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## **“The personal is political science”: Epistemological and Methodological Issues in Feminist Social Science Research on Prostitution**

By Emily St. Denny<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Unlike academic and policy discussions over enduring and pervasive social problems like poverty or ill health, which focus on how they should be tackled, debates concerning individuals in prostitution are divided over how, and to what extent, prostitution even is a problem. This has led to apparently intractable disagreement over the legitimate representation of a subject at the juncture between vulnerable invisibility and liberated agency. Concretely, this raises a paradox whereby feminist researchers, seeking to facilitate emancipation through the illumination of the experiences of a stigmatised and invisible subject, must carefully give voice to the voiceless without speaking on their behalf. Drawing on contemporary feminist scholarship on prostitution, this essay argues that, to begin resolving this paradox, the field must explicitly engage with the underlying epistemological and methodological implications of conducting emancipatory social science research on prostitution. The essay concludes that, in order to contribute meaningfully to the feminist research agenda on prostitution, practitioners must acknowledge the inherently political nature of emancipation, as the expression of choice and power.

*Key Words:* Emancipation, Feminist Research, Prostitution, Methodology, Social Science

### **Introduction**

Few social phenomena continue to oppose policymakers and researchers in their normative stances and empirical findings as much as commercial sex. Indeed, research on pornography, striptease, and prostitution, is fraught with antagonistic claims to legitimate representation of the issue, the people involved, and the solutions required. This essay argues that the antagonisms within social science research on prostitution are due to more than the subject matter's inherent complexity and incommensurability. Rather, we may owe much of the issue's intractability to a lack of explicit engagement with feminist knowledge politics, and to the epistemological and methodological variety that exists among feminist researchers. There is, as yet, little in the way of explicit discussion of what we hold science, and our role as scientists, to be in this domain. As a result, we are confronted to a paradox, which has yet to be adequately addressed in the literature, whereby we concurrently strive to actualize the emancipatory

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potential of our knowledge without, in so doing, speaking on the behalf of a voiceless and invisible other.

Thirty years after Patti Lather set out to explore “what it means to do research in an unjust world” (1986, 257), the world is still unjust and people are still undertaking research. By unpicking the politics of research on prostitution, this essay is a tentative and preliminary incursion into whether, and how, we can use research to align action and meaning in a non-oppressive manner. In light of the persistence of existing power and resource imbalances, the emergence of new relational dynamics, and the complexification of our understanding of both, this essay is therefore an invitation to reedit Lather’s reflection, and consider what research in an unjust world means today, at the dawn of a new millennium. In a first instance, the puzzlingly fraught nature of research on prostitution is evinced and presented as evidence of a scientific project at the juncture between politics and meaning. In a second instance, the implications and challenges raised by the epistemological and methodological choices made in the domain are discussed. In particular, in light of the desire to align progressive and emancipatory action with the knowledge created by research on prostitution, the place of reflexivity and activism in research is problematised as praxis rather than intellectual license for deploying an oppressive subjectivity. Finally, presenting examples from the literature, the particular risk of emancipatory intentions being co-opted by an oppressive and reductionist appeal to the oppressed’s ‘false consciousness’ is examined. The essay concludes firstly that the rigor and relevance of feminist social science research on commercial sex should be more authoritatively predicated on sustained, coherent and explicit engagement with our epistemological choices. Secondly, the essay suggests that feminist researchers should fight to establish these objectives as the incontrovertible yardstick of emancipatory research and the precondition for continued dialogue and development in feminist social science.

### **A Puzzle**

What drives both political and research debates on the issue of prostitution is the concern that it is a problematic ‘real world’ phenomenon that endures and eludes control, leading to grave injustices and criminal excesses. However, unlike debates over other enduring and pervasive injustices like poverty or ill health, which primarily concern how they should be tackled, debates over prostitution are fraught and fractured over exactly how, and to what extent, it even is a problem. This disagreement over the meaning and consequences of prostitution is reflected in the variety and divergence of policies addressing it. There is broad consensus on three main types of national prostitution policy regimes: prohibitionism, which criminalises all parties involved in prostitution; regulationism, which criminalises the coercive exploitation of sex workers but regulates the consensual provision of sexual services and the employment of sex workers; and, abolitionism, where the provision of sexual services is not criminalised, for the sake of not punishing individuals in prostitution—conceptualised as victims of gender violence and inequality—but the profiting from the prostitution of others, however, is.

