

## **Sexing Up the Subject: Methodological Nuances in Researching the Female Sex Industry**

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**Abstract** There has been a recent expansion in research into various markets and aspects of the sex industry. With investigation on the increase, this article takes a step back to consider the trials and tribulations of researching female sex work. First the article reviews the difficulties that can be posed by ethics committees and offers solutions to convince officials of the feasibility of the setting and method. Second, concentrating on the access phase, I explore the methodological nuances of researching the sensitive, sometimes hidden and often illicit world of commercial sex. Third, I analyse how inquiry into commercial sexual behaviour and the sexual field site presents particular issues in terms of managing ethical dilemmas in the field; negotiating the researcher role; and both the pleasures and dangers of researching this aspect of social life where the main topics are sex and money. In the conclusion I draw links between the methods used to investigate the sex industry and the development of theoretical debates. These points will be made with reference to the literature and my own work over the past five years in the UK sex industry, including a 10-month ethnography of the indoor prostitution markets.

**Keywords** collaborative research, ethics, ethnography, qualitative methods, sex work

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## Sexing Up the Subject: Methodological Nuances in Researching the Female Sex Industry

### Introduction: The UK context of sex work research

The information that is usually generated about women who sell sex and in particular those involved in prostitution, is tainted by biased media that impose moral judgements on how women use their bodies to make money, or to a lesser extent, the image of the male social misfit whose

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deficiencies leave him little option but to purchase sexual services. In the UK, a welcomed movement to challenge these tired old stereotypes has come from an increase in empirical research into sex work over the past decade prompted largely by the changes in the shape and nature of prostitution and subsequently a shift in the political agenda. New forms of research such as evaluations of welfare initiatives and 'what works' progress reports of projects that assist women involved in street prostitution, usually in the form of 'exiting' (making transitions out of prostitution) and community safety initiatives such as mediation with residents (see Hester and Westmarland, 2004), present new forms of information. Other empirical studies have continued to explore the vast differences and complexities of the male, female and transsexual sex markets (see collections by Campbell and O'Neill, 2005; Day and Ward, 2004; Elias et al., 1998; Weizter, 2000), as well as uncovering the extent of violence against women involved in prostitution (Kinnell, 2004; Penfold et al., 2004; Phoenix, 1999; Riberio and Sacramento, 2005) and the role of the internet (Sharpe and Earle, 2003; Soothill and Sanders, 2005).

This renewed attention given to the sex industry by social scientists echoes a lengthy history of researching sexual behaviour that can be traced thorough the archives of social science to what is known as the birthplace of sociology. Heap (2003) documents how the sociological studies of sexuality that came out of the Chicago School in the 1920s proved to be the foundation of a radical approach to sexuality that highlighted the social context and meaning of 'deviant' sexual behaviours. Robert E. Park promoted the notion that the city is a sexual laboratory to be observed and understood as integral to any social system. The less famous Chicago School sociologists, in particular W. C. Reckless (1925, 1933), concentrated on explaining urban sexual practices as social and cultural constructions. Methodologically, the School promoted an active investigative approach to studying sexuality through 'field research', where social scientists traded office space for urban space by entering the communities of 'vice' to observe the natural shenanigans (see Heap, 2003: 465). Laying themselves open to criticisms of exploitation and voyeuristic methods, the investigators spoke against the expectations of positivism that demanded a 'scientific' and objective approach to inquiry. Instead, they favoured ethnographic observation that enabled a snapshot of the lives of women who plied their trade in the inner city and the men who were involved in organizing the trade or buying what was on offer. This tradition has influenced those who have studied the sex industry, exploring the depths of sex work through small scale, intimate methodology.

Despite the interdisciplinary accounts of the sex industry, apart from some reflective revelations (for instance by Hart, 1998; Hubbard, 1999a; Maher, 2000; Melrose, 2002; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; O'Neill, 1996;

