliefs of broader American society. The purpose of analyzing sex work advocacy organizations is to capture how practitioners frame sex work, as well as how they drive normalization. For example, the Sex Workers Outreach Project works to decriminalize sex work.³⁴ The fact that they are working towards decriminalization rather than legalization indicates something about how those who partake in sex work view the practice.

Cognitive participation will be evaluated through the lens of advocacy organizations and the House of Representatives. Cognitive participation is about enrollment and engagement in the practice.³⁵ The presence of sex work advocacy organizations will indicate engagement with the practice. The House of Representatives will be analyzed at this stage again. However, instead of analyzing the language used, the fact that bills relating to sex work are introduced will represent the cognitive participation of the House in normalizing (or maintaining the status quo about) sex work.

To operationalize collective action, I will primarily focus on congressional hearings. There are several reasons for this. The first is that, again, the House of Representatives is designed to be the more representative of the two legislative bodies, so this will capture a

³⁴ Sex Workers Outreach Project USA. "About Us." Sex Workers Outreach Project USA. Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://swopusa.org/about-us/>.

³⁵ May, Carl and Tracy Finch. "Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices." 543.

broader variety of political elites' opinions. Political elites' opinions will be captured through the way that politicians frame their questions because this will show how they think about the topic. For example, one representative might use the words "sex work" while asking a question, while another representative might use the word "prostitution." The differences in language will help to capture how the work of normalization and construction of beliefs occurs. Additionally, congressional hearings relating to sex work will involve expert testimony from actual sex workers or sex work advocacy organizations, which will capture practitioner opinion. Mass public opinion will be captured through congressional hearings in a few ways. The first is that the issue was brought to Congress in the first place, which means that there had to be some level of public awareness or concern about the topic. The second is that there may be cases where everyday citizens are testifying to share their concerns about a strip club being located near a school, for example. The passage of federal laws will also capture collective action. This will help to show the strength of the construction of beliefs and adherence to those beliefs.

Finally, reflexive monitoring, which is how the beliefs are understood and assessed by the public, will be analyzed by looking at public opinion polls. This is the best indicator to see how the public engages with sex work. If sex work is truly being normalized, I hope to find that public support for sex work has increased, which will most likely be in the form of the public supporting softer sentencing or decriminalization (or supporting one form of sex work).

Theories of institutionalism tend to view institutions as sole entities that drive normalization, making it appear that institutions exist in a vacuum, untouched by the individuals that compose institutions. Theories of individual action tend to work backwards from norms to the role of individuals, meaning that norms drive individual action. However, this does not entirely account for the role of individuals in forming those norms. Norms do not just appear one

day in society; work must be done to formulate those ideas and spread those ideas, and then embed them in society. Acknowledging the gaps in theories of institutionalism and individual action does not mean those theories are without merit. I will use both theories to elucidate the connection between institutions and normalization, as well as the connection between individuals and normalization. These theories will be set in relief to Normalization Process Theory to create a more well-rounded approach to the interplay between individuals, institutions, and ideas.

IV. Method

For my methodology, I use pattern-matching. The congruence method, or pattern-matching, involves assessing a theory's ability to predict an outcome.³⁶ One must determine the value of the independent variable, as well as a prediction about the outcome of the dependent variable that should occur based on the theory.³⁷ If the outcome is consistent with the theory's prediction, then there may be a possibility of a causal relationship.³⁸ However, the purpose of pattern-matching is not limited to focusing on one variable causing an outcome.³⁹ The focus is on determining whether the expected outcome of a theory is in fact occurring in the real world.⁴⁰ One of the benefits of pattern-matching is that it does not involve tracing the causal process from independent variable to case outcome.⁴¹ Another benefit is that pattern-matching can contribute to theory development,⁴² which is how I hope to use it. Pattern-matching is a useful tool for theory development because it focuses on qualitative methods that might elucidate connections that quantitative data cannot. The authors of Normalization Process Theory expounded upon their theory to make it a middle range theory, and they recognized that it should

³⁶ George, Alexander L., and Andrew Bennett. "The Congruence Method." In *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 181. N.p.: MIT Press, 2005.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. at 182.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

be applied to other fields.⁴³ A middle range theory is one that connects social theory with “empirically observable patterns.”⁴⁴ Since Normalization Process Theory lends itself to making connections between theory and observable patterns, I hope to identify aspects of the theory that work well in the field of political science, as well as potential shortcomings.

