

Participant-Driven Action Research (PDAR) with Sex Workers in Vancouver

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HISTORICALLY, academics, practitioners, and policymakers have treated sex workers, like many other marginalized groups, as the *subjects* of research by limiting—or denying—their opportunities to participate in designing and guiding research. Typically, researchers will approach sex workers with projects that have already been conceptualized, designed, funded, and approved by ethics boards and academic institutions. As a result, sex workers are excluded from key phases of knowledge production about their lives and work—the research instruments have been finalized, research assistants have been hired, and the data analysis strategies have been decided. Generally, the only remaining role for sex workers to fill is as participants in the data collection phase of the research. Although some researchers involve members of a community of interest as consultants, or hire individuals to perform tasks such as project coordination or data entry, crucial phases of research remain out of reach for community members. In this chapter, we hope to expand the dialogue around inclusion to demonstrate that participant-driven research (where participants are research collaborators and the source of research topics) may offer the most potential for empowering the communities that are subjects of research. Here, we discuss the challenges, successes, and benefits of participant-driven action research (PDAR) as a mechanism to address issues of power in knowledge production within marginalized communities.

PDAR is an expansion of participatory action research, a methodology by which investigators and communities can collaborate in research technologies and processes. Such research can take many forms. Alexandra Lutnick's discussion of the SWEAT study (chapter 2 of this volume) is

In C.R. Showden & S. Majic (2014). *Negotiating Sex Work: Unintended Consequences of Policy and Activism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press

an excellent example of a complementary collaborative research approach wherein community members have expanded roles as participants, as research assistants who collect data, and as members of the research advisory committee. These research partnerships provide much-needed opportunities for inclusion but, most importantly, they offer evidence that it is possible to make more fundamental changes wherein research topics *emerge* out of the community through interactions and relationships with its members.

Under the PDAR framework, community members are not only participants but also the architects of research frameworks and processes. In this way, PDAR acknowledges the leadership roles that sex workers can take in research rather than confining them to narrow roles as data sources. Through this process, research is created, guided, interpreted, (re)presented, and utilized by the community of interest. As a result, the research enterprise becomes more accessible and relevant to community members and the production of knowledge through research becomes a tool *of and for* the community. Thus PDAR expands the roles available to participants, from data collection and advisory capacities to the research conceptualization, design, analysis, and praxis phases.

The Development of Our Research Orientation

Our research orientation was shaped by our experiences working in a grassroots, sex worker–driven organization called PACE (Prostitution Alternatives, Counseling, and Education) Society. PACE Society was founded in 1994 by Paige Latin who, along with other former sex workers, garnered the support of friends and allies to raise money for an outreach and support service for street-based sex workers. PACE is a Federal Charitable Society and is one of two Vancouver-based organizations providing outreach, one-on-one support, and advocacy to active and former street-based sex workers. Originally PACE was structured like a typical nonprofit organization (i.e., with an executive director and board of directors), but with the leadership and inclusion of sex workers, it began to operate in a nonhierarchical manner. Decisions were made based on consensus so that all staff, managers, and members had equal say.

We both became involved with the PACE Society (and PDAR) as an extension of our own work as community activists, providing frontline services for other local nonprofit groups on youth justice and women's

rights in the Vancouver area. Raven was the chair of the board of PACE Society in 1995. She soon resigned to accept employment with the organization. From 1996 to 2000, Raven provided outreach and direct support services to sex workers and youth at risk of sexual exploitation and then served as executive director until 2006. As executive director, she worked to ensure that sex workers filled decision-making roles within the organization. As a result, all of PACE Society's programs and services were designed, implemented, and evaluated by sex workers. For example, PACE Society materials, such as operating policies, were developed by sex workers who were employed at the organization and who received its services. The PACE Society board of directors, of which Tamara served as chairperson from 2001 to 2004, comprised people with diverse experiences and backgrounds—sex workers, academics, activists, and other community members were all dedicated to promoting sex worker leadership within the organization and in the community at large. Within this collaborative environment, sex workers were encouraged, individually and collectively, to explore opportunities for increased social involvement—a crucial step in addressing some of the marginalization experienced by street-based workers, who are typically relegated to the fringes of society.