Sharpe, 2000; Shaver, 2005) researchers have been reluctant to report on the methodological demands of this topic. These pieces of work highlight the importance of reflexivity in the researcher process – a research account that is aware that the researcher is of the world being studied and therefore should be included in the process of analysis. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2002: 21) encourage, the ethnographer should place their own role at the centre of the research process, understanding how we fit into the production of knowledge. One specific point for reflection is that of power relations in the research process. Hart (1998: 49) reminds the reader that in prostitution, power inequalities are not only evident between the different parties (e.g. sex worker–client, sex worker–manager) but also power dynamics exist between those who look in from the outside and the natives. In this regard, ‘the process is just as important as the results’ (Hart, 1998) yet it is the process that receives less commentary. Building on the precedent set by Hart’s account of prostitution in a barrio in Spain and Maher’s (2000) account of the sex and drug markets of Brooklyn, this article sets out to expose what reflexivity means in the context of researching sex work. This article explores the methodological challenges that question existing procedural boundaries and push the parameters of the qualitative method as the subject becomes increasingly sexual. Drawing on my own ethnography in the indoor prostitution markets (see Sanders, 2005a), this article reflects mostly on research into female adult consensual prostitution but will refer to other aspects of the non-contact sexual services such as pornography and erotic dancing.

## Stumbling at the first hurdle: Ethics committees

Much of what has been written about the ethics of fieldwork and the sex industry focuses on what happens in the field. Yet increasingly, one of the first stumbling blocks for the researcher (especially students) is gaining approval for the project from the internal institution’s ethics committee. With these regulatory bodies becoming an increasing part of funding applications and university bureaucracies, having a vague plan and heading into the field is becoming less of an option. Anecdotally it can be said that ethics committees have treated the sex industry as a problematic area of inquiry, which can sometimes result in projects failing at this initial stage. An example from Mattely (1997) demonstrates how funding research into prostitution continues to be stifled by stigma and excluded by research councils. This section teases out three familiar areas of suspicion that are charged at those wanting to research sex work: the methods employed, the setting of the fieldwork and concerns for the reputation of the institution.

Methodological concerns are often raised at ethics committees when the method of inquiry is based on an ethnographic style that places informality at the heart of the data collection. Invariably this method requires lengthy periods of observation, interviews that can take the form of informal conversations and other methods that are unorthodox in the minds of positivist thinkers. As a result committees can query the validity of the methods, whether enough information will be collected and the quality of the data. For instance, in situations where interviews cannot be taped, data collection relies on fieldnotes and memory, which raises questions about how information can be accurately recorded. In addition, as Shaver (2005) documents, researchers in the sex industry are constantly struggling with the unknown size and boundaries of the population, leading to queries of sample representation. Covert methods have also been adopted in sex work research highlighting the difficulties of informing all parties that are being observed, often for the sake of access and at the request of sex workers and managers. Ethics committees are usually hostile to covert methods as they can appear unethical and potentially dangerous for the researcher. Stereotypes and misunderstandings about the research setting exacerbate these generic concerns about the methods often employed when studying the sex work field.

The setting, whether it is a 'red light district', crack house or illegal brothel, is often the focus of concern raised by ethics committees. Is this the correct environment for research to be conducted, or for a student to be initiated into the research culture? Questions of danger always arise because of stereotypes that link prostitution to criminality, especially drug-related crimes. Associations between HIV, drug-injecting sex workers, vicious and violent male pimps and the sex work setting all surface with the prospects of researching the sex industry. Fuelled by assumptions about the type of people who organize and work in the sex industry, as well as the men that buy sex, the researcher is expected to take extra precautions when assessing participants and fieldsites. In addition, the routines that the researcher will be expected to engage in usually entail long hours in fairly unknown or secluded locations, often late at night, and sometimes alone.

The danger that the researcher is exposed to is a central concern of officials, but this can sometimes be a disguise for more pressing anxieties about the reputation of the institution. As a postgraduate student my own research (which was originally based on an internet survey of the sex work community) was scrutinized by the senior officials in the university before it was vetoed as an unacceptable area of inquiry and methodological design (see Sanders, 2005b). Behind this decision was apprehension related to preserving the reputation of the university and concerns about media headlines that linked students to the seedy underworld environment in the name of completing a doctorate. Along with what Ashworth

et al. (1988) calls the 'academic prudery' of the institutions that promote information production, such paranoia can be the real reason that research located in the sex industry is vetoed or requires changes that completely alter the original questions and design.

However, there are solutions to these ethical trials. The plethora of successful work in this field, using both ethnographic and more mainstream methods, is a testament to the appropriateness of the sex industry as a field-site. The general literature that explains the limitations of informed consent in all circumstances and the acceptability of covert inquiry within an ethical framework that prioritizes the anonymity of those being studied, can be used to demonstrate the feasibility of the design. There are few horror stories reported (this does not mean that researchers have not experienced some difficult and vulnerable situations), and good quality accounts of ethnography explain the basic rules of engagement such as finding a gate-keeper that acts as a protector (Hart, 1998: 55; O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). Therefore, it can be demonstrated that despite common conceptions, there are regulators (health workers, sauna owners, police, key informants) in the sex industry that researchers can align themselves with in order to stay out of trouble and learn the local scene.