The normative positions and policy preferences foregrounded in the political and research debates follow the fault lines that arose during the ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s, which opposed feminist movements on the possibility for women to express consent and agency in their

sexuality under conditions of oppression (Showden, 2009). Over time, two broad but antagonistic positions have come to dominate the debate over what prostitution is, and what should be done about it. One perspective, rooted in radical feminism, considers prostitution to be an inherently violent expression of men's domination and exploitation of women which can never be consented to; the other, so called 'sex-radical' or liberal perspective, considers that in certain cases prostitution can be consented to and, therefore, that it deserves destigmatisation and/or recognition as a form of labour. In reality, these positions can be considered ideal types, with political actors, activists, and researchers expressing ideas and policy preferences that tend more towards one conception or the other. The combination of 'real world' concern and ongoing debate over meaning and governance has lent research on the subject a tone of uncharacteristic intractability and vociferous activism. This propensity frustrates traditional conceptions of science as neutral and progressively collaborative. This challenge has yet to be adequately addressed as a potential obstacle to the development of scholarship—and policy—on the matter.

Considering the apparent interrelation and undeniable similarities between positions staked in research on prostitution and the social and political ideas that dominate the governance of the issue, one possible explanation for the strident dissonance across both is simply that there is something particular about prostitution that makes its study and its politics accordingly unique. Across the board, the debate features "the lack of robust policy theory, the confusion around core concepts, the persistent lack and [...] disinterest of key actors in reliable data, the prominence of ideology in formulating prostitution policy, the impatience of policy makers with the implementation of formulated policies, the abrupt swings in policy course, and the absence of an international community of experts" associated with morality politics (Wagenaar and Altink, 2012, 281). In light of the particularity of the issue, perhaps the cantankerousness of the current research debate is to be expected.

To attribute similarities between the politics and the research to their respective reflection of the issue's intrinsic complexity and intractability is to acknowledge the constituting and constituted nature of research. This perspective considered scientific research to be but one mode of meaning production interwoven with myriad others, which all react to the same properties of the matter at hand, in this case: disagreement over foundational values. Consequently, the politics and meanings of prostitution continue to reflect and perpetuate each other. This argument foregrounds the interrelation between the politics of prostitution and academic research on the subject. Research does not happen in a vacuum, but rather in a complex environment of opportunities and constraints. Indeed, professional and institutional dispositions, such as dominant research paradigms or disciplinary 'schools' of thought, and socio-economic conjuncture, such as funding and the salience of particular research issues for politicians and citizens over time, all contribute to shaping the production of research knowledge.

However, the weakness of this perspective is that it explains away the politics of prostitution as determined by the issue without addressing the puzzle of why it continues to matter to us. Indeed, to assert that research is a reflection of an issue's inherent properties—real or supposed—is not to explain anything but rather implies a choice regarding our capacity to ascertain the ultimate 'truth' of an issue, and react accordingly through governance. The fact is that, regardless of the difficulties linked to the study and discussion of prostitution, we continue to study and discuss it. On the one hand, we can believe, as positivists do, that there is an

objective reality that exists outside of those observing it, and that, if we look hard and close enough at it, we may gain insight into what it means and what we ought to do about it. On the other hand, we can believe that reality is what each observer makes of it, and that the intrinsic worth of unpicking the power relations undergirding an issue lies in it predicating faithful representations of the lived experience of the phenomenon, and the legitimacy of subsequent action to be undertaken.