In addition to the outreach and support components of PACE Society, staff and board members also created and took part in many research projects. For example, in 2001, Len Cler-Cunningham, former executive director of PACE (1994–2000), copublished the findings from a study on sex workers' experiences of victimization in Vancouver (2001). Sex workers at PACE Society also took part in both the implementation and the evaluation of a support and education project funded by the National Crime Investment Fund. This project produced educational materials targeted at youth and an asset-based peer support tool that inventoried sex worker's strengths and mobilized these toward personal and career goals. Since some PACE Society staff and board members were former sex workers, they also had experience as research subjects and thus as the objects of the research "gaze." They had experienced stigma and exclusion through their past participation in positivistic and hierarchical research projects. They expressed their frustration about how these kinds of research designs corralled them into specific roles, controlled how their stories were "made sense of," and how their experiences and lives were (re)presented publically.

One of the key areas of concern identified by PACE members was how knowledge about sex work was produced and used by the health, welfare,

and legal systems. Sex workers identified the link between academic research and social policy and social spending; they saw that their organizations were constantly struggling for funding, which limited their ability to advocate for sex workers' rights and safety initiatives. When organizations do not have funding to send representatives to conferences, experts' meetings, or other policy forums, they are unable to voice the concerns and needs of their members. Sex workers at PACE therefore expressed the desire to see more accurate information about their working conditions produced so that policies affecting the sex industry are grounded in their lived experiences.

In 2005, as a demonstration of resistance to the misrepresentation and exclusion of sex workers from knowledge production, Raven organized policy development workshops with sex workers at PACE Society who wanted to change the way research was performed in Vancouver. These individuals learned about policy development and research ethics by working with experts such as researchers Ted Palys and John Lowman from Simon Fraser University and government policy analyst Esther Shannon. These experts were invested in sex workers gaining a greater understanding of the roles of policy and research in order to increase sex workers' abilities to realize roles as collaborators in research. In 2006, Raven published *Research Ethics: A Guide for Community Organizations* (hereinafter, *Community Guidelines*) to establish some minimal "rules of engagement" for research with sex worker communities (Bowen 2006). The *Community Guidelines* were created to (1) ensure that sex workers who participate in any form of research are knowledgeable about their rights to privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and the right to withdraw from research, in accordance with Canadian research standards (and that this protection is the acknowledged responsibility of sex workers, community organizations, and researchers);¹ (2) increase the accuracy and quality of research about hidden and criminalized populations *because* research informs social/welfare and enforcement policies; and (3) ensure that community groups become full partners in the production of knowledge about and with their service populations. By increasing knowledge among service providers about research ethics, goals, and potentialities, we strove to encourage egalitarian partnerships with academic researchers and community organizations.

The *Community Guidelines* explained what potential research participants should know prior to agreeing to research; it assisted potential

participants and organizations in identifying key questions to ask when approached to participate in research. As a result, many sex workers in Vancouver have access to these community guidelines and now question the research designs, approaches, and uses of data, as well as the motives and intentions of researchers, prior to taking part in studies. The community's use of the guidelines is a clear demonstration of their desire to be a part of knowledge production. The guidelines also serve as an invitation by sex workers to the research community to do more research and to collaborate in mutually beneficial ways.

These experiences with PACE showed us how valuable it is to involve sex workers in all stages of the research process; and so when we entered academia, participatory research methodologies appealed to us as a meaningful way to involve sex workers in the creation of knowledge about themselves. We also believed that sex worker leadership in research was in itself a political act. Our shared philosophies of increasing sex worker participation in knowledge production and of respecting sex workers' rights in research activities thus led to the collaboration that eventually became Tamará's (2007) research on victimization with off-street sex workers. The research, which employed PDAR, was completed in partial fulfillment of a master of arts degree in criminology.² The project comprised a self-administered survey and in-depth interviews with sex workers that explored women's experiences of victimization in off-street venues such as massage parlors, escort agencies, and private work environments. Raven was one of Tamará's key community mentors and helped to facilitate the study. For Raven, the project provided an opportunity to operationalize the community-based guidelines developed by sex workers. In the following sections, we illustrate our PDAR approach through our reflections on Tamará's research project. This contribution presents our experiences of undertaking scholarly yet community-based research.