I use pattern-matching because of the aforementioned benefits. Other methods, while relevant, are not the primary focus for my thesis for a few reasons. First, I want to focus on testing the theory to see if it is applicable to the field of political science. Second, other methods, such as process-tracing, involve causal research.⁴⁵ While I do believe that a connection exists between ideas, institutions, and the normalization of sin, I do not believe that causal data exists to prove that ideas and institutions drive normalization. Therefore, the flexibility of pattern-matching makes it an appropriate method for analyzing my research question.

In order to measure the process of normalization, I first have to determine what the tipping point of normalization is as compared to the baseline. In the chart below, I identify indicators for normalization and the status quo. In order to collect my data, I used the Congress.gov database and entered the search terms of “sex work” and “prostitution.” I filtered the searches by Congress, as well as whether the items (bills and congressional hearings) were introduced in the House. In my preliminary research, I came across the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017 (referred to as FOSTA), as well as the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act of 2017 (referred to as SESTA).⁴⁶ Repealing these acts has been the goal of many sex worker advocacy organizations that I researched. Due to the negative impact of

⁴³ May and Finch. “Implementing, Embedding, and Integrating Practices.” 536.

⁴⁴ Oxford Reference. “Middle range theory.” Oxford Reference.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100156350;jsessionid=A39835569BBB004951D4F3443B519D71>.

⁴⁵ George and Bennett. “The Congruence Method.” 182.

⁴⁶ These two acts are commonly referred to in tandem as SESTA/FOSTA, and repealing these acts have been the focus of many sex work advocacy organizations.

SESTA/FOSTA on sex workers, I set my timeline to six years (2017-2023). This timeline captures the introduction and codification of SESTA/FOSTA and brings us to the current year. I used this timeline to capture an established time of criminalizing sex workers in modern legislation, as well as a possible shift towards normalization in later Congresses.

Concept	Operationalized	Normalization indicators	Status quo indicators
Coherence - construction of beliefs	→ Elite opinion → Practitioner opinion	→ “Sex work” → “Decriminalization” → “Legalization”	→ “Prostitution” → “Criminalization”
Cognitive participation - who does the work of constructing beliefs?	→ Advocacy organizations → House of Representatives	→ Presence of sex work advocacy organizations → Presence of bills favoring decriminalizing sex work or loosening restrictions	→ No sex work advocacy organizations → Presence of bills favoring harsher sentencing
Collective action - how does the work get done?	→ Congressional hearings → Passing federal laws	→ “Sex work” → “Decriminalization” → “Legalization” → Bills in favor of decriminalization pass	→ “Prostitution” → “Criminalization” → Bills in favor of harsher sentencing pass
Reflexive monitoring - how are the beliefs understood and assessed?	→ Public opinion polls	→ 51% in favor of sex work or decriminalizing sex	→ 51% in favor of harsher sentences or 51% against sex work

For measuring the coherence of beliefs (elite and practitioner), I measure normalization of sex work based on the use of language. I do not count the number of times politicians use certain words in a bill; rather, this is based on whether certain words are used or not. From politicians, I look for words such as “sex work,” “decriminalization,” and “legalization.” The

presence of these words indicates normalization because typically in American society, sex work is referred to as “prostitution,” and the current legal status of sex work is “criminalization.” The presence of “prostitution” and “criminalization” represents the status quo position. I use the same indicators when analyzing the sex work advocacy organizations.

To measure cognitive participation, the presence of advocacy organizations in favor of decriminalizing sex work represents normalization. The cognitive participation of the House of Representatives in creating legislation represents the status quo. The presence of bills or House Resolutions introduced favoring the decriminalization of sex work, loosening restrictions, or lowering sentencing/fines for sex workers indicates normalization. If bills favoring tighter restrictions or increasing sentencing/fines for sex workers are introduced, this represents the status quo.

To measure collective action, I analyze the language used by elites, practitioners, and the mass public in congressional hearings. The words “sex work,” “decriminalization,” and “legalization” will represent normalization of sex work. The words “prostitution” and “criminalization” will represent the status quo position. I also analyze the passage of bills. Codified bills in favor of decriminalization represent normalization. Codified bills in favor of harsher sentences represent the status quo.

