

Reflections on a research process: Exploring violence against sex workers from a feminist perspective

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Abstract

Undertaking feminist research with marginalised groups of women requires the careful negotiation of challenges in the research process. This paper explores the research process in relation to fieldwork undertaken on the management of violence related risks with street-based sex workers in New Zealand. This paper provides an insight into the strategies used to make connections with a relatively hard to reach group of women, and the complexities of managing the fieldwork process. Demonstrating the importance of self-reflection, challenges encountered in the research process are explored highlighting the emotional impacts of fieldwork on the researcher and the balancing of power dynamics in qualitative interviewing. The discussion of these challenges highlights critical issues to consider when undertaking qualitative research on sensitive issues with stigmatised or marginalised groups of women.

Key words: Sex work, decriminalisation, feminist methodology, reflection

Introduction

The Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) was passed in New Zealand in 2003. The decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand was significant since prostitution is more commonly criminalised and, as a consequence, very little is known about the potential impacts of decriminalisation. This paper provides a reflective account of my experience undertaking qualitative research for my PhD, exploring risks of violence with women working on the streets as sex workers in the decriminalised context. I reflect on the experience of carrying out this research and the methodological challenges encountered. To begin, I discuss the research process. I describe the theoretical approach, and the strategies used to access the street-based sex work environment in the decriminalised context. I then reflect on the tensions I experienced managing the researcher role, the interview process and the emotional impacts I encountered whilst doing this research.

The research approach

The research is based on the experiences of 28 women who worked on the street as sex workers in Wellington and Christchurch between 2008 and 2009. Epistemologically, I approached this research from a feminist perspective. Feminist epistemologies were developed partly in response to a frustration with the inadequacies of traditional positivist epistemology to represent the experiences of women (Brooks, 2007; Chase, 2005; Cotterill, 1992; Harding, 1998; Kitzinger, 2004). However, feminist research is not simply research 'by', 'for' and 'about' women (Alice, 2003; Glucksman, 1994). Rather what makes research 'feminist' lies more within the way in which the research is carried out, and the particular way in which methods are used (Brooks, 2007; Code, 1991, 1995; Harding, 1993, 1998; Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994; Maynard, 1994). Feminist researchers make an explicit commitment to acknowledging the relationship between researchers and the 'researched'. However, feminist research on sensitive issues still presents ethical dilemmas and challenges in the research process (Weatherall, Gavey and Potts, 2002). Whilst a full account of the ethical dilemmas I grappled with in this research is beyond the scope of this paper, some of challenges I encountered are explored in subsequent sections.

The theoretical framework which explicitly informed this research is feminist standpoint epistemology, within which social phenomena are explored from the point of view of an individual who has been culturally and historically defined for the reader (Schwandt, 2000). Sanders, O'Neill & Pitcher (2009) comment that, 'central to much feminist research methodology is an acknowledgement of the location of the researcher as part of and influencing the research process' (p. 168). In conducting this research I felt it was important to make explicit my own political and moral standpoint on sex work, to make explicit the lens through which I analysed the women's experiences. As Letherby (2003) explains, 'All research is ideological because no one can separate themselves from the world – from their values and opinions, from books they read, from the people they have spoken to and so on' (pp. 5-6).

Feminist standpoint epistemologies have been critiqued as based on narrow understandings of power and domination that focus on patriarchal oppression whilst failing to acknowledge the power differentials that exist between women (Sanders et al., 2009). In recognition of this, my use of feminist standpoint epistemology in the research encapsulated my belief that research is grounded in experience, but also in the need to make explicit my own position of privilege in the research process. My positioning in the research is complex and multi-dimensional, and thus is also heavily influenced by my own privilege as a researcher and as an individual. I am white, able bodied, literate, and with sufficient formal and informal education to support myself independently wherever I choose to live. Whilst undertaking this research I recognised that individuals make choices within the constraints of structural oppression that impact on their lives and that for some women involved in sex work, choices are limited significantly. However my approach to this research was focused on 'accepting the essential validity of other people's experiences', underpinned by a belief that 'Feminists ... shouldn't tell other women what to be, how to be, how to behave' (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 8). I wanted the research to reflect as accurately as possible these individual experiences, to avoid making judgements on the choices the women had made throughout their lives, and their current circumstances. Thus, whilst recognising the impacts of structural oppression, and reflecting on my own privilege as a researcher, I was committed to the women defining their own experiences. In addition, my perspectives in the research were not fixed and shifted over time as I progressed with the research and had some of my own preconceived ideas challenged. Miller (1997) notes that 'With the passage of time, our perspectives develop in new ways and we can become more explicitly aware of the frames of reference that shaped us previously' (p. 161). As such, I became committed to reflecting on my thoughts, feelings and perceptions in the process of doing this research. In the subsequent sections of this paper I explore my experiences in the research process, beginning with an overview of how I negotiated the fieldwork.