Sex Work Researchers and PDAR

For decades sex workers have been voicing their concerns about research performed on their communities and they have objected to the stereotypical and sensationalist representations that often appear in media and academia (Brock 1998; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Pheterson 1989). In our experience, sex workers are willing to engage in research *because* they have been subjected to the often harmful policies that have been

created based on inaccurate and overgeneralized research findings and that have been erroneously transformed into “common sense” wisdom and social stereotypes. Both sex workers and academics express concern over researchers benefitting “off the backs of sex workers”: researchers earn academic degrees, further their progress toward tenure in universities, and gain reputations in the academic community as a result of the information provided to them by sex workers (Hubbard 1999; Jeffrey and MacDonald 2007; O’Neill 2010). However, some academics have taken great pains to learn from the criticisms raised by sex workers and a growing number are working in research partnerships with sex workers in Canada.³ These partnerships have created research best practices and hence more nuanced representations of sex workers’ lives.

Yet despite these potential benefits, collaborative research methods are not typical in academia and researchers may struggle to gain equal recognition for their work. Researchers may even face stigma by association for their work with marginalized groups such as sex workers (see, for example, chapter 1 in this volume). But even with these challenges, researchers who choose collaborative research designs can benefit from enhanced reputations in their communities of interest: they can develop a kind of “street cred” or social capital that may facilitate future projects in hard-to-reach communities. This has certainly been the case for Tamara. The relationships she built as a result of using PDAR for her master’s thesis research enabled her to conduct a second, more expansive, study for her current PhD research. Such research collaborations may also inspire community activists to undertake research degrees as it did for Raven, who defended her master’s thesis in March 2013. This kind of community–academy collaboration may also benefit the community and therefore reduce the perception some hold that the benefits of research are only unidirectional. For example, participatory research may carry an “emancipatory potential” for traditionally silenced and criminalized groups (Hubbard 1999) by encouraging greater political activism from community members as they may see changes to their conditions and may benefit from challenges to stereotyping about their community. It also may reveal new research directions that might have been overlooked due to a lack of in-depth knowledge regarding the issues affecting community members. All of this can ultimately build social and cultural capital among sex workers and researchers;⁴ support joint goals toward social justice; and challenge existing policies that serve

to criminalize and ostracize sex workers, directly affecting their health and leaving them susceptible to violence.

The PDAR Approach: Research With Rather Than Research On

While many styles of collaborative research feature key principles of inclusion—participation, individual and collective action, social change, and empowerment—the degree of participant involvement at various stages reflects a researcher’s valuation of participants.⁵ Maggie O’Neill, one of the principle advocates for community-based collaborations, argues that by reorienting the subject–object paradigm, researchers and participants can all be repositioned as subjects, thus enabling “mutual recognition” and allowing the “critical recovery” of history for oppressed groups (2010).

Other researchers, such as Sandra Kirby, Lorraine Greaves, and Colleen Reid (2006), and Stephanie Wahab (2003), also ensure that collaboration occurs at all stages of the research process: design, method, analysis and “knowledge uptake” (Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2006, 46). Debbie Pushor (2008) explains that the specific division of labor within projects will differ and work will not always be equally shared, but all collaborative projects should feature the goal of more equitable power sharing over decision making. This sense of mutuality is a hallmark of participatory research.

PDAR, as we have experienced it, extends the participatory approach and encompasses five broad steps: *conceptualization, research design, implementation, analysis and (re)presentation, and action*. The remainder of this chapter explains how we employed these steps in our own participant-driven action research by detailing each step as it related to Tamara’s master’s research. Tamara’s study consisted of two elements: (1) an interview segment exploring ten women’s working conditions, safety, stereotypes of prostitution, and law reform; and (2) an anonymous, self-administered survey dealing specifically with interpersonal violence and other forms of victimization in the workplace, such as theft and client refusals to wear condoms. The methodology was designed to facilitate the greatest amount of meaningful involvement by women with experience in the sex industry to ensure that they had opportunities to guide the research. Our overarching objectives included contributing to academic and legal

knowledge about prostitution and effecting legal change to increase safety for sex workers.