In addition, researchers in this field can rely on the professional codes of practice promoted by the subject discipline that set out procedures, obligations and expectations of the research process (for example the British Sociological Association produces guidelines for its members). Often universities have their own codes of etiquette, which can include safety procedures when researchers are working alone or at night for instance. Basic safety checks such as never meeting people alone in private, always in a public place, letting a third party know of your whereabouts and checking in after the session has ended, are assurances that go a long way to maintaining safety (see Shaver, 2005: 302 for a thorough account of safety procedures for sex work researchers). The potential dangers and strong stereotypes associated with the sex industry are issues that researchers have to confront before the project gets off the ground. Although this means that research designs are perhaps over scrutinized and charged with queries that expect more insight from the novice researcher, this encourages the researcher to be reflective even at this initial stage. Thinking ahead to foreseeable problems, having a set of plan 'B's' if the initial methods fail, and taking time out of the fieldwork to reassess are good practice in an intense and volatile environment.

## Access and acceptance into the sex industry

For the researcher, the legal status of prostitution and the actual environment are the key considerations when planning the access route.

Prostitution is often located outside a legitimate legal framework or even where the sex industry is legitimate, there are always issues of stigma and deviancy to consider. The different environments that facilitate street and off street prostitution offer some peculiarities (for a lengthy discussion see Shaver, 2005). On the street, the environment is vulnerable, as women mainly work at night, in deserted and unlit industrial areas, in an economy that can be linked to other forms of acquisitive crime. Indoors, although not usually characterized by the violence and vulnerabilities of the street scene, the premises of illegal brothels may be well known but getting a foot in the door is a difficult prospect – especially if the researcher is a woman. Owners, managers and workers are suspicious of unknown inquirers, and women who enter the building are normally looking for work (i.e. competition) or are spying for the opposition. Rarely has it been reported that a researcher has introduced herself or himself to sex workers without a third party mediating the initial introductions.

To side-step these closed environments researchers use various gatekeepers to overcome initial hostilities. Some access routes have been outside the sex work environment. For example the criminal justice system (prisons, bail hostels, courts, probation service and so on) or sexual health and welfare services have traditionally been a successful introduction route to women and men involved in prostitution. Specific sex work outreach projects (see Cooper et al., 2001) have been the most prolific gatekeepers, as their established and trusted ties with street workers and indoor establishments provide researchers with the opportunity to prove their credibility. Hubbard (1999b: 233) explains four principles that must be demonstrated to outreach projects and sex workers to achieve success in the negotiation phase. First, the investigator must establish how the research will produce knowledge to help reduce stigma surrounding prostitution; second, that the researcher has an insight into the reality of prostitution and the circumstances in which sex is sold; third, a recognition that prostitution is a legitimate form of work; and fourth, a belief that health and safety risks should be minimized for sex workers. However, as Melrose (2002: 340) documents, securing access through sexual health projects is not straightforward. This route can be met with refusal because of concerns that the research will demand too much time from the project, disagreement with the premise of the research or the worry that their clients are ‘over-researched’ or exploited.

As Smart (1984: 153) describes, once access has been gained at an official level, the researcher is then faced with the task of convincing others further down the ranks that their quest is legitimate. In my own project, once official access was gained from the National Health Service as the initial gatekeepers to the sexual health clinic, the next stage was to ask the outreach workers if I could accompany them in their daily work activities.

Like Hubbard, I had to persuade the professionals that I was not a liability. After all, they would be taking me into sex work venues that the project had worked with over many years and they could not afford to jeopardize that relationship.

Once inside the indoor sex establishments the next hurdle was actually to convince the owners and managers that I was a serious researcher and would not expose or harm their business reputation or the sex workers. I was aware that the outreach workers took me to only the formally organized saunas or entrepreneurs who were more familiar with attention from outsiders. Elsewhere I describe how within the sex industry there are tight informal networks based on female business and friendship circles (Sanders, 2005a: 168). Acceptance by a couple of key players in this network meant that I was given access to the main saunas throughout the city and was eventually able to leave the side of the outreach workers and go it alone. Nevertheless, no matter how much effort is put into convincing gatekeepers, the emphasis is on the researcher to build up sustainable relationships of trust with informants by spending a considerable amount of time in the field. This is dependent on whether time is affordable and often relationships have to be sustained when the researcher is not present. There is pressure to maintain the network source and keep track of participants who are sometimes from chaotic and unstable populations where the idea of remembering phone numbers and pre-arranged dates and times for meetings is often alien.