### **Feminism(s) and Science(s)**

It is precisely in the context of growing critiques of the appropriateness and adequacy of positivism for grasping the complexity of social phenomena that the aspirations of feminist social science research, which makes up the bulk of contemporary research on prostitution policy, evolved. In particular, feminists argued that the natural science model aspired to by the social and political sciences at the time had a predilection for indefensible claims to universal truths about a putatively “objective” reality (Ackerly and True, 2010; Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983, Haraway, 1988). Further, science was considered to be rooted in a sexist and androcentric research paradigm that had an insidious tendency to reproduce patterns of subjugation and exclusion (Ackerly and True, 2010; Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983, Haraway, 1988; Lather, 1986). Thus, the crux of “the science question in feminism,” like all epistemological inquiry, concerns the purpose of science in light of the perceived nature of ‘reality’ (Harding, 1986). Specifically, it seeks to address whether “it is possible to use for emancipatory ends, sciences that are apparently so intimately involved in Western, bourgeois, and masculine projects” (Harding, 1986, 9). This has prompted the advent of a social ‘science’ that privileges conjectures rather than claims of universal ‘truths.’ As a result, Lather argues that we have witnessed a transition from the dominant positivist conceptions of science that postulates the possibility and desirability of separation between researcher and researched towards an understanding that the cognitive and normative frameworks held by the researcher can influence the research itself (1986).

Current feminist social science research on the politics of prostitution straddles two types of feminist epistemologies. Feminist empiricism accepts the existence of a reality independent from those who observe it, and considers sexist and androcentrist biases that can be obviated by the twin safeguards of methodological rigor (strict and systematic adherence to methods of observation and measurement) and neutrality (the elimination of the observer’s own perspective) in order to come to a faithful and reproducible account of the ‘real.’ Feminist standpoint theories instead posit a mediated reality structured by the observer’s own identity and position, and strive to develop contingent truths to counter the distorting effects of an uncritical acceptance of the ideologically corrupted dominant (sexist and androcentric) perspectives. Overall, most of the social science work on the topic of prostitution is concerned with putting forward faithful accounts of situations and social phenomena rather than to formulate predictions (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983). Nevertheless, some of that same work also appears to make problematic universal truth claims on the back of standpoint theories. More than analytic eclecticism, this practice points to a possible cherry-picking of epistemological and methodological elements from divergent perspectives.

Thus, elements of empiricism that pervade current scholarship on prostitution tend to revolve around data collection protocols and inference. Indeed, while considering prostitution as a particular type of policy issue may be an exercise in conceptual taxonomy, the methodological implications of its purported distinctiveness are quite significant. Indeed, beyond the undeniable complexity of social phenomena that makes teasing out causality and meaning difficult in general, research on issues characterized by stigma and/or illicitness faces further challenges to establishing the validity of inferences made from data (Lee and Rezentti, 1990). This is particularly true when it comes to making numbers speak. In light of the considerable obstacles and/or disincentives (eg. shame or fear of reprisals) to self-identifying as part of a stigmatized or vulnerable group and, as a corollary, to participate in research, it is often fairly assumed that a large number of individuals of the sample population remain invisible in the final data set, and that those who do manage to overcome the obstacles may not be representative of the whole population. Difficulties in determining and accessing populations have led to substantial discrepancies in data across the area, which further compounds the challenges posed to inference.

However, there remains a paradox whereby, while many researchers grasp the particularly slippery nature of data—especially quantitative data—in this domain (whether it be population estimates (Kempadoo 2003) or sample representativeness (Phetherson 1990)), such data is still recurrently used to inform on the nature and characteristics of the issue under study. Kempadoo highlights this puzzling practice when she states that: “To any conscientious social scientists, such discrepancies should be cause for extreme suspicion of the reliability of the research, yet when it comes to sex work and prostitution, few eyebrows are raised and the figures are easily bandied without question” (2003, 144). The crux of the problem is that reliability and validity can only be discussed relative to the types of knowledge claims being made. Because the epistemological nature and concomitant theoretical scope of the claims being made in research on prostitution are rarely explicit, we have reached a degree of intractability that threatens a war of attrition over the meaning of what we are observing. In this sense, perhaps the reason why we have trouble finding ourselves—through shared observations and conclusions—in the work of some others, is that none of us are being particularly clear about what we think we are looking at, or about what kind of meaning we are seeking to ascertain.