Conceptualization

In PDAR, research topics are created as a result of interactions with community members (Wahab 2003). Particularly among oppressed groups, members tend to share anecdotal information about experiences they have had or barriers they face in their daily lives. Researchers can work with marginalized communities such as sex workers to identify what they already know and don't know about an issue. This information, or lack of it, can be transformed into a topic for exploration that reflects sex workers' lived experiences. Conversations that emerge from these interactions can lead to project ideas that have goals toward social change or community education.

Researchers note that those who participate in the early stages of research will intimately affect the research direction, approach, and methods (Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2006). Tamara conceptualized her research based on, and therefore reflective of, the personal and professional experiences, political viewpoints, and biases of each of the people who would eventually become her "collaboration team." This was important because the sociopolitical positions of academic and community members ultimately affect what they prioritize and what they miss or ignore when conducting research. By employing a diverse collaborative team, it is possible to reduce any biases or blind spots that might exist.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asks researchers to consider two specific questions prior to engaging in research with indigenous populations: *whose interests does it serve* and *who will benefit from it?* While these questions are central to conceptualizing research, they can also serve as anchors for PDAR at every stage of the research project. In this research project, the collaborative team was committed to centering the work on these questions; in effect, the questions became a part of our philosophical common ground from which the collaborative team could suspend individual politics and work in a consensus-driven framework. Since three of the members of the collaborative team were already colleagues, working under a consensus-based peer-driven framework, this structure was familiar and posed no problems. The fourth member of the team took part anonymously; she heard of the project and joined the team after we had

decided on the research topic. We were all committed to informing policies with empirically sound evidence developed with sex workers as active and equal members of the collaboration.

In PDAR, the shape of a project emerges through the conceptualization of the research. The sex workers who had encouraged Tamara to pursue research in the first place agreed to take part as “collaborators” in the research project. Once the collaborative team was established, a research topic (victimization) and a general target group (off-street workers) quickly emerged over a casual meeting in a local pub—a space that the sex workers had identified as safe. In the collaborators’ experiences, off-street sex work was safer than street-based sex work but they wanted to know if their experiences held true across a wider population of off-street sex workers. To explore this further, the collaborative team opted to focus exclusively on off-street venues.

The idea to research violence in off-street commercial sex venues therefore came from the community rather than from Tamara; this was an important distinction that resulted in a unique research experience for all parties involved in the project. While crucial to the success of Tamara’s project, participating in but not controlling the community process through which the research topic emerged does not appear to be a particularly common strategy in academia. If researchers decide on topics themselves, then the projects are still originating via a more hierarchical structure—especially if the researchers are outsiders to the communities they wish to study. These projects can still be participatory if members of the community find value in the research topic and shape the project’s design and its implementation.

Even if a researcher is an insider to the community and that individual decides on a research topic on his or her own, that person is not engaging in collaborative research unless multiple individuals from the community are involved. Joey Sprague (2005, 192) cautions against “privileging” insider researchers; she argues that we are all limited by our standpoints, or our “locatedness,” in relation to any given social issue. For Sprague, the solution to this epistemological issue is to include a diverse group, including social researchers, or outsiders. While the individuals on the collaborative team in Tamara’s research were all women with experience in the off-street industry, they each had different experiences in relation to the sex industry and with prior research—for example, some had significant involvement as both principal investigators and participants.

After making the decision to focus on off-street sex work, Tamara and her team decided to explore victimization specifically; this was important to the team because one of the most enduring ideas about sex work is that it is rife with violence. With this starting point, Tamara searched the academic literature for information on off-street sex work and found a significant void. This paucity of research about the topic was known intuitively among sex workers and was reinforced by the lack of literature. Taken together, this highlights the differing roles parties can play in the collaboration and demonstrates that community members may “know” about the gaps in academic research done on their groups because they have been the subjects. Sex workers “live” in the research gaps and in the misrepresentations and they are consciously aware of when their experiences are not represented; Tamara became empirically aware of this. Although the way of “knowing” (i.e., that the topic of off-street victimization was a research gap) came about differently for Tamara and the collaborative team members, they felt united and prepared to begin the process of designing a research project that was meaningful to all involved.