## Accessing private and the public lives

Once access to sex establishments or sex workers has been achieved, researchers then negotiate whether the research will be conducted in either the working environment or in the private lives and spaces of the sex workers. Despite the difficulties of the prostitution environment, research is often conducted in the working spaces of the commercial sex exchange. By striking 'research bargains' and 'exchanges' that involve giving out condoms, sterile needle equipment and hot drinks on the street, researchers have been able to observe successfully how the street markets operate. For instance, McKeganey and Barnard (1996) and Sharpe (1998) were able to step into the native environment of street prostitution and witness how sex workers organized their work, the vulnerabilities and violence that were everyday encounters as well as the police enforcement tactics and 'kerb crawler' interactions. Porter and Bonilla (2000) interviewed women in Spain in their working street environment and found that there was an advantage to observing the ebb and flow of the transactions in addition to recording in-depth information from interviews. A combination of methods (usually a mixed approach



that includes observations and interviews) appears to be a successful recipe for data collection.

In the non-contact sexual services industry, such as erotic telephone lines, lap dancing clubs and sex cinemas, researchers have often combined examining the work environment with that of the private lives of female sex workers. Pasko (2002) observed how women performed erotic dancing in bars as well as observed and interviewed the same women at home and in their social lives in order to capture different aspects of the female dancer's experiences and perceptions. Also, Abbott (2000) investigated the pornography industry and held informal discussions with pornography producers and actors in a range of settings including production sets, industry parties and trade shows.

The private lives of sex workers have proven to be more difficult to access and often the in-depth accounts of the experiences of sex work come from autobiographical accounts (Annandale, 2005; Cockington and Marlin, 1995; Delacoste and Alexander, 1988; Efthimiou-Mordant, 2002; Jaget, 1980; Kempadoo and Doezema, 1999; Levine and Madden, 1988; Nagel, 1997). The array of personal accounts of working in the sex industry is often a testament to 'coming out' or setting the record straight after a life of hiding their involvement in it behind a more salubrious activity. As I have evidenced elsewhere (Sanders, 2005a: ch. 7), the 'double life' of women involved in prostitution is difficult to access because of the immense secrecy that surrounds their activities and the need for many women to avoid their public work life entering their personal domestic domain. Wahab (2003: 632) notes that the level of secrecy that often operates in sex workers' lives determines where information can be discussed, describing how interviews she conducted usually took place at her home or in her car. For women who are also illegal immigrants, there are additional reasons for keeping out of the spotlight and avoiding communications with any type of authority for fear of detection and deportation (see Riberio and Sacramento, 2005).

Entering the private worlds of women who are involved in activities that are largely disapproved of presented additional ethical issues. On the few occasions I was permitted into the private worlds of participants I would often be asked to collude with the secrecy stories that sex workers had constructed to hide their money-making activities. I would have to pretend I was a colleague from the office, or an acquaintance whilst I chatted to a participant's husband, or was invited to stay for tea with the children. An example of the role-playing that I describe in the next section shows how it is an essential tool in the field.

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## Making sense of the sexual field

When actually doing research in the sex industry where the exchange of sexual services, bodily functions and flesh-to-flesh contact is the everyday trade, the reality of research cannot avoid these characteristics. Although there are similarities with other illicit economies, the setting of the sex industry is unique because the combination of studying sex and money in an illegal arena affects how the research is executed, the dilemmas for the researcher and the immediacy of making decisions in the 'sexual' field. For those who are unaware, a typical sauna or brothel can be characterized by televisions showing hardcore pornography, pornographic magazines, sex toys, domination equipment, a menu of sexual services on offer, an explicit photographic gallery of the women who are available and other sex paraphernalia. This environment can be distasteful at best but is often violently shocking and disturbing.

The sexual subtext of the environment is impossible to escape as participants are in their work clothes (which usually consists of very little), buying into the fantasies that tempt customers to part with their cash (see Sanders, 2005c). The physical sexual environment is not the only sexualized element to the fieldwork setting. Men are constantly wandering into the premises and engaging in a set of negotiations with the receptionist (maid) and then (often in private) with the sex worker. Men linger in the communal lounge while they wait for a worker to finish her current client, idling the time away by flicking through a pornographic magazine or watching graphic images on the screen, before they are called to the shower room and finally the specifically chosen bedroom, until, 30 minutes later they come out the other side, £60 lighter. This routinization of the sexual negotiation is a process with which the observer becomes familiar (and perhaps desensitized) and after several sessions of data collection, the process of negotiating sexual services becomes part of the momentum of the fieldwork.