An open and closed environment: making connections in a decriminalised context

The fieldwork was conducted primarily in Christchurch. A small amount of fieldwork was conducted in Wellington early in the research process. The decision to concentrate the fieldwork in Christchurch was taken for specific reasons. Christchurch has the highest population of street workers in New Zealand as a proportion of all sex workers, 26% compared to 13% in Wellington and 11% in Auckland (Abel, et al., 2007). Three street-based sex workers have been murdered in the city since 2005, and subsequently there had been much debate in Christchurch regarding sex worker safety. Importantly, the support and social agency infrastructure available in Christchurch was very strong at the time of the data collection, which helped facilitate the fieldwork. Christchurch therefore provided an ideal site for the bulk of the fieldwork to take

place. The population of street-based sex workers in Wellington is relatively small and as my base at that time the city provided an appropriate site for initial consultation with sex workers.

Due to the extent of stigma shrouding the sex industry, sex workers are considered a hard to reach population. Street-based sex workers are considered a particularly hard to reach group, due to their criminalised status (Barnard, 1992). Undertaking this research in New Zealand, one of the only places in the world where sex workers can work on the street without the threat of arrest, was a very unique opportunity. Unfortunately, sex work is still considered a clandestine activity in mainstream New Zealand society. Thus, like other researchers globally, I found it was of great importance to work with gatekeepers already involved in the sex industry (McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; O'Neill, 2001; Sanders, 2006a; Wahab, 2003).

The most appropriate point of contact was the national sex worker organisation, the New Zealand Prostitute's Collective (NZPC). The NZPC was established in 1987 and the sex worker led organisation was instrumental in leading the campaign to decriminalise sex work in New Zealand. I first met with the NZPC in December 2007 to discuss the research proposal I had developed. Hubbard (1999) has outlined four basic principles which would be typically expected by sex industry 'gatekeepers' before supporting a project: (1) that the research must be capable of producing knowledge which would reduce stigma surrounding sex work, (2) that the researcher has an understanding of the realities of sex work, (3) that sex work is understood by the researcher as a legitimate form of work, and (4) that the researcher believes in the minimisation of health and safety risks for sex workers in their work. These were principles that were important to the staff and volunteers I met with at the Prostitute's Collective and I had to work hard to gain their trust. Like Sanders (2006b), I had to convince frontline staff in the organisation that I would not be problematic to have around, that I would not embarrass them and jeopardise their relationships with individuals and organisations by behaving inappropriately, or harass and have an adverse impact on sex workers.

At my first meeting with the NZPC I expressed an interest in becoming a volunteer prior to and for the duration of the fieldwork. The purpose of this was threefold. In line with the feminist approach ensuring reciprocity was a priority (Skeggs, 1994), and volunteering with the NZPC would provide that opportunity. I also recognised the value of volunteering in that I would be likely to learn a great deal about the broader sex industry in New Zealand. Finally, I also genuinely wanted to be involved in NZPC because I admired the work invested by them to achieve the law change in 2003. I started working with the NZPC as a volunteer providing administration support at the beginning of March 2008. This also facilitated my initial contact with potential participants in Wellington.

In Christchurch the process of making connections was slightly more complex. Several organisations in the city were extensively in contact with street-based sex workers at that time. Owing to the higher street-based sex worker population than in Wellington, services included outreach and drop-in centres provided by NZPC, the Salvation Army (a Christian organisation), and Youth Cultural Development (an organisation providing services to at-risk youth). Therefore, to get a broad insight into the street-sex work scene in Christchurch and introductions to as many women as possible, it was important to work with all three of these organisations. Making links with the NZPC was the most straightforward since I had been volunteering in the Wellington base for almost a year and had already met with the Regional Co-ordinator and some of the Christchurch staff. However, I did still have to work hard at building relationships with the NZPC in Christchurch, and support for the research developed over time as I built relationships with those working in this branch of the organisation.