Research Design

We have separated the conceptualization and research design phases here to highlight the fact that research design begins with the identification of a topic, which in PDAR is often a result of informal dialogue over multiple occasions. But when participants begin to create the lines of inquiry and chose the methods to employ, a more structured process develops, even if this process is conducted in informal environments (Wahab 2003), as demonstrated in the previous section. Collaborative research may potentially transform researchers, participants, and the community at large; however, it also raises many challenges that are not present when a researcher operates on an individual basis (Dupont 2008). Debbie Pushor (2008) describes a variety of administrative items that are beneficial to successful academic research collaborations, such as clarity in coordination and leadership of the team, discussion about the division of labor, rights to the data and the research tools, and copyright issues. In our experiences, attention to these practical details was necessary, but it is not an area that most texts on research methods devote much time to.

Fortunately, the collaborators were prepared for dialogue on the administrative items that Pushor speaks of because some had participated

in the *Community Guidelines* project. We discussed expectations, time requirements, confidentiality, and rights to authorship at the onset of the project. In paying attention to rights and responsibilities, we brought transparency to the process. For example, confidentiality, or the promise not to disclose particular information, is a key concern for nearly all researchers (Palys and Atchison 2007; Shaver 2005). John Lowman and Ted Palys (2007) recommend that researchers employ strict confidentiality to effectively protect research participants. This requires researchers to maintain confidentiality even in the event that a third party, such as a criminal court, subpoenas a researcher to testify in court.⁶ Confidentiality was also a concern for sex workers and members of the collaborative team, since some members knew each other and others took part anonymously. Tamara had to engage in multiple group and individual meetings with participants in order to support their safe participation in the research design phase.

In participant-driven form, the collaborative team chose the methods. To do this, researchers can inform participants about the different research methods, the strengths and weaknesses of each in relation to the particular subject area, and then support the participants in choosing the method they would like to employ. Here, the collaborative team felt strongly that quantitative methods could be used to gather evidence that would be accepted in formal legal settings. But the team also wanted to employ qualitative methods to allow sex workers to contextualize the data arising from the research. Over a four-month time period, we used our connections to sex workers, along with outreach to other sex workers who advertised their services in public online forums, to purposively sample the off-street community. We invited anyone who identified as a woman engaged in off-street commercial sex work to participate in the research project. In the end, the team decided to use a mixed-method approach, which included both a questionnaire (N = 39) and interviews (N = 10).

The success of the research project was most certainly connected to the effort that went into creating an appropriately worded and thorough questionnaire. Choices in language proved to be instrumental to success; by using insider language we showed a strong level of knowledge about the sex industry. We also used terminology that would not offend; for example, the term *prostitute* often carries a negative connotation and while most of the participants would agree they engage in forms of prostitution, they resisted being labeled a *prostitute*. While some preferred *escort*, *masseuse*,

or *companion*, we agreed upon the terms *sex worker* or *sex industry worker* to refer to most forms of erotic labor.

The process of developing the questionnaire was tedious. The team went through about twenty five versions of the survey before we had to stop revising and simply start the research. We began with a survey developed by Dr. John Lowman and Laura Fraser (in 1996), as Dr. Lowman was a well-known and trusted researcher whose work was also conducted in Vancouver. The team revised this survey, developing numerous original lines of query about topics such as coworkers as potential perpetrators of victimization, requests for unsafe sex acts as a form of victimization, and sex workers' grounds for refusing to provide services to clients. When we reviewed the results later, we found that all these new questions produced valuable information in the study: coworkers ended up being the most likely source of victimization for masseuses, refusal to wear a condom was the most likely form of victimization for escorts, and nearly all participants detailed grounds upon which they would refuse to provide sexual services. Working with a small group of sex workers to customize a research tool was time consuming but invaluable to the collaborative process. Coproduction of research tools is where participants' ideas, experiences, and priorities are most evident.

Occasionally issues arose on which the collaborators disagreed. For example, there were minor disagreements about the terminology used in the survey, but with discussion we came to agreement based on informal acknowledgment of a basic consensus decision-making structure: team members could (1) agree, (2) disagree but live with the decision, or (3) disagree and require a change. Consensus was attainable in this project because the sex workers involved initiated it and there was a collaborative spirit, a sense of ownership, and a commitment to seeing the project succeed.