For reflexive monitoring, I analyze public opinion polls. If polling indicates at least 51% in favor of sex work or decriminalizing sex work, this represents normalization. If polling indicates 51% in favor of harsher sentences or 51% against sex work, this represents the status quo. The reason for choosing 51% is that it would be the majority of the respondents polled.

VI. Data Analysis

A. Overall Findings

Ultimately, my findings confirm that sex work is in the preliminary stages of normalization. I found, based on my indicators, there was a strong adherence to the first two stages of Normalization Process Theory, and a weak adherence, if at all, to the last two stages. The following sections examine the findings in more detail.

B. Adherence to Normalization Process Theory

1. Coherence

Table 1

Congress	Search term	Number of bills
115th (2017-2018)	“Prostitution”	4
115th (2017-2018)	“Sex work”	1
116th (2019-2020)	“Prostitution”	13
116th (2019-2020)	“Sex work”	2
117th (2021-2022)	“Prostitution”	9
117th (2021-2022)	“Sex work”	7
118th (2023-2024)	“Prostitution”	2
118th (2023-2024)	“Sex work”	1
	Total	39

Table 2

Search term	Number of bills	Percentage
“Prostitution”	28	71.8%
“Sex work”	11	28.2%
Total	39	100%

For coherence of beliefs (elite and practitioner), I looked for words like “sex work,” “prostitution,” “decriminalization,” and “legalization” in bills and resolutions introduced by the

House of Representatives, as well as sex work advocacy organizations. The presence of “sex work,” “legalization,” and “decriminalization” represents normalization of sex work. The presence of “prostitution” and “criminalization” represents the status quo position.

Eleven of the 39 bills use the words “sex work.” Only one uses the word “decriminalization” in relation to sex work, but it was technically a House Resolution, not a bill. However, because House Resolutions reflect the sentiments of the House,⁴⁷ I chose to include this Resolution. Of the four Congresses I researched, all had bills using the words “sex work” and “prostitution.” Over the six year time span, there was an increase in bills about sex work and usage of the words “sex work.”⁴⁸ In the 117th Congress, “sex work” was used almost as often as “prostitution.” Additionally, in the 118th Congress, a similar trend seems to continue. However, at the time of writing this project, the 118th Congress is only four months into the session, and this trend could change by the end of the congressional session.

When collecting my data, I found the House of Representatives uses many different words instead of sex work or prostitution. Instead, representatives use words like “commercial sex acts” or “consensual sexual activity.” Interestingly, I also found representatives tend to use the word “prostitution” in a few different contexts. In some bills, representatives use the word “prostitution” in relation to child sex trafficking, seemingly making the distinction that sex work is consensual and between adults, as opposed to forced prostitution of children. I excluded those bills from my data because children cannot consent to “sex work” or “prostitution.” There were some bills relating to children that I kept for the purpose of analysis. One of these bills, the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act of 2022, replaced the word

⁴⁷ United States Representative Bill Keating. “A Guide to Legislative Votes.” United States Representative Bill Keating. Accessed April 14, 2023. <https://keating.house.gov/policy-work/guide-legislative-votes#:~:text=Bills%2C%20if%20passed%20by%20the,either%20the%20House%20or%20Senate.>

⁴⁸ See Appendix Table A for a line graph of word usage.

“prostitution” with “trafficking.”⁴⁹ I counted this towards normalization because replacing “prostitution” with a more accurate word, “trafficking,” indicates some level of understanding from the legislature that there is a difference between those two acts.

Additionally, there were some bills that I could not determine whether they aided in normalization or maintained the status quo. For example, a bill using “prostitution” in reference to a time period when “prostitution” was the primary word available is neither normalizing nor reinforcing the status quo. Another example is a bill that contains the word “prostitution,” but the bill is targeted to foreign governments.⁵⁰ I kept bills like this because ultimately, a representative did use the word “prostitution,” but I had to consider external factors. Perhaps the targeted foreign government does not have a legal definition of sex work, so “prostitution” was used for clarity.