Connecting with the Salvation Army was particularly important given the scope of the services they provided to street-based sex workers in the city. I arranged a meeting with the

coordinator of the services run for street-based sex workers at the end of January 2009 and I was offered the opportunity to spend time at the evening drop-in centre as a volunteer. The drop-in centre then became my most important point of contact for making links with women working on the streets in Christchurch. Through my connections with NZPC and the Salvation Army I met a youth worker in early April 2009. After this meeting I was invited to attend an evening drop-in attended by young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in street prostitution.

Thus, gaining access to the field in Christchurch involved working with three very different organisations, thereby increasing the range of perspectives encompassed within this research. The field in Christchurch was complex and the range of agencies willing to involve me was instrumental in helping me gather a broad understanding of the street-based sex industry.

The methods selected for the data collection consisted of three strands: 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 women working on the streets as sex workers (five in Wellington and 23 in Christchurch), 16 semi-structured interviews with a number of key informants (two in Wellington and 14 in Christchurch), and researcher observation. Interviews with the women were focused on entry into sex work, perceptions of risk and vulnerability, feelings of safety, and strategies to manage risks. The interview guide was developed following an initial review of existing research on violence risk management in the street sector and consultation with three staff members from NZPC. Key informant interviews were included to broaden the range of perspectives and to supplement the interviews with sex workers. Key informants were selected from organisations with an interest in sex worker safety and their expert knowledge of the sex industry. These interviews explored perceptions of sex work and risk in the street sector and strategies to support the safety of street-based sex workers. Researcher observation was an ongoing process throughout the six-month fieldwork period in Christchurch. In the first two and a half months this involved volunteering at a drop-in centre for street-based sex workers and on a street outreach van. In the final months of the research, I accompanied an NZPC outreach worker once a week on the street to distribute condoms.

The success of the fieldwork was underpinned by the connections made with these three organisations. However, managing my fieldwork experience still required careful negotiation and reflection. In the remaining sections of this paper I describe my experiences in the field, detailing the complexities and challenges I encountered whilst managing the research process.

Managing the research process

The interview process

The women interviewed for this research had diverse experiences and varied backgrounds. The oldest woman interviewed was 57 and the youngest was 17 years old. Thirteen identified as New Zealand European, fourteen as Māori and one as Cook Island Māori. There was considerable diversity with regards the age at which they had entered the sex industry. The average age of entry was 20 years old, however one woman had become involved in street prostitution at the age of 12 whilst another had started working at 45.

The length of time working in the sex industry varied between two months and 22 years. Five participants had started working after the law reform that decriminalised sex work, whilst the remaining 23 worked in the sex industry before the law change. The research therefore captured the perceptions of women with experience working pre- and post-law reform. Sixteen participants were unsure about how much longer they would work in the sex industry, whilst two thought they would continue for another one to two years. One woman expected to work for a further three to five years and four women reported that they would continue to work for

more than five years. Four of the women had recently stopped working, although two disclosed working occasionally to meet unexpected personal and household expenses. A few described feeling satisfied working and had no desire to stop, whilst a few were very keen to stop and were proactively exploring options to leave the sex industry. There were also a number of individuals in between these two positions.

Ten participants reported doing no other work outside of the sex industry in the course of their lives, whilst the remaining 18 had worked in other occupations previous or concurrent to working in the sex industry. Two were also engaged in part-time paid employment outside of the sex industry at the time of the research. Five were currently studying in full- or part-time education, whilst nine were full-time caregivers. Four reported that they were currently involved in voluntary work.

Seventeen of the women interviewed had children. In some cases these children were now adults and not dependent financially. In a few cases children had been taken into care. However, nine of the women were supporting children currently. Several of these women described working on the street solely for the economic benefits that this brought to their children, to provide necessities and luxuries that they had sometimes lacked in their own childhood.