While we are advocates for remunerating any individual who takes part in sharing his or her experiences, Tamara's project was not funded. In situations where funding is not available, there are creative ways to compensate individuals for their time and wisdom. For example, researchers could offer collaborators reference letters for those who wish to work in traditional labor markets, special limited-edition copies of the final research project (made unique by collaborators through artwork, special bindings, signatures, etc.), or special certificates or plaques for contributing to the project. It is important to discuss with participants how they would like

to be recognized for their work and how they would like to celebrate or mark their contributions. This could also be done as a “roast” celebration or through art, such as the creation of collages.

In this case, at the end of Tamara’s master’s research, we celebrated the project and Tamara provided hard copies of the final product to the collaborators. One of the collaborators spent an incredible amount of time revising the survey. To recognize her intellectual rights, we signed a contract recognizing her coauthorship of the instrument and providing her the rights to use it for future research purposes. Tamara also provided scholarly and work-related references for the collaborators to acknowledge the research skills acquired by the collaborators and maintained the collaboration through the dissemination phase.

Implementation

Once we established who was doing what and through what method, community members guided researchers through their networks, vouching for them as individuals and introducing the research project and team to key individuals through sex worker–established mechanisms of communication. Due in large part to the considerable time spent preparing the research tools, implementing the study went quite smoothly. Tamara initially believed that this stage featured the least amount of involvement from the collaboration team; they functioned to assist in recruiting participants, and Tamara checked in with each member periodically to give them updates on the number of surveys that had been received or the number of interviews that had been completed. However, the collaborators’ roles in recruitment were actually quite significant, and Tamara’s ignorance to their level of involvement in this stage speaks volumes to the sustained divide between researchers and community members that exists even in collaborative styles of research.

While Tamara had worked in the community for years and had many strong individual relationships with sex workers, the combination of her outsider status and her legal background carried with it all of the potential negative outcomes of the previous decades of research done *on* the sex worker community by other academics. At the time, she was not fully aware of the degree to which her allies and collaborators were involved in negotiating sex workers’ involvement in the project. And in addition to the collaborators, PACE staff members (many of whom were former

sex workers) who were more visible among sex workers in the community shared the opportunity to work *with* Tamara and the collaborators to collectively produce knowledge about off-street victimization. Potential participants would check in with the members of the collaborative team to ask who Tamara was and whether she could be trusted. This “vouching” was significant because collaborators risked their reputations to support the project. Their willingness to do this demonstrates their degree of investment in the project and perhaps their sense of ownership over the research process itself. Their activities in essence moved Tamara from an “outsider” position to that of an ally or “trusted outsider.”

Analysis and (Re)presentation

The analysis phase involved structuring and organizing data to present and represent a community, a context, or a phenomenon. As Howard Becker (1996) argues, it is not a question of *whether* we interpret the phenomena or findings based on our own frames or reference, the question is *how accurately* we interpret them (57). Drawing out themes or conducting data analyses is a subjective endeavor where interpretation can alter data to conform to the interpreters' expectations and experiences. Due to the inherent subjectivity of the analysis and representation phase (Strauss and Corbin 1998), it is crucial to involve collaborators as a way of increasing the breadth of the analysis (Becker 1996), thereby increasing the likelihood of accuracy in representations.

Kirby, Greaves, and Reid (2006) write that the analysis and interpretation phase is the most contentious part of collaborative research as it is the most likely point where conflict will occur. They argue that it is a “process fraught with the issues of difference” (51). This phase is also the part of the research process where some academics seem to be reluctant to share decision-making power. We do not dispute the fact that some forms of data analysis, such as using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and interpreting statistics, require skills and training that community members may not have. The academic in a collaborative team is often useful here. We were concerned about the “top-down” decision-making power over data analysis and interpretation, so we supported the full participation of sex workers at the data analysis and interpretation stages, as we did in every other stage of the research process. We learned that the analysis stage is the hardest stage to manage collaboratively. As Ted Palys

and Chris Atchison (2007) note, it “comes down to whether it’s better to ask people what *they* think is important, and incorporate their answers into our efforts to make sense of their behavior, or to ask only what *we* [researchers] think is important and then try to infer what they must have been thinking in order to give such answers” (9). Likewise, Ida Dupont (2008) concedes that while involving community members in the data analysis and writing process is challenging, providing the opportunity to dialogue in such a manner is a key step in empowering communities (205).