My reflections appear to be typical as other researchers describe how their data collection consisted of spending time in settings that were dominated by sexual acts. For instance, Abbott's (2000: 19) primary data collection site was the production sets of pornographic movies where it was impossible to avoid nudity and explicit sex acts such as anal sex and 'double' penetration. Reflecting on her own observations of '*Paper Dolls*', a strip venue, Murphy (2003: 332) notes that in fieldwork sites where observing nudity is the main activity the tables can soon be turned as the ethnographer's role shifts from 'watching the spectacle' to becoming 'part of the show'. Murphy goes on to reveal that as an observer of a nude dance performance, male managers and dancers expected her to engage in sexual banter and innuendo as a process of initiation, which seemed to be pivotal to whether she was accepted as a legitimate outsider.

My own experiences of being in the sexual field of the sauna and brothel involved two other methodological nuances that at the time became routinized yet had an intrinsic effect on the way in which information was collected, my role in this foreign arena and establishing rapport with participants. First, as my role in the sauna was overt to the sex workers but, at the request of the managers, the clients were unaware of my researcher status and I was often propositioned by interested customers. Men would assume I was another worker or a new member of the team and would make propositions and innuendo that had to be managed. Initially flustered, embarrassed and uncomfortable, I soon adopted strategies to deflect their requests: I would either pretend I was 'fully booked', a friend of a worker or a sexual health professional, switching between these roles depending on how confident I felt at the time and the amount of back up I had from those around me. Ultimately, role-playing became a necessity in the field, especially where a delicate 'research bargain' existed that required keeping my researcher status anonymous to one party while others were aware of the investigation.

Second, the majority of the fieldwork in the indoor sex work venues was conducted amongst women who were semi-naked for most of the time. For instance, my interviews with Beryl, a 39-year-old mother of four who had worked in a range of sex markets for 20 years, took place in the 30-minute slot she allocated each day as her 'preparation time' before she welcomed her first customer. In this time Beryl was showering, shaving, applying make-up, styling her hair, putting on lingerie and at the same time answering my questions. It became natural to see women naked as they changed from one outfit to another, were flitting between bathroom and bedroom or needed a hand squeezing into a particular costume. These situations were non-sexualized and non-erotic as the women conducted their behaviour in a professional matter-of-fact manner, relegating luxurious lingerie or kinky outfits to the function of a work uniform. Participants approached their work and ultimately the display of their bodies in an entirely pragmatic, de-sexualized and business-like manner with no sense of shame, embarrassment or vulnerability. Explaining their trade as a combination of physical, sexual and emotional labour, the role of the body and their sexuality was afforded different meanings in the context of a money-making economic exchange.

## What is participant observation in the sex industry?

The ethnographic method in the sex work arena brings into question what participation means, and whilst there are those that maintain 'going native' jeopardizes the professional status of the researcher (Hart, 1998: 55), others have used complete participation as the key to the insider

status. For example, Wahab (2003: 629) describes how she not only conducted observations in strip clubs but decided to engage in the sex work venue. Encouraged by her participants who insisted that to really understand the job it had to be lived, Wahab took part in a peep show as a dancer, immersing herself in the context of the culture.

The alternative meanings or scripts attached to sex in the commercial context were apparent in the offers I received to actually watch women perform sexual services for clients. Several women gave me the option of entering the bedroom when a client was present to observe what I was asking them to describe. Most insistent was Astrid, a 37-year-old sex worker who had been in the business for many years and had managed establishments as well as worked. She continually asked me to witness a transaction 'to see how clinical it really was' and claimed I could not fully understand just how different sex work was from sex in an emotional, loving relationship without seeing the difference. The ethical dilemmas attached to the decision whether to become a complete observationalist involved a degree of transference of my own beliefs and understanding of the meaning of sex. Initially perturbed by the offer, I realized this was because I was judging the act of observing a commercial sexual interaction as if it were a romantic, private relationship rather than a consensual economic exchange with specified parameters and an agreed contract. Sex in this context did not mean a loving committed relationship that was a private expression of emotions and sacredness and therefore the charges of voyeurism could be avoided. Instead, what I eventually realized I was being asked to watch was the way in which women performed their work as sex work and the strategies they applied to separate their personal lives from their job. Turning the study into an autobiographic experience has both advantages and disadvantages as roles blur in order to gain an insider status while at the same time losing the distance that being an outsider privileges.

