

From Research 'on' to Research 'with': Developing Skills for Research with Sex Workers

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The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community ... do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other. (C. Wright Mills, 1959, p. 195)

Following from C. Wright Mills' assertion that admirable thinkers do not disassociate their lives from their work, this chapter represents a joining of my political and activist commitments with my academic and research interests. As an activist, a sex work ally and a labour organizer prior to beginning my doctorate, I was well aware of sex workers' critiques that much academic research tends to exclude them from the research process, homogenize their experiences and deny their agency. As such, when I began to think about what research I would undertake for my dissertation, my priority was to find a way that research and knowledge production could be turned into a beneficial community project. In seeking to find an inclusive and innovative research method that sex workers would support, I turned to action research.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the complicated and problematic history of research on sex work to explicate the ways in which conventional research projects and processes have led sex workers to distrust many researchers. In light of this context, I will argue that an action research methodology is vital if the research is to be supported and the results are to be implemented by sex workers and allies. I will draw on my own experiences researching with a Canadian sex worker rights organization to illustrate how participatory methods can work to build bridges, dismantle barriers and establish new relationships of trust and support between academics and sex workers. Ultimately, the objective of this chapter is to argue in favour of the fundamental importance of action research in moving from research *on* sex work to research *with* sex workers.

Advancements in sex work research

An unfortunate consequence of much sex work research is that it can reaffirm the perception that sex workers lack the ability to make informed decisions about their lives and work. Within the existing literature, in particular writing by anti-prostitution feminists and that which focuses solely on the street-level trade, there is a lack of analysis around sex worker agency and voice. Some have pathologized women in the sex industry or studied them as marginal people, unable to participate in effective decision-making on their own behalf. Sex workers as exploited, oppressed and abused women who are always already the victims of male violence are not uncommon depictions (see, for example, Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1981; Jeffreys, 1997; MacKinnon, 2005; Raymond, 1998; Stark and Whisnant, 2004). Notably, a considerable amount of conventional research has

focused on street-based sex workers, neglecting analyses of indoor work and has thus tended to homogenize and/or conflate sex workers' diverse experiences. Research that glosses over complexity and nuance in order to present uniform images of the sex industry does little to help illuminate questions such as how sex workers are engaging in community change and in struggles for their human and labour rights. Indeed, these types of studies do a distinct disservice to building bridges between academics and sex workers, and it is not surprising that many sex workers are cautious of participating in research projects altogether, choosing only to engage if current or former sex workers are members of the research team (Dudash, 1997). Sex workers' concerns about research can be, at least somewhat, addressed through their greater inclusion in the project design, data collection process and dissemination of results (see, for example, R4SW 1, 1998; R4SW 7, 2004; R4SW 13, 2012).

Many have critiqued the methodological flaws and over-simplifications, and instead have published more nuanced analyses of diverse commercial sex industries that show a range of experiences and perspectives (Chapkis, 1997; Dewey and Zheng, 2013; Ditmore, Levy, and Willman, 2010; Kim and Jeffreys, 2013; Nussbaum, 1999; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Rosen and Venkatesh, 2008; Sanders, 2006; Scoular, 2004; Shaver, 1988, 2005; van der Veen, 2001; Weitzer, 2000, 2005a, 2005b). Importantly, this developing field of research highlights sex workers' resilience and resistance to harmful legislative and political frameworks that facilitate conditions for violence and exploitation to flourish. In Canada, too, there has been a growth in sex work research and publications that have been conducted and written in collaboration with diverse sex working communities, largely focusing on how to improve social conditions (Allinott et al., 2004; Betteridge, 2005; Childs et al., 2006; O'Doherty, 2007; van der Meulen and Durisin, 2008; van der Meulen et al., 2013). This growing body of literature represents a significant and important shift in the ways in which sex work research is being conducted.

Methodologically, action research goes a long way towards dismantling barriers and building bridges as it provides an important and innovative framework that challenges conventional research methods. Described as a process that 'seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people' (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003, pp. 10–11), action research is an invaluable approach to research with sex workers. In addition to bridging theory, practice and action, a basic principle in action research is that the people in a particular setting are capable of identifying their own research topics and priorities (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991; Reason, 1999). In an action research study, then, the local community participates in the design and research process, the analysis of the results and releasing of data, and implementation of action-oriented solutions (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003; Whyte, 1991).

