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Book Review: Ethical Research with Sex Workers: Anthropological Approaches

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**Ethical Research with Sex Workers: Anthropological Approaches. 2013.
Dewey Susan & Zheng Titiantian, Springer, New York. 111pp (Hardcover) (\$46, 53) ISBN
978-1-4648-6491-4**

Reviewed by Nteboheleng Mahapa

The title *Ethical research with sex workers* evokes approaches to dignified research with sex workers. Zheng and Dewey look at the legal, political, physical and stigmatization aspects of sex work and ethical approaches that researchers have developed overtime to address these challenges. The authors state their concern over cultural, legal, socio-economic, political, and moral and human rights challenges surrounding this industry and how these negatively impact efforts to engage in meaningful research with sex workers. The authors (Zheng and Dewey) employ three theoretical grounds to describe field research and how criminalized and deviant settings compel researchers to struggle between legality and illegality as well as moral and deviance and how these present significant ethical challenges. Zheng and Dewey begin by elaborating dynamics of sex work including amongst others, sex workers and condom use, researching illegal immigrants, international socio-economic relationships and how men trade in sex for money and how this demonstrates desire for money and to elevate their social status and mobility, to support families and participate in economic activity, ways in which migrant sex workers negotiate spaces within sex labor settings. The book also reflects how vulnerable groups such as children engage in sex work to support families, to pay for transgender operations as well as how straight-identified Muslim men engage in culturally stigmatized sex work practices to experience homosociality and sexual pleasure. Dewey articulately gives a detailed account of the ethical challenges that confronts researchers who work with these highly stigmatized groups as well as challenges in presenting findings on the sex worker's terms.

Zheng and Dewey add that sensitivity, appropriate and carefully designed methods should be employed in dealing with these groups. Conduct and research design should be guided by moral principles that distinguish acceptable and unacceptable behavior within different contexts. The interview location also has a significant bearing on the findings as hostile environments and fear of surveillance can have serious repercussions not only for the sex worker's job but it can negatively impact confidentiality as well as the findings and publication. She further elaborates issues around positionality as well as the researcher's status and privileged position and ways to reduce the gap between the researcher and the participant and elaborates on how that lack of institutional review boards results in failure to protect participants.

Sex work research is confronted with contemporary debates that have been existent for decades. Moral and political ideas of sex work are frames within good or bad, and sex workers themselves as liberated and empowered workers or exploited coerced victims. In order to build a sound argument, Dewey further elaborates on three antagonistic ideologies surrounding this industry and how they impact policy formulation in this industry. The abolitionist stance criminalizes transactional sex on the grounds that it is some form of violation against women. The basis of the argument stems from the fact that prostitution and sex work exemplifies political dominance over women, centers male interest in women's lives and demonstrates male power over women. This view holds that, the existence of sex work, particularly prostitution, poses a

serious danger to the rights of all women and favors a social system that privileges men (p 10). The authors' ambition to dismantle this ideology becomes clear in her argument that abolitionist views focus exclusively on violence and harm and that research designed upon this premise is likely to elicit findings that corroborate this philosophical perspective, therefore resulting in biasness as well as hostile research environments.

The opposing ideology perceives sex workers to be empowered, liberated individuals endowed with the capacity to make choices to improve their own lives. This feminist stance holds that in the sex work industry, it is men who are powerless in the presence of women's sexuality to the extent that they have to pay for women's attention and sexuality (p.40). The money that men use to pay for women's attention symbolizes men's confession of their weaknesses in the sense that it is women who hold the power to establish and enforce the norms of micro aspects of their interactions. In this way, women exploit men and reverse male dominance. This stance holds that it is women who have total command of their bodies and their association with sex constitute a source of their greatest power.

The other view advocates for the legalization of the sex work industry and argues that the stigmatization represents a hegemonic control over women. This view breaks the dichotomy by advocating that sex workers are neither complete victims nor completely liberated women. This approach to sex work argues that sex work is not inherently violent but criminalization creates working conditions favorable to violence. This view asserts that decriminalization is essential in efforts to diminish violence experienced by sex workers.

The second chapter engages with the ethics surrounding research questions, confidentiality, informed consent, methodologies, and representative research samples as well as data reliability. It focuses specifically on issues related to the formulation of research questions and methods that can be employed to reduce the gap between the researcher and participant in sex work research. It further proposes strategies that can be used to access representative samples. It is crucial that in formulating research questions, the researchers confront their preconceived ideas and avoid making moral judgments about exploitation and agency as these are demonstration of who has the ultimate power and as such fail to explore how sex workers negotiate power. Due to the stigmatized, marginalized and often criminalized nature of this industry, it is important that sex workers are assured of confidentiality and privacy as this is the corner stone of a trusting relationship (p.27). This is also important in averting legal and cultural consequences such as imprisonment, ostracism and exposure of their identities. Informed consent is key as research on sex work entails risky implications for participants. The book should have addressed the fact that respect for free and informed consent can be established on two levels-one related to the site observation and another to the individual.