For practitioner opinion, I analyzed the language used by sex work advocacy organizations. Of the six sex work advocacy organizations I identified, five use the words “sex work.” One of the organizations uses both “prostitution” and “sex work.” Additionally, four of the groups call for or work towards the “decriminalization” of sex work. The two groups that did not use “decriminalization” use phrases like “challenge the system of criminalization”⁵¹ and “interrupt violence.”⁵² For the purposes of this project, I counted that language as normalization. For the coherence stage, consistency is helpful. The point of this stage is determining the construction of beliefs. The sex work advocacy organizations’ choice of language in pushing for

⁴⁹ Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act of 2022, H.R. 8948, 117th Cong. (2022). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/8948>

⁵⁰ Stop Arming Human Rights Abusers Act, H.R. 5880, 116th Cong. (2020). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5880>.

⁵¹ Sex Workers Advocates Coalition. “Sex Worker Advocates Coalition.” HIPS. <https://www.hips.org/sex-worker-advocates-coalition-swac.html>.

⁵² Hacking//Hustling. “About.” Hacking//Hustling. <https://hackinghustling.org/>.

decriminalization seems to be contributing to the coherence of beliefs between practitioners for the coalescence around the solution of decriminalization, rather than legalization.

Based on my indicator of the mere presence of either “prostitution” or “sex work,” it does seem that sex work is becoming normalized at the coherence stage of NPT through elite opinion, as well as practitioner opinion. However, it seems there is more coherence among sex work advocacy organizations than the House of Representatives. This makes sense because as sex workers and representatives of sex workers, the organizations have worked to figure out the best course of action to protect sex workers.

2. Cognitive Participation

The presence of advocacy organizations in favor of decriminalizing sex work represents normalization. I identified six sex work advocacy organizations centered in the United States. Interestingly, only one of the six was founded in the six year time span I used. This organization, Decriminalize Sex Work, focuses on changing state and federal laws, and they work to “to improve public attitudes toward sex work and the decriminalization of prostitution.”⁵³ However, the other organizations founded prior to my six year time span also push for decriminalization. To me, this indicates that sex work has long been a source of contention in American society, and sex workers have felt the need to advocate for themselves throughout the years. This also indicates sex workers have long known about the difference between legalization and decriminalization, and there has been coherence among sex workers in regards to the legal path forward.

I also analyzed the presence of bills in favor of decriminalizing sex work to capture the cognitive participation of the House of Representatives. In bills using both “sex work” and

⁵³ Decriminalize Sex Work. “About.” Decriminalize Sex Work / Campaign to Decriminalize Sex Work. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://decriminalizesex.work/about/>.

“prostitution,” I had to determine the overall purpose of the section or bill to see if it would increase punishment for sex work, or if it would lessen the punishment. Seventeen of the 39 bills had some kind of departure from the status quo. There were no bills outwardly favoring decriminalizing sex work, with the exception of one House Resolution. However, there were some bills that recognized the harms faced by sex workers or identified sex workers as a group worthy of study for legal protection. These bills counted towards normalization. Because there are sex work advocacy organizations and bills in favor of decriminalizing sex work or loosening restrictions, sex work is becoming normalized at the cognitive participation stage.

3. Collective Action

Opinion type	Total # in Congressional Hearings	Language used: “Sex work”	Language used: “Prostitution”
Elite	29	4	25
Practitioner	5	1	4
Mass public	4	0	4

I measured collective action by the language used in congressional hearings. The purpose of analyzing congressional hearings was to capture elite (politicians and those with institutional power), practitioner (sex workers), and mass public opinion in one institution (the House of Representatives). I analyzed 28 congressional hearings in the same six year time span (2017-2023). Overall, between politicians, practitioners, and the mass public, “prostitution” was used the most.

Originally, I framed elites as politicians for the purpose of this project. However, after analyzing the congressional hearings, I found there were other individuals who could be considered elite and have the power to do work in relation to normalizing sex work. I expanded

my definition of elite to include those who have some level of institutional power, such as the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation or high-ranking members of interest groups. I found one elite who specifically talked about the decriminalization of sex work.⁵⁴ Twenty-five of the 29 elites used the word “prostitution.” This indicates that the strength of normalization at this stage is not strong. However, because there were some elites using “sex work,” there is some level of normalization.