Like the familiar debates in qualitative social science inquiry (see Labaree, 2002), the insider–outsider dilemma is a point of negotiation, confusion and reflection for the researcher in the sex work setting. Rarely are researchers' identities clearly defined as only 'information gatherers'. In the spirit of transparency, researchers interested in sex work qualify their intentions and character which often means blurring the roles and boundaries that other types of research and methods have the luxury of maintaining. Wahab (2003) describes how her research led her to become an advocate member of the prostitutes' rights group 'Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics' (COYOTE) in Seattle. She explains how she was never quite sure how other sex workers placed her as she occupied multiple identities as 'social worker, voyeur, wanna-be-sex-worker, advocate, friend, goodie-two-shoes'. My own ethnographic experience was a similar confusion of roles: was I a researcher, a sexual health worker (I was known as the

'condom lady' in several establishments), a friend, an ally of the industry or an official reporting back on good and bad practice.

Presenting different roles for different audiences was a tricky balancing act. I recall an incident in a sauna when two participants set me up so that a client would approach me and ask for a sexual service, while the sex workers watched my embarrassed excuses from the CCTV. This happened because, although the workers were aware I was conducting a study, at the request of the management, my status was withheld from the clients. Similarly Sharpe (2000: 366) remarks on her experiences of using the police as gatekeepers to the street sex market. Sharpe notes that to achieve a 'workable level of acceptance' the ethnographer must possess 'flexibility bordering on the schizophrenic' in order to manage identities between different audiences.

## Pleasures and dangers of the research process

One account of my fieldwork experience in the sex work setting could read as a list of uncomfortable moments, scary confrontations, mistakes that led to insults, embarrassments, treading on toes and appearing unprofessional and out of my depth. Another positive account could reflect the strong bonds and lasting friendships I built with key informants, idling time away putting the world to rights, and sharing our histories, hopes and expectations. This section will reflect on some of the contrasting experiences of dangers and pleasures when conducting research in the sex work environment, highlighting the complexity of the method and the necessity of investing oneself in the process.

The practical challenges of doing research in the field have been discussed in relation to dangerous fieldwork settings or sensitive topics of inquiry (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Lee, 1995; Sharpe, 2000). Nevertheless, as Goldsmith (2003: 118) describes, the 'field-generated stress' associated with the practicalities of ethnography have been glossed over. In the sexual field, despite the advantages of collecting different types of live data when immersed in the working environment, there are inherent dangers for researchers who operate in illegal environments that are isolated. Several researchers describe how they have met with opposition from potential participants, other hustlers on the street and territorial pimps who take issue with a researcher on their patch (see O'Neill, 1996). Maher (2000: 217) neatly describes the risks she took while conducting an ethnography of the drug and sex markets in Brooklyn. Legal risks (witnessing lawbreaking activities and intense police scrutiny), health risks (physical contact with people suffering intravenous drug use, HIV and hepatitis), and personal risks (relating to the volatile environment and high number of violent incidents) were highlighted as points

of concern. Sometimes obvious risks are expected when working with populations at the margins of society, but, as I describe later, the emotional risks of such work are often unknown when the research is designed. Other hazards in the field make sex work a tricky subject for the well-intended researcher. Researchers have been mistaken for plain clothes police (see Barnard, 1992: 145; Sharpe, 2000: 366), journalists (Sanders, 2005b), or accused of spying for rival competitors (Lever and Dolnick, 2000) – all of which add extra hurdles to achieving safety, credibility and, of course, a sample!

In my experience the difficulties were related to the politics of the sex work venues that I visited. There were certain saunas lower down the local hierarchy of establishments that were characterized by a high turnover of staff, lower prices, offering practices such as unprotected sex and that did not adopt the ‘drugs free’ rule on which others saunas prided themselves. I was apprehensive about visiting these places alone, so would be chaperoned by an outreach worker. These saunas were not pleasant to be in, charged with a volatile atmosphere as verbal arguments between sex workers were common, as were physical fights. Few women welcomed my attendance, as they were more concerned with joining the line-up when new customers came through the door, or flirting with men at the bar, focusing solely on making money. I visited this sauna only four times in the whole 10 months, as the hostile environment was not conducive to recruiting informants or observing.