Unlike conventional research methods that tend to exclude sex workers from the process, or see them as solely the objects of study, action research depends and insists upon a practice that is democratic and egalitarian in nature as its aim is to support those who are involved in the research in 'speaking, analyzing, building alliances and taking action' (Reid, 2000, n.p.). Not only can the inclusion of sex workers in the project design and implementation increase their support of the project itself, but according to some, the inclusion of

local stakeholders and an equalizing of power imbalances can lead to more valid and reliable results based on local expertise:

action research is much more able to produce 'valid' results than ordinary or conventional social science. This is because expert research and local knowledge are combined and because the interpretation of the results and the design of actions based on the results involve those best positioned to understand the process: the local stakeholders. (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003, p. 25)

In action research, then, the local stakeholders are the subjects within, rather than objects of, the research process. Unlike more conventional methodologies, the flexibility of action research allows for situations of collaboration that can lead to new, more meaningful and less exploitative research processes (Reason, 1999). Indeed, as action research continues to benefit from the greater involvement of local stakeholder voices, there is the greater possibility of a meaningful shift from traditional research *on* communities to action research *with* communities.

Building bridges through action research

Unlike other academics who might encounter hostility or apprehension when attempting to conduct research with sex workers, my prior support of and involvement in both the sex workers' rights and labour movements meant that I received supportive and enthusiastic responses when I first mentioned wanting to work on a collaborative project with a local sex worker organization. I had recently been asked to join the organization's board of directors and thought that facilitating a collaborative research project for my doctoral dissertation could be a fruitful endeavour. As Nadine, a former sex worker and one of the local stakeholders involved in the study, remarked: 'I thought it was an exciting prospect ... It was reassuring to have an active member conduct the research'. Due to the breadth and depth of the sex industry, an action-oriented case study that focused on a particular geographic location (Toronto, Canada) and sex workers affiliated with a particular sex-worker run organization was the most feasible approach. The purpose of the study was to compile sex worker relevant and supported in-depth data through qualitative interviews and policy analysis.

In action research style, I met with members of the organization, including both staff and members of the board of directors, on a few occasions to discuss possible dissertation topics. As we brainstormed ideas for research that would be useful to the organization, we kept coming back to the importance of labour organizing and labour standards in the sex industry. We decided that it would be helpful to have data collected about the impact of the prostitution-related sections of the *Criminal Code of Canada* on sex workers' lives and work as well as how to best implement labour rights in the sex industry. The collaborative research design process was important both for myself as a burgeoning action researcher to be able to determine what kind of study would be most supported by the community, as well as for building trust between sex workers and researchers more generally. Julia, one of the sex workers who helped design the study, commented in retrospect: 'I thought this was an example of how research with sex workers should be done ... I felt it was an ethical

research project'.

In addition to their early involvement in deciding the overall topic for the dissertation, the organization's board and staff were also involved in the design stage when drafts of the dissertation proposal were sent out for feedback and suggestions. All comments on the proposal were incorporated into the final version before I submitted it to my supervisory committee and departmental review committee. Upon receiving their approval, and the approval of my university's Research Ethics Board, I was cleared to begin the data collection process. Initially, all current staff and board members were asked if they would like to be interviewed. Additional interviews were arranged with supporters of the organization through snowball sampling methods including referrals and word of mouth. All participants in the study were current or former sex workers and key allies in Toronto; each had experience in sex work advocacy, community development and/or labour organizing, and were past or present members of the organization around which the research was built. The interview sample, therefore, represented a small and targeted case study, which I subsequently triangulated with Canadian and international research and writing on the sex industry (van der Meulen, 2011a). Given the diversity and heterogeneity of the sex industry, this proved to be the most successful research design; achieving a representative sample of sex workers is nearly impossible (Benoit, Jansson, Millar and Philips, 2005; Shaver, 2005). In the end, the study included two key allies and 10 current or former sex workers, each of whom had experience working in multiple sex industry sectors, including on the street, escorting for third parties, independent escorting, massage parlours, exotic dance, dungeons and more. The number of years they had been engaged in sex work ranged from 3 to over 20, with an average of 13.

As the material gathered from the in-depth interviews might help to inform policy recommendations and suggestions for future labour organizing campaigns, it was particularly important for the local stakeholders to participate in designing the interview guides. Together we determined the specific interview topics and the wording of the questions. The interviews themselves were transcribed within a week of being conducted and were sent to each interviewee for approval. Individuals were encouraged to modify their transcript and were asked only to return them to me once they were fully comfortable with how our conversation was documented. Most interviewees made only minor changes to their transcripts and some made none at all. Seeking final approval from the participants themselves before analysing the data was particularly important and allowed for greater participation and collaboration in the data collection process. While reflecting on this part of the research, Nadine commented: 'I took the transcript review as an opportunity for improvement in the area of articulation and strength in being concise'. Since research on sex work has frequently denied sex workers their own voices, participant review and modification of the transcripts was particularly meaningful (Wahab, 2003).