For practitioner opinion, there were only five total practitioners who testified before Congress or had their stories shared in front of Congress. Two of the practitioners did not actually testify before Congress, but their stories were told by the American Immigration Council and Refugees Council.⁵⁵ I counted these two as practitioner opinions rather than elite opinion because the organizations spoke on behalf of the individuals. The language used in that example was “prostitution.”⁵⁶ Among practitioners, “prostitution” was used the most. This did not align with what I expected to find.

However, there could be a few reasons for the use of the word “prostitution” among practitioners. One possible reason is age. Defining the act of selling sex in exchange for something of value as sex work is relatively new. Older practitioners may use “prostitute” because it was the word they grew up with and have heard the most often. Another reason, closely related to the first, is that perhaps practitioners choose to identify themselves as prostitutes because there is a more mainstream usage of the word. Or perhaps they identify as

⁵⁴ *There's No Pride in Prejudice: Eliminating Barriers to Full Economic Inclusion for the LGBTQ+ Community: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Diversity and Inclusion of the H. Comm. on Financial Services*, 117th Cong., 1st Sess. (2021). <https://www.congress.gov/event/117th-congress/house-event/LC67677/>.

⁵⁵ *Examining the Human Rights and Legal Implications of DHS's "Remain in Mexico" Policy: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations of the H. Comm. on Homeland Security*, 116th Cong., 1st Sess. (2019). <https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/LC65122/>.

⁵⁶ *Examining the Human Rights and Legal Implications of DHS's "Remain in Mexico" Policy: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations of the H. Comm. on Homeland Security*, 116th Cong., 1st Sess. (2019). <https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/LC65122/>.

prostitutes because it aligns more closely with their experiences (i.e., some aspects of non-consensuality in regards to becoming a prostitute). Sex work tends to have a connotation of empowerment and of choosing to sell sex. Prostitution often has a connotation of forced labor and lack of consent. Because of these possible reasons for practitioners to use the word “prostitute,” it is hard to definitively determine normalization at this stage. However, based on the indicators, because one practitioner did use the word “sex work,” there is some normalization among practitioners at the collective action stage.

For mass public opinion, none of the four individuals who testified used the word “sex work.” This indicates there is still a disconnect between elites/practitioners and the mass public. I discuss possible reasons for this disconnect and how to progress past the disconnect in more depth in the Implications section. Ultimately, sex work is not becoming normalized among the mass public at the collective action stage.

I also analyzed whether bills in favor of decriminalization passed, which counts towards normalization. Of the 39 bills I analyzed, only three passed. The three that passed were in favor of harsher sentences or negatively impacted sex workers. Ultimately this stage of NPT with these indicators does not reflect normalization of sex work.

4. Reflexive Monitoring

My indicator for reflexive monitoring was public opinion polls. Normalization is represented by polling at least 51% in favor of decriminalizing sex work. My research was very limited by the amount of polls conducted in the six year time span. I only found two public opinion polls in the time frame. One of the polls was conducted by Data for Progress and 27 other organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union. This report found that “an

outright majority of all voters support decriminalizing sex work.”⁵⁷ The second poll, conducted by YouGov, is a tracker poll, meaning that they track responses over a period of time. I examined the most recent time point in their poll, which was December 2022. The question YouGov asked respondents was “Should working as a prostitute be legal?”⁵⁸ At that time, 49.1% of respondents said working as a prostitute should not be classified as a crime.⁵⁹

The two public opinion polls in the time frame yielded conflicting results. First, sex work is a complicated issue the public may not be very educated about. Second, YouGov used “legal” instead of “decriminalized.” Again, the public may not understand the nuances between these two options. However, if these results are interpreted such that the public does understand the difference between legalization and decriminalization, then the 2019 Data for Progress report is even more interesting. The Data for Progress report posits that “an outright majority of all voters support decriminalizing sex work.”⁶⁰ This would mean that between the YouGov poll and the Data for Progress report, the public does support decriminalization of sex work.

One possible reason for the lack of polls in the time frame is because organizations that would typically conduct their own polling collaborated with Data for Progress to make a more comprehensive data report. Because there was a lack of public opinion polls in the six year time frame, I broadened my search to place the two polls in context. The other polls I examined were from 2015⁶¹ and 2016,⁶² used similar wording to the polls from 2019 and 2022, and yielded

⁵⁷ Luo, Nina. “Memo: Decriminalizing Survival: Policy Platform and Polling on the Decriminalization of Sex Work.” Data for Progress. Last modified January 30, 2020. <https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos/decriminalizing-sex-work>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ YouGov America. “Should Working as a Prostitute Be Legal?” YouGov. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/trackers/should-working-as-a-prostitute-be-legal>.