### **Emancipation as Praxis**

Arguably, the reason why we are willing to grapple with inferential convention is because we, as feminist social scientists, have a stake in the type of knowledge we are trying to develop. Indeed, building on the work of feminist scientists and philosophers of science such as Evelyn Fox-Keller (1985), Sandra Harding (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988), the quest for knowledge has evolved to accommodate the search for “emancipatory knowledge,” that is to say knowledge which lays bare the complex network of power and meaning otherwise hidden by everyday practices and uncritically shared understandings (Lather, 1986, 259). The emancipatory power of this knowledge lies in its twin, and inherently linked, potentials: to illuminate and, in so doing, reveal pathways to transformation. In this sense, by developing as an iteration of, and dialectic between, theory and practices, feminist social science is research *as* praxis. Indeed, the idea that

theory *is* practice is intrinsic to feminist research (Ackerly and True, 2010). Lather posits that research anchored in this project is one that is intrinsically committed to critiquing and counterweighing the status quo by adopting a critical stance in the aim of building a more fair and equal society (1986).

For emancipatory research, the act of conducting research in itself offers an immediacy of praxis, by presenting opportunities for the careful consideration of our understandings of, and role in, particular situations (Lather, 1986). In order to better realize the praxis of empirical research, emancipatory research has devised its own toolbox of techniques including the submission of preliminary findings for response and scrutiny by the researched subject, and the use of life-histories as consciousness-raising tools and gateways to understanding. The aim of these techniques is to aid us in both overcoming the tendency for research to objectify the researched by affording them equal subject status in the process, and to account for ourselves in the reality we are engaging with. The translation of the epistemological choices we make into research practice is contingent on reflexivity. In feminist research, we therefore use reflexivity as a means of dispelling the “god-trick” (Maxey, 1999, 201) of a putatively objective and universal knowledge serving to mask the (re)production of patriarchal domination (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986). Reflexivity, in this sense, is a channel through which to discover and raise our own consciousness, and is used to dispel scientists’ illusion that “as long as they are not *conscious* of any bias or political agenda, they are neutral and objective, when in fact they are only unconscious” (Namenwirth, 1986: 29). Consequently, one of the principal embodiments of research as praxis in feminist social science is activism. The logical transition from reflexivity to activism stems from the understanding that power relations are not fixed and objective social fact that can be avoided once identified, but rather relational and fluid, and that they involve us whether we like it or not (Maxey, 1999). If we cannot choose to operate outside of power relations, we can however, elect to engage actively with them—a process which leads to greater personal and societal understanding and empowerment (Maxey, 1999).

### **The Problem of False Consciousness**

Nevertheless, while critical approaches to social science have turned to reflexivity as a means of overcoming insidious and pervasive relations of oppression, working with the assumption that an individual can be simultaneously fully aware of both their own subconsciousness and of the contextual power nexus they figure in, may be just as problematic as a failure to engage reflexively at all (Maxey, 1999). In this sense, uncritically deploying a reflexive discourse—being unreflexively reflexive—can also serve to mask and perpetuate unjust power relations. Reflexivity and activism are practices, not justifications. Being aware of our own partiality does not dispense us from establishing the rigor and relevance of our practices (Lather, 1986; Maxey, 1999).

In particular, one of the difficulties of being immersed in reflexive meaning is that we risk drowning out the competing visions of others in our haste to articulate meaning and action. Lather discusses this challenge of articulating world-changing meaning from subjects who, like the researcher, are partial and situated:

Sole reliance on the participants' perceptions of their situation is misguided because, as neo-Marxists point out, false consciousness and ideological mystification may be present. A central challenge to the interpretive paradigm is to recognize that reality is more than negotiated accounts—that we are both shaped by and shapers of our world. For those interested in the development of a praxis-oriented research paradigm, a key issue revolves around this central challenge: how to maximize the researcher's mediation between people's self-understandings (in light of the need for ideological critique) and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*. (1986, 269 [emphasis in original])