In saunas that were much more palatable because of their friendliness and orderliness, the politics of the everyday work setting were still a constant challenge. There were high levels of competition, jealousy and aggravation between work colleagues who would try and draw me into their arguments and expect me to take sides. Also, sex workers would tell me information in confidence, whilst others would probe for information they knew I had. On one occasion, several thousand pounds went missing from the sauna’s safe and the manager approached me for information about who was working at the time, presenting me with the quandary of whether to be helpful, and risk being a grass, or to keep quiet. Often I felt under pressure to get involved in the gossip or the information sharing: knowing whom to trust was sometimes a case of personal survival. These were difficult times and often the sauna felt like conflict management rather than social science research. Reflecting on these situations highlights the fact that there were incidents and issues that were not reported in the writing up process. Stories that were surplus to the central inquiry about the occupational hazards and strategies of management that sex workers adopted were either not recorded, remain unanalysed or are idling in my memory.

## The emotional toil of data gathering

The emotional effort needed to research sex work is stark in both the pragmatics of the fieldwork and the efforts needed to dissect, reflect and understand the researcher's own position in a complex social activity. What Melrose (2002) calls the 'labour pains' of researching sensitive areas like prostitution are often given little attention as the researcher is expected to apply emotional labour to manage the feelings of others as well as their own responses. Although not always the case, informal conversations and taped interviews with women who work in prostitution can involve the disclosure of disturbing and unpleasant data consisting of tales of exploitation, abuse, violence, desperation, drug use and hopelessness.

Melrose, like others (Miller, 1997; O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994: 216–7; Sharpe, 2000: 365), documents how stories provoke feelings of anger, rage and despair both in the data collection phase and again in the analysis stage. In a current project with men who buy sex from female sex workers, such feelings of anger and contempt have been a consequence of listening to the other side of the story. In a minority of cases, as interviewees have left my office I have felt pure rage at their misogynist attitudes and belief that if they buy the services of a sex worker then they can do as they please. It is difficult to understand or accept these experiences as research but maintaining a professional attitude and response to people who incite such negative feelings is the only reason why the project has not been shelved.

The dangers of the sexual field are not only related to the physical safety of the researcher as the emotional investment in the endeavour is significant and needs to be reflected upon and managed. At times the field relations with participants can prove to be very intense. To bridge the scepticism and doubts held by potential participants the researcher knowingly or unknowingly enters into a degree of self-disclosure. What Wahab (2003: 633) describes as 'mutuality and reciprocity' is an accurate description of what is expected from the researcher whose aim it is to come to know the work and personal lives of women who sell sexual services. Wahab reflects how nude dancers, street sex workers and escort workers probed questions about the researcher's life and experiences, rendering the information collection a two-way exchange of intimate details. Wahab's experiences of enquiring participants echoes my own journey with sex workers who wanted to know as much about me as I did about them. Participants always wanted to know why I was interested in sex work and whether I could be tempted or indeed had the guts to sell sexual services for money. Such curiosity could not be ignored and a natural process of self-disclosure and identification became an integral part of how field relations were secured. I recall this process as natural rather than manipulative because it was not

a chore to engage in in-depth conversation with the participants as I shared many experiences with them. Yet although disclosure brought me closer to the women, this self-investment also opened up vulnerabilities and concerns about keeping my private life protected from the demands of the fieldwork setting and the public academic eye. At the same time, having to do some personal soul searching also made me confront my stereotypes and prejudices about sexuality and lifestyles. Not something that is generally written into the research design.

The intensity of the research does not necessarily decrease as time lapses between the fieldwork and the safety of the academic corridors. In processes of self-reflection, what was experienced cannot be fully understood until the 'after' phase of the data collection, writing up and dissemination (see Roberts and Sanders, 2005). It is in the after phases that the journey can be considered as a whole, the mistakes highlighted and good practice recognized as worthy of repeating or sharing with peers. It is also in the 'after' phase that there are dilemmas about whether we make our academic careers off the backs of the people who have supplied the material. Making a successful academic career through permanent positions, book contracts and promotions from the experiences of those in the sex industry brings added suspicions of exploitation. The information used to make that career is based on experiences of individuals involved in what some consider an immoral or inhumane exchange of sex for money, or an institution that exists as a prop for patriarchy and wider unequal power structures that subjugates women. As O'Neill (1996: 132) warns 'researchers are sometimes seen as akin to pimps, coming into the field to take, then returning to the campus, institution or suburb where they write up the data, publish and build careers – on the backs of those they took data from'. Solutions to these criticisms can be found in the methodological principles that form the basis of research into sex work as well as the way in which methods are delivered. Collaborative research partnerships that work alongside informants, offering directorship and control to those who are normally subjected to the research process is a step towards reducing the exploitative nature of social science research.