⁶⁰ Luo, Nina. “Memo: Decriminalizing Survival: Policy Platform and Polling on the Decriminalization of Sex Work.” Data for Progress. Last modified January 30, 2020. <https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos/decriminalizing-sex-work>.

⁶¹ YouGov America. “Country Split on Legalizing Prostitution.” YouGov. Last modified September 1, 2015. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2015/09/01/country-split-legalizing-prostitution>.

⁶² Marist Institute for Public Opinion. “Do You Think Prostitution between Consenting Adults.” Table. May 25, 2016. Microsoft Word.

similar results. Based solely on my indicators and timeframe, sex work is not becoming normalized at the reflexive monitoring stage. However, the results from the 2019 and 2022 polls, in conjunction with the 2015 and 2016 polls, suggests some level of normalization. If my timeframe had been expanded, it seems likely that sex work, at the reflexive monitoring stage, would be normalized.

C. Implications

Ultimately, sex work is becoming normalized in American society. However, the degree to which it is normalizing is not strong. There is still a disconnect between elites/practitioners and public opinion. Based on my research, this disconnect seems to come from a lack of strong issue framing. In the legislature, politicians use the words “sex work,” “prostitution,” “sex trafficking,” and “child sex trafficking” interchangeably at times. These terms all have different meanings, with the exception of “sex work” and “prostitution.” For the most part, “sex work” and “prostitution” are understood to be the exchange of consensual sex between adults for something of value. “Sex trafficking” and “child sex trafficking,” however, are very different. Sex trafficking means the act is not consensual, and it is abuse. Because the legislature tends to conflate these terms, it is difficult for the public to have a clear understanding of what is actually being discussed in hearings or laws. In order to further normalize and break the stigma around sex work, there must be more concise language in the legislature. In order to achieve this, sex work organizations need to lobby Congress, recruit members, and spread the word. While sex work continues to be framed as a moral issue against sex workers, they are still being harmed. Additionally, sex workers cannot seek legal recourse for violence committed against them.⁶³

According to Amnesty International:

⁶³ Human Rights Watch. “Why Sex Work Should Be Decriminalized.” *Human Rights Watch*. Last modified August 7, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/07/why-sex-work-should-be-decriminalized>.

Any foray into the lives of sex workers reveals so many crucial human rights issues that urgently need addressing. How can we reduce the threat of violence to sex workers?

What can be done to ensure their access to medical care and help prevent HIV? And how can discrimination and social marginalization that put sex workers at increased risk of abuse be stopped? These questions about health, safety and equality under the law, are more important than any moral objection to the nature of sex work.⁶⁴

Ultimately, sex workers are human beings and deserve legal protection, regardless of moral objections to the work they do.

VII. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

For further research, I would expand the time frame to examine 1990 to present day. The reason for lengthening the time span is to capture the influence of multiple presidents and congresses, as well as sex-positive movements, such as third-wave feminism and riot grrrl. The president plays an important role in setting the agenda for Congress. It could be possible that the president puts pressure on the legislature to stifle some bills and promote others. I would suspect that lengthening the time span might reveal that Democrats tend to promote bills relating to “sex work” and Republicans tend to promote bills relating to “prostitution.” However, there are many factors affecting which bills make it onto the session agenda. This is my reasoning for suggesting including sex-positive movements in the time frame. If advocacy organizations during certain time periods coalesced around decriminalizing sex work, I would expect some pressure to be on the legislature.

I would also expand my search terms to include words like “commercial sex acts,” which I found the legislature used in relation to sex work and prostitution. Expanding my search terms

⁶⁴ Amnesty International. “Sex Workers’ Rights Are Human Rights.” Amnesty International. Last modified April 14, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/sex-workers-rights-are-human-rights/>.

could have yielded bills and congressional hearings explicitly about sex work, rather than just bills and congressional hearings where the word is mentioned. This could have added another layer to my research. If there was an increase in bills specifically about sex work, this could reveal more normalization. Additionally, I would have expanded my search from bills and congressional hearings to include memos and other official documents from Congress members. I would also try to conduct interviews with sex workers to gather more first-hand viewpoints than was available from congressional hearings or advocacy organizations.