As Tamara was undertaking this research in partial fulfillment of her degree, she knew that ultimately she had to be the author of the thesis. But many research projects are not done for such specific purposes and therefore can feature collaborative writing. Sex workers are rarely offered opportunities to write or contribute directly to knowledge derived from their work and lives. Most often, their stories are interpreted and told through the lens of the researcher or are confined to quotations. Each research project is unique and it is possible to devise creative ways for sex workers to directly contribute their feelings and interpretations of projects through poems, vignettes, anecdotes, introductory statements, reflections, project dedications, nonidentifying photography, artwork for report covers, and so on. In this case, all the research-related activities were done collaboratively, but Tamara undertook the labor-intensive work of writing, entering data, and conducting and transcribing the interviews, while the collaborators guided the direction of the research, helped to decide on appropriate methods and research tools, assisted in recruiting participants, and contributed to the analysis of the data.

Kirby, Greaves, and Reid (2006) mention that challenges can occur if members of a collaboration team have conflicting opinions about the final conclusions of research. This was certainly true in our experience, but it was not an issue that detracted from the collaboration. Differences in interpretation should occur, particularly when you have a very diverse collaboration team. Similarly, Katherine Borland (1991) explains that the process of collecting information and unintentionally misrepresenting the experiences of her participant (who then rejected the text), forced a reconceptualization of the data to incorporate both the researchers’ interpretation of the participant’s experiences and the participant’s representation of her own experiences. This kind of interchange is possible in sex work research when sex workers provide feedback on preliminary findings and drafts, thus providing opportunities for representations to be challenged (Wahab 2003).

To illustrate this, in an effort to make data analysis more collaborative, Tamara used SPSS and NVivo software to organize her data and then forwarded anonymized computer files to the collaborative team members along with descriptive statistics derived from the surveys and themes that emerged from the interviews (such as the positives and negatives about working in the industry, myths participants wished to dispel, and sex worker experiences reporting victimization to authorities). The collaborators posed questions about these preliminary data outputs, suggested explanations for certain trends, interpreted the data based on their lived experiences, and at times challenged what was being presented.

For example, many of the women who participated in this project had negative views of escort agencies and in one of the early drafts of the thesis, Tamara initially presented these views as a generalization that escort agencies were exploitative and unconcerned about their employees. Members of the collaborative team caught and corrected this generalization in their review of themes. They explained that their experiences with agencies were much more complex than how Tamara had (re)presented them to be.

Action

The actions that follow participant-driven research make the process meaningful and relevant to community members and researchers. The action focus here is on praxis. The activities that have been part of, or will follow, the final printing of the research study function to empower community members in their social change and equality-seeking efforts. The utilization of research findings as part of the creation of subsequent community-based projects or advocacy work is a tangible outcome that makes the coproduction of knowledge worthwhile.

For action-based research, producing useful research is merely the starting point. As Dupont (2008, 197) argues, "The empowerment of research participants is as important as the contribution to knowledge and policy development." Therefore, to move participatory research into participatory *action* research, researchers must consider the "social value" of research and "[their] obligations to research participants beyond simply doing no harm" (Dupont 2008, 197). Rather than a final step in the research process, the finished report signifies the beginning of one of the most important phases: publication, distribution, and for us, dissemination and action.

The development of transferable skills among sex workers as a by-product of collaboration with researchers is a powerful contribution to sex worker movements. For example, as a result of all the collaborative work that has taken place in Vancouver over the past twenty-five years and sex workers' own desires to make change happen, sex workers formed a nonprofit organization called Downtown East-side Sex Workers United against Violence (SWUAV). This group brought about a legal challenge to Canada's criminal prohibitions related to prostitution (*SWUAV and Kiselbach v. Canada*, 2008).

Through the collaborative process, the team encouraged Tamara to initially take the lead on speaking engagements and the distribution of the report through academic publications and conferences; this process would support the ongoing anonymity of participants and collaborators. Since Tamara was uncomfortable speaking for a group of individuals she knew were entirely capable of speaking for themselves, a compromise was reached; Tamara has spoken, and continues to speak, about the study alongside sex workers who choose to be public about their experiences. Tamara very rarely accepts engagements where there is not at least one sex worker involved in the presentation of the work.