A primary goal of action research is that the results should lead to social justice goals and should have tangible benefits for the community involved (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003; Minkler, 2004; Whyte, 1991). As Flaskerud and Anderson (1999) argue, the results of the research project should be returned to the community stakeholders. In light of this, I structured the dissertation to conclude with a chapter devoted to five concrete policy and social recommendations that can be used as lobbying and

advocacy tools (van der Meulen, 2011a). A draft of the five-point action plan was given to each interviewee to ensure that it incorporated their key suggestions for social, labour and legislative change. I had email, phone and face-to-face conversations with those interested to discuss the series of recommendations and to solicit their feedback. Similar to the transcript review process, all suggestions were incorporated prior to submitting the dissertation for defence. Comments from the local stakeholders were unanimously positive with the only suggested changes related to grammatical errors and typos; there were no dissenting voices or disagreements on the findings and recommendations. As sex worker ally Patricia commented: 'I especially like that they are very concrete, feasible and realistic recommendations'. Similarly, current sex worker Robert said: 'It looks good ... your suggestions are legit! This support and endorsement showed that the results could indeed be considered valid and reliable.

In these and other ways, I attempted to facilitate an action research study that included the local community in the research design, encouraged continual feedback and input during the research process and concluded with practical action-oriented research results. In my experience, the incorporation of participatory methods proved to be highly effective in dismantling some of the barriers that exist between sex workers and academics. Additionally, through my continued involvement in the sex workers' rights movement and my involvement in the organization that was the centre of the research, I had developed a strong sex workers' rights perspective that was central to building the trust and solidarity needed for successful research. As Nadine articulated: 'So often we are approached by researchers who we know nothing about as far as their motives and actual philosophies'. What this highlights is the importance of inclusive research with sex workers, or as Julia so eloquently put it: 'Looking at the history of research that has been done on sex workers and how sex workers are almost invariably represented as degraded or victimized ... speaks to the need for sex workers to be much more involved in any research about sex workers or the sex industry'.

An action research framework, where sex workers are actively involved in the research design, implementation, analysis and dissemination, can be a highly effective way to challenge problematic conceptualizations and to ensure that the voices of the community are not overshadowed by ideology. Even well-intentioned researchers who want to help improve sex industry labour conditions can inadvertently cause harm by drawing inappropriate conclusions, by misreading the research results and by making poorly thought-out recommendations. This in turn can lead to even greater levels of mistrust. Involvement in the research process and an action research methodology can increase the community's comfort and willingness to participate in the project. In this instance, sex workers' engagement in the study, from the design to the concluding recommendations, countered dominant narratives about sex work.

Conclusion

Conventional research on sex work can neglect to consider the diversity of experiences and people working in the industry insofar as it tends to construct the sex industry in singular terms with little regard for complexity and nuance. This over-simplification and over-generalization is a source of frustration for sex worker activists

and organizations. Action research *with* sex workers, rather than *on* sex work, is an exciting research paradigm that has proven to be an effective intervention that instead considers sex workers as actors in their own right.

If action research is defined as, 'a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge' (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003, pp. 10–11), with an understanding that people in a particular setting are capable of identifying their own research needs (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991), then my doctoral dissertation certainly utilized action research as its methodological framework. However, it was I who approached the organization with the idea of conducting a research project; they were not articulating a need for research prior to my initial suggestion. This meant that while there was overall support and interest in the project, it was not 'high on the agenda of the affected community' (Minkler, 2004, p. 687). Further, while the local community was involved in the creation of the research questions, the design of the project and the modification of their interview transcripts, other aspects of the research process were not collaborative endeavours, including the policy, literature, and interview research processes, the writing of the dissertation and the releasing of some of the results (van der Meulen, 2008, 2011b, 2012). Further, the sex workers and allies that participated in the research process did not have the time, resources and/or interest in data analysis or interview coding. As Wang, Yi, Tao and Carovano (1998) contend, while there are advantages and benefits to participatory research, 'many tasks associated with the [action research] process may be burdensome, impractical or even infeasible for some participants' (Wang et al., 1998, p. 84). Researchers working with sex workers therefore should encourage participation throughout the research process but not mandate or force engagement if the local stakeholders are unable, unwilling or uninterested in contributing further.

Action research principles proved to be highly useful in addressing sex workers' critiques of conventional research practices. As we have seen, creating a collaborative research context that actively encourages sex worker participation can be successful in gaining the support of those involved. Researchers interested in conducting research *on* sex work should instead engage in action research *with* sex workers, who tend to be highly, and rightfully, wary of outsiders. This is not to argue, of course, that simply because I drew on action research tools for my dissertation that there was an equal sharing of power or that all parties stood to benefit equally. While the local stakeholders received an honorarium for their participation in the project, they did not benefit to the same extent that I did. Upon successful completion, I received my doctoral degree. They, obviously, did not. As such, while it is important to support active collaboration and involvement in the project itself, community members should not be expected to contribute an equivalent amount of time or resources unless they receive an equivalent advantage once it is finished; contributions should be commensurate to the benefits received. It is my hope that members of the organization who designed the research and participated in the process see the results as part of their own making and feel as though they benefited from their involvement in the process. It is also my hope that members of the sex workers' rights movement find the results of the study useful in future campaigns. And last, it is my hope that future sex work researchers will engage with sex working communities through an action research framework.

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