Finally, I would do a state by state analysis. One critique of focusing at the federal level in regards to sex work is that it might be better handled at the state level. It would be interesting to see if there could be a waterfall effect if some states decriminalized sex work or had a bigger push for decriminalization. This could be a potential route for normalization outside the scope of this project but is nonetheless viable.

VIII. Conclusion

Ultimately, I conclude sex work has begun the process of normalization. Through elite and practitioner opinion, normalization is the strongest. Mass public opinion remains the weaker aspect of normalization. To reach these findings, I used Normalization Process Theory as formulated by May and Finch. This theory was originally developed for the scientific community, but the authors noted that NPT could be expanded to other fields. By using pattern-matching, I found NPT to be quite compelling and useful in the political science field. The four stages of implementation (coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, and reflexive monitoring) allowed me to gain a new and deeper understanding of how normalization occurs, especially with a more complex issue. While I noted some limitations and suggestions for

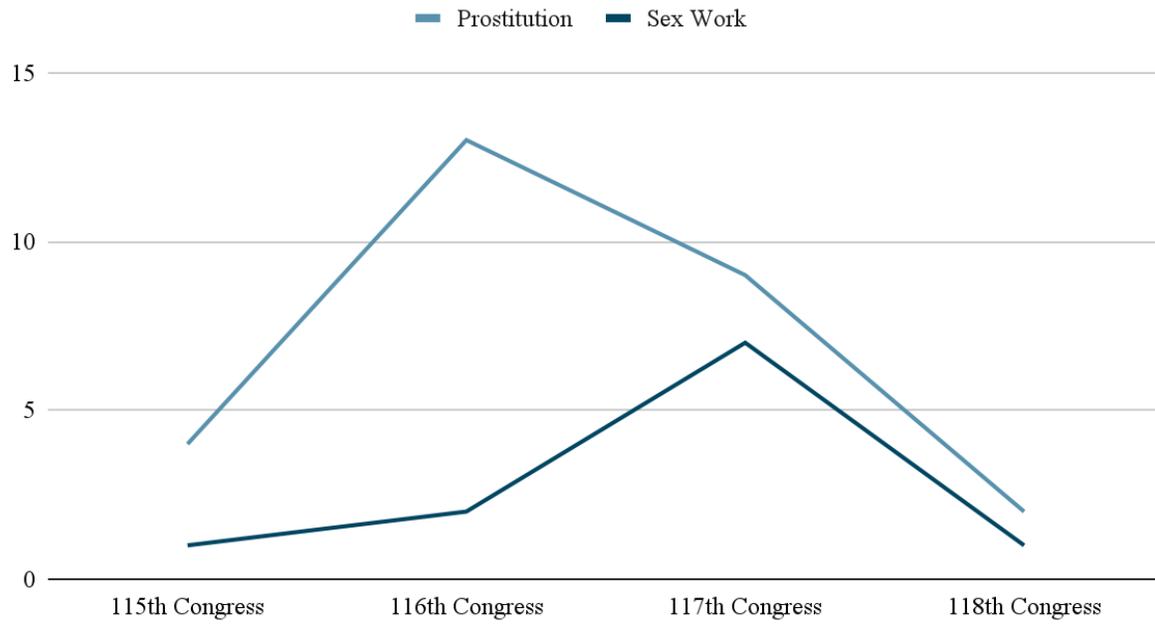
further research, I would advise expanding upon adapting NPT to the political science field. This theory is very valuable and could be used to analyze a variety of issues in American politics.

While sex work continues to become normalized, I suggest there needs to be stronger issue framing by both the legislature and practitioners in order to shape public opinion. This could be done at the federal level or the state level. Decriminalizing sex work in a few key states could cause a waterfall effect, or it could cause intense pushback. Decriminalizing sex work at the federal level would set the floor, but there could be difficulties with implementation at the state level. Ultimately, no matter where normalization efforts are concentrated, ideas, individuals, and institutions have to work together to fully normalize any issue.

Appendix

Table A

Usage of "Sex Work" and "Prostitution" from 115-118th Congress



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