The risk of imposition evinces a paradox in emancipatory research whereby in order to embody theory “adequate to the task of changing the world,” we must individually articulate action based on inferences made from, and about, an ultimately unknowable other, who does not (and cannot) tessellate entirely with our partial and positioned understandings (Lather, 1986, p. 262). Frequently, in fact, the people we think we share some commonality with elude us in some fundamental way. The challenge arises when dissonant behavior is considered to be part of the power dynamics that perpetuate oppression. Thus, the consciousness of certain individuals in situations of subjugation is conceptualized as “false” when it reflects and serves to secure and reproduce the interests of the oppressors instead of their own (Jost, 1995). Therefore, on the one hand, authoritative claims of oppression and injustice, which are in themselves expression of the researcher's power, are said to be *asserted* rather than *imposed on*, to avoid transforming the subjects of the research, and intended beneficiaries of the emancipatory project, into “objects of scrutiny and manipulation” (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983, 425). On the other hand, the inclusion of those who behave in a manner that seems contrary to their putative interests is sometimes justified by imposing a reading of false consciousness on their behavior and experiences.

One solution to this tension is to anchor the emancipatory aspirations of feminist research on a logic of *consciousness raising* rather than on a more problematic logic of imposed liberation. Marx and Engels defined emancipation-as-consciousness-raising as liberating people “from the chimeras, the ideas, the dogmas, the imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away” (1846/1970, 37). From this perspective, emancipation would arise from the recognition, by oppressed individuals, of their subordination and their subsequent development of action against it. However, Jost argues that, to a certain extent, feminist emancipatory social science is premised on the belief that Marx and Engels may have been too optimistic about the capacities of individuals to recognize and take action against their oppression (1995). Science and research must therefore be deployed in aid, in the form of raising consciousnesses and empowering people to be agents of change in their own lives (Jost, 1995).

The problem lies in keeping an ethical distance between the consciousness-raising aspirations of an emancipatory endeavour, and the temptation to read behaviors we find puzzling or problematic as expressions of an individual or group's ‘false consciousness.’ This tension is particularly prominent in feminist scholarship concerned with responses to phenomena with potential traumatic psychological consequences, such as domestic violence, rape, and participation in the sex trade, since these present the recurrent puzzle of individuals displaying

reticence to leave behind harmful or abusive social situations (Jost, 1995). Thus, while consciousness-raising has traditionally been, and continues to be, an essential element of feminist action (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983; Bartky, 1975; Westkott, 1979), it has often been a source of frustration for the women's movement. In this sense, to paraphrase Ferguson, feminism as a "philosophy of liberation" has always sought to deploy both agency and subjectivity in its quest for emancipation (1988, 76). However, in so doing, it has had to struggle with striking the right balance between the two, in order to guard against imposing its own agenda and principles on the ones it seeks to liberate.

### **Speaking for/on 'the behalf of' in Prostitution Research**

In contemporary research on prostitution, the risk of imposition derives from both the methodologically inferred and theoretically conceptualized voicelessness and invisibility of individuals in prostitution. For example, Melissa Farley states that:

Women in prostitution are silent for many reasons. They are rarely given the opportunity to speak about their real lives because this would interfere with sex businesses. The silence of most of those in prostitution is a result of intimidation, terror, dissociation, and shame. Their silence, like the silence of battered women, should not be misinterpreted, ever, as their consent to prostitution. (2004, 1117)

In light of this perceived voicelessness, the debate over representation has focused on establishing or dispelling the legitimacy of different groups' claims to representing the invisible population. This amounts to what Epstein calls a 'credibility struggle,' that is to say a form of "contest over knowledge making" hinging on the "competition to establish knowledge claims as believable and their claimants as authoritative" (2006, 2). Thus, for example, Janice Raymond, a professor of women's studies and medical ethics who also campaigns for the recognition of prostitution as a form of violence against women and who was co-director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women from 1994 to 2007, couches her distinction between US-based sex worker activist organizations and abolitionist groups in terms of an objective truth, referring to the latter as "groups *who truly represent* prostituted women" (1998, 4 [my emphasis]). Or yet, academic, social psychologist, and executive member of the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, Gail Pheterson writes "My purpose with this article is to demonstrate how social science research [...] is *infested with prejudices* against prostitute-branded women." (1990, 398 [emphasis added]).