The author also mentions that political bias of the organizations or institutions could potentially result in situations where sex work is put in a moral context and efforts to end this industry. Interviews conducted in this manner are problematic as they focus on unfair labor condition and violence. Data collected in this manner as the author rightfully fails to note, take heed of the diversity of sex work and pathologize, demonize and criminalize sex workers. Viable methodologies should avert moralistic judgments, dismantle the gap between the researcher and participants as well as respect the sex worker as capable of making an informed decision. Sampling should be inclusive and researchers should access participants in their most representative and natural setting to avoid bias, limitations and to ensure quality of the data. Researchers also need to know the informant's networks and engage in the participant's daily activities to verify data.

The third chapter tackles ethical research in specific environments as most of the time sex work research is done in ideologically charged contexts in which both the researcher and the participant need to be accustomed to the legal and policy implications of sex work. This chapter elaborates how the dichotomized stance of sex work forms the basis of the international debate against trafficking as most anti-trafficking efforts adopt the view that prostitutes are forced, exploited victims and all sex work should be outlawed. This ideologically and politically charged environment has direct implications for research as review boards often impede and reject proposals in this area of research. Zheng also suggests that the researcher gender may result in stigma, marginalization, objectification and leaves room for cultural stereotypes against sex work. Protection of human subjects is always important in research and this should be accounted for in the proposal. As the authors suggest, researchers should minimize risk to research subjects while simultaneously ensuring validity of research methods and quality of data.

The fourth and the last chapter explains how participatory research can reduce the gap between the researcher and the participant. Zheng suggests that methodologies should include the sex workers on research design, research processes, data collection and dissemination. The challenges involved in the design of an ethical non-exploitative research project with sex workers involves numerous strategies and include techniques to increase representativeness and harm reduction. Findings and analysis in this book have provided a detailed account of the moral nuances and politics surrounding research with sex workers and the implications that these might carry for current and future policy making processes. The authors elaborate on the risks and harmful consequences of conducting such research, specifically the possibility of exacerbating stereotypes which may in turn influence negative policy and legal framework that cause difficulties and harm sex workers.

Zheng and Dewey also convincingly contemplate on how individuals perceive and emotionally process their experiences of sex work and acknowledge that participation in sex work research may present emotional burden or the potential for interpersonal and work place conflict. This book appropriately devote in discussions on the full range of sex work related behaviors as well as ethical concerns associated with each as well as the difficulties inherent in maintaining contact with a transient minority group. Central to the authors' argument is the argument that ethics should be safeguarded at all stages of the research process. The authors postulate that research questions should address normative frameworks that sex workers employ in their daily lives as well as the issues of concern to them. It also elucidates issues around sensitivity and confidentiality and how these help in the context that are wrought by controversy.

Although participatory research seems viable in a lot of ways it is not cost effective and is time consuming. Participatory methods have the potential to produce pioneering results but can be difficult and time-consuming to organize and carry out as getting sex workers trust can be fraught with a number of problems due to criminalization and stigmatization of the industry. Researchers must be sensitive of these realities as sex work research is potentially dangerous work that could get them arrested. Concerns regarding anonymity, privacy and confidentiality are also crucial in doing research with sex workers as membership in hidden populations often involves stigmatization or illegal behavior. Failure to do this can result in refusal to cooperate or to give unreliable answers to protect their privacy.

Another ethical dilemma that the book should have addresses in detail is the use of language. The use of the words "prostitute" and "sex worker" provide a point of contention as it may arguably cause shame or embarrassment or even trauma related consequences with the respondent. These terms have legal, moral and religious implications of non-conformity and may

construct the respondent as deviant. This has resulted in a lot of stigmatization, ostracism and criminalization of sex workers. It is also worth mentioning that sex workers have become accustomed to being viewed as passive objects in research instead of creators of knowledge about their communities and researchers must establish a sense of equality between all partners in research.

As the authors rightfully mention in the narrative, participatory research method does not eliminate the researcher's emotional and physical risks and as such also leaves the researcher vulnerable to different kinds of abuses during the data collection as the researcher has to participate in the respondents' daily activities.

The book said very little on what researchers can do to overcome assumptions of homogeneity in sex work research. In order to understand to better understand the challenges that sex workers face as well as the political and economic processes creating and maintaining these challenges it is essential to fully understand it is important to employ strategic comparison methods to identify which of these challenges are unique to a certain group of sex workers. This helps to falsify popular perceptions and stereotypes about sex work as well as enhance inclusiveness in the research endeavor.

Participatory researchers should also question their own assumptions about organizations and their ideologies and take notice of their own previously held notions about sex work. The great advantage about participatory research is that it allows points of view to evolve among all stakeholders in the project. Interview guides should interrogate family background and establish the relationship, health status in general, work conditions and contact with family if research aims to benefit this marginalized groups as well as for validation of responses. Respondent driven sampling in which participation and recruitment is done by friendship networks could be viable for this kind of research. Emphasis should also be put on the fact that participation is voluntary to rule out the possibility of participation out of fear of losing relationship with the researcher. Research in sex work should not be universalized but should adopt methods that are context specific and which best suit the situation in question.