

Alternate Ethics, or: Telling Lies to Researchers

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On the subject of ethics in sex work research, we usually think of the insensitivity and careerism of researchers whose interest is in obtaining information they will take credit for. I want to point to another problematic angle: the issue of whether those being researched are honest with researchers. Why, after all, should people who are being treated as objects of curiosity tell the truth?

We are all so surrounded by research projects that they seem to be a natural part of life, but what is research for? While often presented as pure advancement of knowledge, research is often integral to people's jobs, whether they work in government, NGOs or universities, and the audience for whatever they find out is first and foremost whoever paid for the research.

Institutional research projects are required to explain the investigator's ethical responsibility to the people researched. But the assumption is that once research begins, researchees will cooperate, freely telling researchers what they want to know. Since this side of the research relationship has not usually been given any choice about participating, it has also not been required to agree to an ethical standard of behaviour. Since no universal ethics exists, it is no criticism to say that research subjects simply may not tell (all) the truth to researchers.

Sad stories, omissions and outright lies

When a person working in an 'irregular' trade is approached by a professional-looking person from the straight world, and is not a paying customer, he or she is naturally viewed with suspicion. In the worst case, the visitor may be working for the police; in the best case, be someone giving out free condoms or needles. Of course, researchers have to find a way to 'gain access' to their subjects, making friends with the head of an NGO or a bar or convincing a doctor of their good intentions, and thus may be introduced as an 'ally'. This goes for those conducting any kind of research using any kind of methodology. But even if the person comes with a good introduction, how does it feel to have him or her move toward you with the intention of asking personal questions? In most cultures, such a situation does not occur naturally. A Nigerian sex worker in a Spanish park once commented on outsiders asking questions:

I don't understand what they're doing, they don't have anything to offer. The others that come are doctors, they give us medicine, exams. But these want to talk, and I don't have any reason to talk to them.

It has long been recognised that people who are considered 'victims' or 'deviants' are likely to tell members of the mainstream what they believe they want to hear. Given that so much research with sex workers has focused on their personal motivations (wanting to know *why* they got into sex work, which is assumed to be bad), it's not surprising that many make their present circumstances appear to be the fatal or desperate result of a

past event. After all, if we were forced to be what we are now, we cannot be blamed for it. One Dominican woman told me:

All those social worker types feel sorry for me. They don't want to hear that I prefer to do this work, so I tell them I have no choice. They want to hear that I was forced to do this, so that's what I tell them. Anyway, I was, because my family was poor.

Ethics or self-protection?

There are other reasons to tell sad stories. When behind the research project sex workers know that a certain health-care service may be at stake, or that only if they can present convincingly as victims will they get help, it is not surprising if they tell stories that serve their own interests. Or, in the case of research for health promotion, workers may not want to talk about *their own* failures to use condoms or *their own* getting drunk—who does, after all? Or, in the case of research on 'trafficking', sex workers may not want to admit they thought boyfriends really cared about them, when it turned out they were only using them, or admit they paid people to concoct false travel documents for them. It really doesn't matter whether their answers will be treated 'confidentially', because they simply may not want to talk about such intimate matters.

To put it another way, keeping secrets may help sex workers gain independence or control over projects to help them. Talking about sexual risks with people who think it's wrong to ever take *any* risks may cause them to treat you as irresponsible. Admitting the desire to stay in sex work after getting out of the clutches of abusers can render you ineligible for victim-protection programmes. The best policy may be to omit certain information from responses or to put on the expected front. There are deeper reasons to keep personal secrets, too:

To be able to hold back some information about oneself or to channel it and thus influence how one is seen by others gives power. . . . To have no capacity for secrecy is to be out of control over how others see one; it leaves one open to coercion. (Bok 1984: 20)

But there are also researchers who second-guess people's responses. Negre i Rigol tells about an interview with Leonor, who presents her own entrance into sex work as a rational choice. When she starts to talk about other girls who were raped and coerced, the interviewers 'realise perfectly that Leonor is telling them about her own life for the first time' (Negre 1988: 39). Here interviewers are presented as omniscient, capable of seeing through lies. If Leonor saw this interpretation of her words, she might decide not to talk with interviewers any more.

Ways around the problem?

No formula exists for avoiding these problems. Some people believe that using 'insiders' to contact the target group is the solution—people who have shared the same life of those under research. It sounds better, having a sex worker do the interviewing of other sex workers, but other differences between 'insiders' can be more important than whether they have worked or not—class, colour, nationality. A Colombian woman once commented to me on a Colombian 'peer' interviewer:

I wouldn't tell her anything, she's from Cali. You know how those women are.

One researcher I know says she is perfectly aware that sometimes people are lying (or at least hiding something), and she tries to find out the truth by going back to the same point on different occasions to see if the cloudiness clears up. Or, she may check one person's story against another's to see if they coincide. To her, it's a question of instinct:

It's not so different from daily life, you ask yourself every day if people are telling you the truth and you acquire mechanisms for selecting information.

Researchers need to understand that if their access to those researched comes from a particular agency then informants may be less than candid about that agency, or if access comes from a friend of a friend, who is the madam of a club, then those that work for the madam will probably not share their complaints about her with you.

The best way to avoid being lied to is to spend long amounts of time with the people under research. Participant observation for at least a year is a standard technique of anthropological ethnography:

. . . my practice of noting conversations greatly helped me to establish how clients and sex workers lied to me about factual matters. I found that initially people lied to me considerably concerning where they lived. For a considerable amount of time Rita, one of my main informants, lied to me about her role as a madam. . . It would seem that Rita did not want me to know that she was charging the other sex workers to use the flat because she did not want me to think that she exploited them. (Hart 1998: 67)

Beyond 'truth'

Is a failure to tell the truth to researchers 'unethical'? Only if you believe that some universal standard of ethics exists and that it is better to be ethical than not. The version of ethics that is usually referred to in research is, like so much else, a thoroughly western one. But we should remember that other ethics exist and refer to values that make sense within particular cultures and subcultures. And, in fact, keeping secrets can be seen as another system of ethics (Bok 1984).

One of my favourite pieces of research was carried out in New York crack houses. The tape-recorded conversations of Puerto Rican crack dealers leave no doubt about *their* version of ethics: selling drugs, ripping people off and even rape come across as logical within their extremely disadvantaged world system (Bourgois 1995). At the same time, dealers' own positive values, such as the search for 'respect', come across, too. Of course, do we know that they 'told the truth' to the researcher? We can only guess.

Bok, Sissela. 1984. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourgois, Philip. 1995. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hart, Angie. 1999. *Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological Reflections on Prostitution in Spain*. Boulder [Colorado]: Westview Press.

Negre i Rigol, Pere. 1988. *La prostitución popular: Relatos de vida*. Barcelona: Fundació Caixa.