To talk about legitimacy in representation in social science, is to hit on the problem of inter-subjectivity. This is the puzzle whereby, as Stanley and Wise phrase it, "in spite of our ontological distinctness none the less we recognize ourselves in others and they in us and can speak of 'common experiences'" (1990, 23). In research, the risk of speaking on behalf of an oppressed other is therefore intrinsically linked to the imposition of a theoretical reading on a lived experience in order to render it meaningful beyond the respondent's immediate personal and social world. This challenge can arise at data collection stage when having to decide whether or not to confront respondents with your own interpretation of their situation. This problem can

also arise at the level of theorization or conceptualization, when researcher ultimately retains the power to construct meaning inferred from the experiences of others. The tension, in both cases, speaks to the researcher's ultimate power and control over the research process. Thus, the following passage, taken from a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on the harmfulness of prostitution, illustrates the possibility of conceptually reframing subject's experiences in order to make them match conceptual and theoretical assumptions:

It is likely that the low rape incidence reported in some studies is a result of unclear definitions of rape. We found in our research that even women in prostitution themselves assume that rape cannot occur in prostitution when, in fact, it occurs constantly. Future research on prostitution should behaviorally define rape. For example, *if rape is defined* as any unwanted sex act, then prostitution has an extremely high rate of rape because many survivors view prostitution as almost entirely consisting of unwanted sex acts [...]. (Farley, 2004, 1100 [emphasis added])

The risk, for Kapur, is of falling prey to a "victimizing rhetoric," alluring because it affords feminist researchers a "victim subject" which challenges the dominant and problematically neutral and universal subject of liberal rights, and also grants them "a unitary subject that enables women to continue to make claims based on a commonality of experience" (2002, 5). However, for Kapur, the price to pay for having a unitary subject through which to frame emancipatory demands is an increased risk of eclipsing the subject altogether (2002). Kessler draws attention to the potential for victimizing individuals in research on prostitutions when she states:

Just because someone cannot imagine why a woman would choose prostitution, does not mean that this is not in fact exactly what has happened. To tell women that their choices in this situation is always an illusion is to force victimization on women, many of whom are no more victims than non-prostitute women under our current patriarchal capitalist system. (2002, 223)

In addition to its epistemological seductiveness, the victim rhetoric is a robust and compelling argumentative frame. Indeed, more than simply aiming to derive some common understanding from particular perspectives, the decision—or not—to impose a reading on another's experience in a situation of perceived injustice is considered a powerful act. Contrary to the traditional criterion of non-imposition in emancipatory praxis (Lather, 1986), the courage to impose can sometimes, very problematically, be framed as ethical and righteous in a way that, perhaps despite itself, unthinkingly contributes to the perpetuation of injustices. Consider, for example, the representation of those who refuse to consider prostitution as a form of violence against women today as analogous to the apologists of domestic violence in the past:

The ambivalence on the part of many researchers, NGOs, and governments to view prostitution as a form of violence against women parallels an earlier

disregard and neglect of the harm done to battered women on the part of those who believed that if women made the choice to stay with abusive husbands or partners then “it couldn’t be that bad.” (Raymond, 2004, 1177)

The interface between knowledge, consciousness and meaning is diaphanous and involves problematic power dynamics. It underpins the challenge of giving meaning to the subject’s experience in a manner that minimizes the power differential between researcher and researched in a context where there is no agreement over the meaning of the experience. Donna Haraway calls it “our” problem when she asks:

[how can we achieve] *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meaning, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness? (1988, 579)