When interviewing these women, it was important to pay particular attention to the power balance as a key principle of feminist research. The relationship between researcher and 'researched individuals' is classically understood as being unavoidably unequal. However, whilst conducting interviews it soon became clear that most of these women would, in any case, not allow themselves to be disempowered. Although I was inevitably in a position of power as a researcher, it was simply not the case that I had all of the power. In some situations, the women took control of the interview by letting me know their thoughts on the sorts of questions being asked. Some of the ways in which these women managed the power relationship in interviews perhaps in part reflected the skills they used in their sex work to establish control in encounters with clients. In addition, I too was asked questions by participants and, recognising the personal nature of the information I was asking them to reveal, I readily answered questions about myself and shared my thoughts. Consistent with experiences reported by other researchers, I found this to be a natural process in response to curiosity of the participant, which helped build relationships and increase rapport (Liamputtong, 2007; Sanders, 2006b). It was important for me to be honest with the women to balance the power relationship between us as much as possible, even though this was at times uncomfortable. For instance in my second interview with one woman, Sydney, I was asked whether I could ever see myself working on the street as a sex worker. I answered that I could not and Sydney pushed me to divulge the reasons why. Explaining that I would be afraid for my safety, Sydney laughed and informed me that if I ever did, she and the other women would ensure I was safe, clearly emphasising her position of power as the holder of knowledge I was interested in.

In an interview with Justice, we discussed experiences of sexual violence as teenagers. After sharing my experience, Justice talked in more detail about her own experience. In this situation I felt that this disclosure helped Justice feel more at ease talking about the emotions that accompany such a deeply personal experience. However, I also remained aware that sharing such experiences risked emotionally burdening participants and thus it was important to ensure these situations were approached in a way that would support rather than hinder women. I also had to remain aware of the risk of overwhelming myself. Self-disclosure in the fieldwork setting at times did cause me some concerns. Like Sanders (2006b), I found on reflection that this sometimes made me feel emotionally exposed. I became aware that this required constant reflection and, as other researchers have noted, a delicate balancing of allowing myself to be vulnerable, but not too vulnerable (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000).

Managing emotions

My immersion in the fieldwork setting also impacted on my emotions and this required careful management. The emotional impacts that can result from carrying out field research in this area have scarcely been explored (Melrose, 2002; Hammond, 2010). Melrose (2002) described experiencing 'labour pains' in the course of undertaking fieldwork on the prostitution of young people. During the data analysis process she reported experiencing a range of emotions, such as anger towards men who paid for sex with the young people she interviewed, concern for the ongoing wellbeing of participants, and sadness about the experiences of violence that were described during the interviews. Similarly, Hammond (2010) found herself experiencing emotions of sadness, anger, anxiety and fear in her field research with male clients of sex workers (Hammond, 2010). Managing emotional reactions in the research process was an issue for me throughout the research and was something I struggled with on multiple levels.

One such emotional challenge related to balancing my insider/outsider status whilst immersed in the fieldwork setting. Other sex work researchers have reported similar challenges. For instance, whilst researching sex work issues in the USA, Wahab (2003) built a relationship with the sex worker organisation COYOTE and described experiencing role confusion, feeling she had the multiple identities of 'social worker, voyeur, wanna-be-sex worker, advocate, friend, goodie-two-shoes ... I constantly felt like an insider and an outsider while working with sex workers' (pp. 628-629). Sanders (2006b) also reported experiencing this role confusion whilst balancing the roles of researcher and sexual health outreach worker, becoming known in several sex work venues as the 'condom lady' (pp. 459-460). I also struggled to balance diverse roles in the research process. At times I felt like part of the scene and had to remind myself of my primary purpose of being there. At other times I felt like an outsider, paranoid I was considered a snotty, middle class, white 'girl' who wished to benefit personally by 'studying prostitution'. I constantly had to reflect on and negotiate these roles in the field and, like Sanders (2006b) I came to accept that the role of researcher in this setting is seldom clear-cut and limited to the mere gathering of information.

To balance these roles, it was essential that I had sufficient time away from the fieldwork settings I was involved in. Whilst immersing myself in the field was important, it was equally important to ensure I had sufficient time away to reflect on my experiences in the field. To enable this, I set aside two days per week for writing and did not do any fieldwork at weekends. This 'time out' allowed me to reconcile any internal conflict and confusion I experienced, whilst enabling me to benefit fully from my time spent in the field.