As a demonstration of the action phase in PDAR, the master's research project was used in a Canadian legal challenge (*Bedford v. Canada* 2010) to the criminalization of consensual adult sex work. The findings provided evidence of the diversity of sex work experiences; this evidence calls into question generalizations about prostitution and requires academics, legal practitioners, public policymakers, and others to make room for differences in experiences that extant generalized statements ignore. Tamara also submitted an expert's report as evidence to support the SWUAV and Sheryl Kiselbach court case.

In another example of the action phase in PDAR, when conducting community-based research projects among sex workers, Raven was able to engage sex workers in what she calls "participatory action advocacy," where sex workers shared the findings of research projects with funders, community groups, the public, and other stakeholders to garner support for harm reduction programming and improved reporting of violence experienced by sex workers.⁷ Ultimately, research projects are unique and each can offer differing opportunities for action in ways that are comfortable for participants. In our technological age, sex workers can more safely participate in dissemination online and by using various forms of digital

media. We encourage researchers and sex workers to work together to find creative ways to share project results and to act for social change.

Conclusion

The benefits of participant-driven action research span beyond bridging an “artificially” created divide between researcher and participant (Reinharz 1992, 181). Tamara gained innumerable skills and knowledge from the process. The data derived from the study have begun to fill a void in the academic literature and it has been used to support sex worker’s advocacy efforts. The collaborative team also benefitted: they built upon their knowledge of research ethics by doing research, and they gained new skills in understanding specific details of creating questionnaires, managing workloads, understanding statistics, and learning about the requirements of academic publishing.

Our insider and “trusted outsider” privilege clearly influenced our methodological frameworks: we used PAR principles as social activists in environments where community members set the agenda. In this context it followed that participatory action research, for us, would emerge as participant-driven action research. We believe that as oppressed communities increase their capacities and forge new access routes toward social change for their communities, participant-driven collaborations with researchers will soon become the norm. As young academics, we are excited by this; however, it may be challenging for some researchers to adjust to this method, where the direction of research expertise flows not *from* but *to* the researcher.

By sharing our experiences with PDAR, we are encouraging partnerships and the transfer of knowledge, skills, and experiences between sex workers and academics. We also hope to inspire further debates on community-driven research approaches. We recommend that researchers demonstrate an investment in their populations of interest by giving their time to relevant community groups prior to conceptualizing research. This can be done by engaging with local organizations as part of a preliminary work plan—a “pre- pre”-research activity. The challenges and issues that community members face will become apparent through the resulting relationship building—and so will the community’s ideas for responses and solutions. By valuing the community members’ knowledge and abilities, PDAR offers increased potential for the empowerment of oppressed and marginalized groups.

If we approach research *with* participants who codetermine topics and methods and codevelop tools, in addition to shaping interpretations and (re)presentations, then knowledge has its best chance of being collectively produced. Both academics and sex workers can enter into research activities through a process of respect and recognition and leave mutually enriched with insights, new epistemological approaches to understanding our world, new jargon and frames of reference, stories, negotiable social capital (i.e., credibility and “street cred”), and new perspectives that are the derivatives of each other’s lived experiences, and most importantly, of the research collaboration.

Notes

1. The Community Guidelines are based on Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement, which sets the standards for academic research institutions to follow in granting ethical approval for research with humans. For the most current Tri-Council Policy Statement, see <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/default.aspx>.

2. The full thesis is available at: http://24.85.225.7/lowman_prostitution/HTML/odoherty/ODoherty-thesis-final.pdf.

3. For example, see Benoit and Millar (2001), Jeffrey and MacDonald (2007), Lewis et al. (2005), Pivot Legal Society (2006), and Shannon et al. (2009).

4. See Benoit et al. (2005), Hubbard (1999), and Sanders (2006).

5. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between research *with* and research *on*, see O’Neill (1996).

6. Unlimited confidentiality is also recommended by Bowen (2006b) and the West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals (n.d.).

7. See, for example, R. Bowen (2006a), R. Bowen (2007a), and R. Bowen (2007b).

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