Currently, it appears that the most significant consequence of the inability to resolve this issue in contemporary prostitution research is the polarization of research perspectives detracting from a focus on the subjects-beneficiaries of the emancipatory project. In certain cases, this navel-gazing is considered to negate the emancipatory potential of the research because it abandons the ‘view from below’ as its epistemological anchor. Thus, in her research on migrant women’s involvement in commercial sex in Europe, Laura Agustin argues that “migrant women’s exploitation would be better understood and confronted if European supporters could leave their own debate behind, listen to migrants’ own voices, and include migrant women as equal partners in any effort to improve their situation” (2005, 98). In other cases, seeing artificial antagonisms and dichotomies where there may only be a loss in epistemological or theoretical translation can create the illusion that feminism is made up of warring factions instead of contrasting “means of interpretation, directions of exploration that share a great deal but none the less differ as to the kinds of meanings they make possible” (Ferguson, 1988, 68). In light of this, Kessler reminds us that we too, as feminist researchers, may get bound up in a false consciousness that serves neither our own liberation nor our emancipatory research goals:

Everyone will certainly not agree with my opinion concerning prostitution, and that is fine. There is room for a multitude of views. What must stop, however, is the us/them, good girl/bad girl mentality that does not allow for dialogue. This is simply a mechanism to keep women fighting amongst themselves, rather than directing our action where it belongs. (2002, 234)

If then, as Kapur argues, one of feminists’ key concerns is to come up with “ways in which to express their politics without subjugating other subjectivities through claims to the idea of “true self” or a singular truth about all women” (2002, 37), we perhaps are not faring as well as we had imagined in the area of social science research on prostitution.

### **The Healing Process**

There is no single solution to “our” problem. Short of being able to solve the issue conclusively, we can choose to approach it with intellectual honesty, critical reflexivity and epistemological consistency. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983) posit that this entails maintaining an awareness of when true and equal dialogue between researcher and subject can and cannot be achieved in the research process, and making this critical awareness explicit, in order to respect and celebrate both our own and our research subjects’ legitimate subjectivity. For Haraway, embracing both scientific rigour and the legitimacy of subjectivity in this way allows us to overcome the illusion that there exists an ultimate and attainable separation between meanings and bodies and, in so doing, “build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (1988, 580).

If our epistemological choices entail that we be more explicitly and critically reflexive, so too do they require us to engage with the ethical issues concerning our practices. This amounts to recognizing our situatedness as researchers. This is premised on the understanding that “the claims of every knower reflect a particular perspective shaped by social, cultural, political and personal factors and that the perspective of each knower contains blind spots, tacit presuppositions, and prejudgments of which the individual is unaware” (Hawkesworth, 1989, 557). This guards us against the threat of subjective emancipatory knowledge masquerading as unqualified ‘truth’ (Lather, 1986). Acknowledgement of situated knowledge necessarily has theoretical repercussions, in terms of staking out the scope and validity of claims made; methodological repercussions, in terms of the lens through which we choose to analyse our data; conceptual repercussions, in terms of the complexity which we must necessarily built into our constructs; and technical repercussions regarding the design of data collection protocols and the carrying out of fieldwork. Thus, if we are not purporting to present traditional ‘rational’ knowledge, or to advance claims of ‘objective truths,’ then we are obligated to acknowledge our position and, just as importantly, its *limits*. This is what, for example, Jody Freeman attempt to do in her discussion of the competing views in the debate on prostitution when she states:

I have tried to clarify the prostitution debate for an audience that I hope will include prostitutes. I realize, however, that this article will probably be inaccessible or irrelevant to most prostitutes. Nonetheless, exposing the divergence in opinion on issues like this one is important because it helps feminists create coherent theory, which makes consistent and effective practice. It also clarifies the debate for those struggling to make political choices about reform. (1997, 211)

This is the keystone to Haraway’s argument that the feminist conception of objectivity is as “positioned rationality” (1988, 590). Indeed, Haraway argues that if we suppose there is no extrinsic and objective ‘reality’ to discover, then the logic according to which we come to terms with and construct accounts of our world is driven instead by a contingent and power-charged dialectic (1988). In this sense, being clear about what we consider we can and cannot

functionally and ethically do not only situates our research (and us) in the world, but also actively situates it in the ongoing feminist dialogue. Ultimately, adopting a partial, situated perspective allows us to present an “embodied objectivity” necessary to sustain the variety, complexity and dynamism that make up the critical feminist project (Haraway, 1988).

