

Fact Sheet | ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING SEX WORK RESEARCH

by Katie Bloomquist, SWOP USA Board of Directors

Individuals who transcend norms of socially expected sexual behavior have long attracted the attention of well-intentioned and curious researchers. This guide is intended to ensure that research conducted WITH (not ON) sex worker populations is ethical and prioritizes the wellbeing of this often marginalized and criminalized population.

As sex work research becomes more common to study in the social science fields, it is important for SWOP-USA to maintain a clear stance on ethical standards and guidelines, especially for researchers who are outside of the sex work community. The following guide has been written by Katie Bloomquist, a current board member of SWOP-USA, to be distributed and used as needed by researchers or others interested in studying sex work in a way that is ethical and useful to the sex work community.

RISKS:

The key risks identified in researching the sex work population are the exacerbation of [minority stress experienced by sex workers](#), and breaches in confidentiality which expose sex workers to arrest or public disclosure of a highly stigmatized and often criminalized identity.

In the context of sex work research, the potential harm caused by breaches in confidentiality are heightened because individual sex workers may face higher rates of violence, discrimination, and legal repercussions due to the stigma and criminalization of sex work.

Because of these vulnerabilities, we suggest that conducting face to face interviews with sex workers provides less anonymity than other types of research, may be especially risky and threatening to some sex workers and should therefore be engaged in cautiously and with the guidance and support of the sex work community (including formal communities like SWOP-USA).

CHALLENGES:

Shaver (2005) articulates three main challenges of engaging in ethical research with sex work populations. These challenges are outlined below with additional notes that SWOP-USA finds necessary to include.

- ◆ The size and boundaries of the sex work population are vast and unmeasurable; therefore, it is difficult to obtain a representative sample of sex workers.
- ◆ Sex work is highly stigmatized, criminalized, and is often a concealable stigma (Link & Phalen); confidentiality and privacy concerns are extremely important and difficult to navigate.
- ◆ Sex workers are not a homogenous population and should not be [mis]represented as such in research. It is important to distinguish between types of sex work in research (escorting, stripping, porn acting, professional domination, etc.). When making comparisons to the general population, using appropriate comparison groups.

METHODOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS:

In order to address and mitigate the above challenges of engaging in ethical research with the sex work population, researchers must be well-informed of and able to utilize the following strategies:

- ◆ To obtain a more-representative sample of sex workers, utilize harm reduction strategies to work with local sex work

networks. Apply the notion of minimize harm, maximize benefits to the sex work community (Shaver, 2015). ♦ To help overcome privacy concerns, use rigorous sampling strategies and a participant-centered approach. Identify “sex work” as a revenue generating activity rather than an act of deviance or crime (Shaver, 2015). Studying street-based sex workers requires different methods than studying off-street sex workers. For a detailed “how-to” guide, see Shaver (2015) pages 304-306.

- ♦ If a comparison is being made between a sex work population and a general population, use a general population that is similar in terms of age, socioeconomic status, etc. and clarify whether “stress of sex work” is unique to the sex work population (see Shaver 1994 for a discussion on stigma management techniques in the caring professions). For an example of what NOT to do, see Vanwesenbeek, 2001. If discussing psychological stress experienced by sex workers, define whether the stress is due to sex work stigma, arrest, harassment and maltreatment of sex workers by society OR due to sex work itself ([hint: it's the first one](#)).
- ♦ Recognize that with socially and economically marginalized communities, compensation often decreases rather than increases sample bias. In other words, uncompensated surveys or studies of sex workers often skew towards more privileged and more politically engaged individuals than studies with compensation.
- ♦ If at all possible, use a community advisory board comprised of members of the community you will be conducting research with, as well as individuals who work closely with them. Include this advisory board at all stages of research, from question to survey or interview design to data analysis to dissemination.
- ♦ Design research for anonymity; do not require legal names or a sequence of questions which, in aggregate, are identifying, in informed consent forms, incentive processing, and research notes. Do not require or include identifiers that could harm participants if research notes or participant tracking is leaked or subpoenaed. This is especially important for criminalized sex worker populations. (See Lowman & Palys, 2001; Venkatesh, 1999 for further discussion of the limits of confidentiality, especially when dealing with criminalized populations).

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES:

To determine whether research is sex-worker affirmative, the following ethical principles must be met and explicitly addressed in research involving sex worker participants:

1. **Beneficence:** defined as action that is done for the benefit of others. These actions can be taken to help prevent or remove harms or to simply improve the situation of others. Researchers examining sex work-related issues are expected to refrain from causing harm but are also obligated to help the research participants in some tangible way. This looks like compensating research participants (when possible) and using the results of research to support sex-worker led movements for the decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work.
2. **Maleficence:** defined as doing no harm to the population that is being studied. By following the methodological suggestions listed above and by working with sex work communities, it is required that no harm will come to individuals through participating in sex work research. Protecting the confidentiality of sex workers is a **MUST** in order to do no harm.
3. **Autonomy:** defined as obligation to respect the autonomy of other persons, which is to respect the decisions made by others concerning their own lives. This means not interfering with the decisions of competent adults who may choose to engage in sex work **AND** empower research participants whenever possible.
4. **Justice:** defined as an obligation to treat people with fairness and distribute benefits or burdens fairly. Applied to sex



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work research, this means treating all sex work research participants fairly and giving credit where it is due.

INFORMED CONSENT:

Below you will find a sample informed consent document which incorporates the above recommendations for engaging in ethical, sex worker-informed research. Along with this guide, please follow the appropriate IRB guidelines for ethical research.

You are invited to participate in a research study examining XYZ. MS XYZ is conducting this study. Procedures If you consent to participate, you will be asked to complete XYZ. You will also be asked to provide XYZ. The [STUDY TYPE] takes approximately X minutes to complete. Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study: The risks that you will encounter as a participant in this research are not more than experienced in your everyday life, as this study is primarily focused on XYZ We understand the valid concern those in the sex industry may have about disclosing personal information. In order to mitigate this, only non-identifying information will be collected and thus, all data will be completely anonymous. COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY INCLUDES XYZ. Confidentiality: The [TYPE OF STUDY] are anonymous and your responses cannot be traced to any identifying information. Only [RESEARCHER] will have secured access to the raw data, which is stored on the password-protected data collection platform. If you would like more information about the specific privacy and anonymity risks posed by online surveys, please contact the [UNIVERSITY, IRB, RESEARCHER, ETC]. Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with [XYZ]. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions, you are encouraged to contact MS XYZ (the principal investigator) at [EMAIL, PHONE #, ADDRESS]. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, or if you have questions/concerns about the treatment of human subjects, you are encouraged to contact [IRB, UNIVERSITY, ETC.]. Consent: By continuing on to the [TYPE OF RESEARCH], you affirm that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood the above information, and consent to participate. Feel free to print this page for you records or contact the researchers [EMAIL, PHONE #, ETC] for a copy to be emailed to you. IRBNet Approval Number: xxxx-xxxx-xxxx

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