## Creative methods: collaborative partnerships

My argument thus far has been to suggest that ethnographic methods are the most fruitful route into the sex work setting that produces high quality, in-depth accounts of this secretive social activity. The advantages of the ethnographic method allow the researcher and the academic community to explore the in-depth interactions and meanings of people's lives that are involved in the sex industry. This method enables different questions to be asked of people who sell sex for money by posing intimate



questions that require detailed description, context and often-repeated contact to make sense of narratives. These questions cannot be fully answered through tools such as questionnaires and surveys. Yet there are flaws with the ethnographic method (such as its emphasis on subjectivity, the time it takes to experience the context and its lack of relevance to policy and practice) as well as a method that is fraught with power dynamics and the potential for exploitation of the informants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002: 273). Even where research is ethical, going into the field and taking accounts of people's lives can still be charged with a 'smash and grab' mentality. With these criticisms in mind, other researchers in the sex industry have creatively adapted qualitative research methods to bring a specific set of epistemological principles to the fore of knowledge production.

Participatory action research and collaborative partnership working is driven by the principles that research has the responsibility to facilitate resistance and social change (see Agustin, 2004). Drawing on over a decade of research with women involved in prostitution, O'Neill (1996: 131) argues that women should be 'active participants in the social construction of knowledge', in order for their voices and stories to be heard. O'Neill (2001: 187) sets out why researchers in this area need to move away from reinforcing the 'binary thinking' about prostitution as either exploitation or choice but instead calls for research that 'deconstructs the binaries and privilege constellational thinking'. Speaking from a critical human geography perspective, Hubbard (1999b) advocates the 'emancipatory potential' of 'action oriented and conversational research methodologies' that provide a voice to excluded populations. The reliance on theoretically informed methods is evident in prostitution research in New Zealand where Pyett (1998: 368) applied 'community driven research' to address the needs of the sex work community. Here, 10 sex workers were employed as collaborators from the start of the project and assisted in questionnaire design, as well as administering the survey to the target population. By employing sex workers as part of the 'critical reference group' that managed the project, the research was tailored to the needs and sensitivities of the community studied.

## Concluding comments

Despite its criticisms and dwindling application, here I have argued that there is great value in small-scale ethnographic research, especially collaborative in nature, into the sex industry that is concentrated both in time and space. Yet at every stage there are hurdles and challenges, often from within the institution as questions are posed by ethics committees of the appropriateness and feasibility of the sex industry as a worthy topic of study.

Sex work research diverges from institutional patterns and accepted paths of information gathering, transgressing expectations of the types of group that are worthy of research or will produce useful knowledge (Pyett, 1998). In addition, the nature of the sex work environment and the political issues surrounding prostitution demand that the researcher make personal investment (such as self disclosure) into the research process. The demands of emotional labour on the researcher are complex and intense. Researchers have to confront hostile and volatile environments that need to be managed with care, making skills in negotiation, conflict management, role playing and keeping quiet an essential part of the fieldwork tool-kit.

The challenges do not stop as the researcher leaves the field. The writing up process demands considerable reflection on all aspects of the fieldwork and decisions have to be made about what to reveal and what to confine to the fieldwork diary. Continually promoting research into sex work, tirelessly applying (and re-applying) for funding and pushing to disseminate findings amongst the decision-makers is also part of the methodological challenges that face those committed to this important social issue. Pragmatics aside, to advance the theoretical arguments and knowledge regarding the nature and place of prostitution in contemporary life, research needs to be directed at wider issues relating to the politics of gender and social issues. O'Neill (2001: 187) suggests some of these wider social issues such as the feminization of poverty, violence and abuse in the home, and routes into sex work such as homelessness and leaving care are intrinsically linked to finding out more about prostitution. Researchers have the responsibility not to produce more of the same but to address the questions and areas that are often pushed to one side, constantly rejected by funding bodies and appear to be in discord with national political objectives. As Shaver (2005: 307) comments, challenges to stereotypes and the victimization of sex workers needs to be implicit in the methods that are employed to produce knowledge about these groups. If there is to be any advancement in the sociology of sex work, separate aspects of the industry should not be studied in isolation, and female sex workers should not remain the only focus of investigation.

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