Conducting feminist emancipatory social science, then, is about making decision—choices are a *necessity*. The execution and performance of a choice, in full consciousness, is also in itself an affirming and empowering act—choices are a *prerogative*. Moreover, to the extent that the discussion of epistemological and methodological choices between different feminist perspectives and across academic disciplines and traditions offers junctures for progress, choices are *opportunities*. Finally, conceptions of scientific adequacy and the criteria through which it can be measured are determined as a result of choices regarding the ordering of research priorities. The benchmarks of what constitutes good practice in the type of research being conducted must be set out prior. The question of evaluating knowledge has to be undertaken in the context of the purposes set out by the researcher. It follows that if the researcher conceives of the project as emancipatory, then the value of knowledge created can in part be gauged against the contribution it makes towards the further emancipation of women. Considering that an emancipatory objective does not guarantee an emancipatory outcome, feminist scientists find themselves constantly seeking to obviate the risk of their research being used against the intended beneficiaries, including the risks they may themselves introduce by failing to engage deeply with the choices they are making at every stage of the research process. In this sense, the risk of “rampant subjectivity,” arguably higher in the context of emancipatory knowledge, can only be obviated by explicit, rigorous and systematic engagement with the intricacies of accountability (Lather, 1986). Emancipatory social science is meaningful only as an iterative praxis of epistemological choice-making and good practice.

## Conclusion

Current social science research on prostitution appears fraught and intractable. More than a factor of the inherent complexity of social phenomenon, this is evidence of a lack of recognition of our principles and beliefs in the research of others. The culmination of this cognitive and normative dissonance has given research on prostitution the image of two antagonistic camps waging a war of words and ideas over the monopoly of legitimate representation. This is particularly problematic because, for the most part, social science research on prostitution has committed itself to the principles and choices of feminist emancipatory social science. In this sense, it tends to reject the advancement of objective ‘truth’ claims as indefensible, and the meaningless and uncritically reproduction of historical patterns of domination. This makes the dissonance between the apparent consensus over the motivations and objectives of the emancipatory research project, and the strident disagreement over foundational principles seem particularly suspicious. This dissonance endures because the epistemological and methodological implications of a feminist social science, such as the deployment of critical reflexivity and the espousal of research as praxis, are not a form of absolutism. Even when we deploy both, everything remains to be explained and justified.

This essay intended to raise and illustrate, rather than exhaustively discuss and definitively settle, some of the issues arising from conducting feminist social science on prostitution. There remains much to critically engage with in this research area, not least of all the role and implications of ontological choices in deriving feminist epistemological positions, the significance of the academy as the dominant locus of meaning production for emancipatory feminist research, and the possibility and merit of conducting non-feminist research on prostitution. Nevertheless, it has advanced the tentative suggestion that part of the difficulties and ambiguities in this domain rest on the implicitness of the choices made by researchers and that engaging more explicitly with these choices may help obviate some of the risks.

Arguably, the single biggest challenge for social science research on the politics of prostitution that implicitly or explicitly espouse a commitment to emancipation and empowerment, is to strike a meaningful and ethical balance between explaining away complex phenomena as the infinitely particular intentions of social actors, and making problematic inferences about social action as a result of imposing theoretically pre-determined expectations and meanings. Indeed, the voicelessness of the oppressed, which is at the heart of the emancipatory project, paradoxically frustrates the researcher seeking to give voice to, without speaking on the behalf of, others. In the case of research on prostitution, this is primarily expressed by a heightened risk of explaining dissonant behavior as the expression of ‘false consciousness’ and, in so doing, victimizing rather than liberating, the oppressed. This highlights the political nature of emancipation, whereby aligning empowerment with a consideration for human agency and subjectivity—both our own, and that of the beneficiaries of our research—is the expression of choice and power and should be acknowledged as such.

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