Another way in which I felt emotionally vulnerable related to my own experience and management of stigma. Liamputtong (2007) notes that researchers are vulnerable to social stigma and this became clear to me in some interactions I had outside of the fieldwork setting. As a researcher, and as a young woman, I became aware of how deeply ingrained and destructive stigma against sex workers is. Explaining the nature of my research and work to people external to the fieldwork setting often invoked two responses – giggling and questions around why I was interested in that or furrowed brows and comments that it must have been rather saddening and frightening to do this sort of research. When I spoke about women I had engaged with through my research and work, in a positive and respectful way, it felt as though some people resented this and would subsequently challenge this in an attempt to confirm their preconceived negative ideas about street-based sex workers. If I confirmed that some of the women had used drugs, for instance, it felt as though some individuals used this to dismiss the other skills the women possessed. This ignorance was observed amongst a wide range of people with various levels of education. When tutoring a third year Criminology paper I had to engage with a Law student who passionately argued that the rape of a sex worker was best described as

robbery. Whilst conducting research in the UK, Boynton (2002) reported experiencing similar reactions noting in her research diary:

I encountered negative feedback from academic colleagues, e.g. 'he [an academic colleague] laughed and said "whores can't be raped" [during a discussion about abuse of working women]. Later he told me "you'd better watch out now, if anything happens to you out there no one'll believe it wasn't your fault. You're one of them now". (p. 9)

In the course of carrying out this research I felt overwhelmed with frustration that I could not do more to challenge this stigma, and at times felt stigmatised myself. I found that discussing my experiences of stigma was a helpful and effective way of managing the accompanying emotions of shame and frustration, particularly with my supervisors and others with knowledge of sex work. However, like Warr (2004), I also struggled with accepting the limitations of research to tangibly influence negative situations. At some points in the research process, this resulted in me feeling frustrated with myself for using my own power to do this research, when it felt as though I could do very little to influence social change. This self-questioning and critique has been highlighted by other researchers. Miller (1997) described feeling discomfort about her actions as a researcher after the fieldwork was completed. She notes:

When I think about my actions and my interest in the research, I'm not very comfortable with this aspect of it. Is it exploitative? Am I? How much does voyeurism play a part in any research? ...Although we are not dispassionate researchers who distance ourselves from our values and emotions, we continue to objectify our research subjects through the very power we employ as researchers. (p. 149)

I struggled with similar feelings throughout the research process, in relation to my thoughts about what I could gain from the research, compared to any benefits for the women. I eventually came to the understanding that accepting this, whilst uncomfortable, was necessary since there is a need to be realistic about the outcomes of research. Furthermore, I learned to conceptualise interactions with individuals who espoused negative views about sex workers as opportunities to educate and actively challenge stigma. Although realising that some individuals would not be swayed from their viewpoints about the sex industry, defining these uncomfortable exchanges as a means of challenging stigma helped me to manage my emotional reactions.

A further challenge I encountered in the research process was learning to manage the emotional realities of doing research with people living highly complex lives. In the final stages of the fieldwork one of the women I had interviewed three weeks earlier, Lexi, committed suicide. During the interview Lexi had described going back to work on the street having been excluded from the methadone programme for rule breaking. She still needed to work on the street despite feeling afraid after being attacked by someone who had approached her as a client several weeks earlier. Although it would be inappropriate to conclude on what led Lexi to commit suicide, I felt very upset, angry and frustrated that she had experienced such pressure in her life and I had to remain aware of my own emotional reactions whilst analysing her interview responses. I learned that in the event of such strong emotional responses, it is important to reflect on these reactions in order to differentiate between personal feelings about situations and the experiences participants are actually describing from their perspectives (Warr, 2004). I dedicated time to recording my feelings about Lexi's experiences and her death in my research diary. This enabled me to maintain some awareness of my own emotional reactions. Managing and reflecting on my own emotions in this situation was critical to ensure Lexi's voice was prioritised over mine in the research, and was an important reminder that there are some events that cannot be controlled when researching people's lives.

Conclusion

Research on sensitive and personal issues can present a multitude of challenges and dilemmas for the researcher. Building relationships, making connections, maintaining boundaries, and managing the self are all issues that may commonly be encountered and that I have outlined in this paper as key challenges I experienced in the research process. The experiences I have detailed are unique to my research process exploring risks of violence with street-based sex workers, but offer useful insights to other researchers undertaking research on sensitive issues with marginalised populations. Whilst it is critical to prioritise the experiences and voices of the 'researched', the experience of researchers, and particularly the emotional experience of conducting research, is arguably often neglected. Documenting such experiences is an important tool for learning how to manage the challenges that can undoubtedly impact on the outcomes of the research, and the experiences of both researchers and participants. Reflecting on the experience of undertaking research is arguably critical both during the fieldwork period, whilst analysing data, and when writing up the findings, and this was something that became clear to me in the course of doing this research. Whilst there are no guaranteed solutions to the challenges that can be encountered in the research process, reflecting on this process provides an outlet for developing strategies and learning how to negotiate these issues.

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