

Dewey, S. and T. Zheng, 2013
Ethical Research with Sex Workers:
Anthropological Approaches
New York: Springer.

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Can, or should, researchers separate ethics from politics, and those from methods? How do these stand in relation to analysis? These questions may haunt readers as they progress through the pages of this short, manual-style book. Yet, they most certainly will not find answers from the authors, who – whilst clearly attempting to distinguish between these concepts in several passages, through their examples and reflections inadvertently seem to suggest such sorting might not be so straightforward after all. For this and other reasons, this is a text on ethics and methods like many others, except for its specific focus on sex work and its commendable attempt to promote (though not really theorise) participatory research. It may be of use to students approaching ‘ethnographic’ (whether indeed it makes sense to retain the adjective here, or elsewhere) research on the subject for the first time. But it is unlikely to provide much new insight to more experienced scholars in the field. Written by two anthropologists who have carried out extensive research on sex work and trafficking in different contexts (the United States, China, Bosnia and Armenia), with chapters authored individually by one or the other, it also features the contributions of two sex-worker activists (and researchers in their turn) from the United States, who share their insightful experience and reflections on carrying out participatory fieldwork with different sex-worker ‘communities’ (another problematic term, in this as in many other contexts, as the authors themselves note) in the US.

A brief introduction by Dewey anticipates some of the issues lying ahead, typically through vignettes of first-hand fieldwork experience; it begins reflecting on the fraught politics of sex-work research and gives a self-admittedly ‘concise’ literature review. Chapters 2 and 3, authored by Zheng, tackle the design and implementation phases of research respectively. Here, she addresses the design of ethical research questions and methodologies; the need for confidentiality and informed consent (Ch. 2); the abolitionist-driven ideological and political climate surrounding sex work at US and international level, in civil-society organisations and in universities, and its consequences on research; issues of access, risk and stigma surrounding

sex work and research on it; and the practices of reciprocity and reflexivity as conducive to ethical research (Ch. 3). In the fourth and final chapter, Dewey, together with two activists and researchers from the New Orleans and Las Vegas branches of the Sex Workers' Outreach Project (who curiously do not feature among the authors of the book), addresses the issue of participatory research, its difficulties, pros and cons, providing some examples and suggestions for design, implementation and dissemination. Though somewhat unstructured, this last chapter is nicely polyphonic and makes no claims to a unity of vision or lack of dissent.

Perhaps the best aspect of this text is the awareness it transmits of how sex work is immersed in strong power struggles at the level of policy and discourse, worldwide and specifically in the United States, and its cautioning against their impact on the representation of sex workers as helpless victims to be rescued – something which of course has been denounced repeatedly by sex-worker activists and allies. At the same time, while sympathetic to the cause of sex-worker rights, the authors refreshingly caution also against an overly positive representation of sex workers as necessarily 'free' and empowered, calling for nuanced accounts based on the lived experiences of those involved which should also go beyond trite and narrow questions regarding their 'agency'. Their examination of how abolitionist stances inflect funding and evaluation within and outside universities is crucial and an important warning to anybody who wishes to approach the subject, though very much geared to the US context. This activist perspective also informs advocacy for participatory research, and more generally the encouragement of forms of scholarly practice which are truly beneficial to their participants (though of course this is a rather ambitious goal in practice, given the variety of subject positions and inclinations and the impossibility of pre-empting results and benefits, which are necessarily a post-hoc construction and again a matter of positionality and judgment). In general, the authors are obviously extremely aware of many of the potential pitfalls of research in this field, and offer some useful guidance.

Yet, in some instances their perspective seems inadvertently to re-instate some of the rigidities they caution against. Interestingly, Zheng proposes the very term 'sex work' as an 'ethical dilemma' (p. 23) – not so much given the bitter sex wars which have polarised feminist debate on this as on other issues for decades (something she deals with rather extensively, teasing out its consequences for researchers approaching this field), but as the term encompasses a rather broad range of experiences. In her view, as in Dewey's, researchers risk generalising insights pertaining to a particular sector of the immensely diverse sex industry. Predictably, and rightly, at several points in the book the authors caution practitioners against the dangers of misrepresentation and urge them to engage sex workers in their own terms. In chapter 2, a whole section is dedicated to this issue, framed in terms of 'Re-

presentative Research Samples and Data' – a language that some may find at odds with the injunction to establish rapport, to cultivate sensitivity and proximity, to engage in research on equal terms with one's subjects/participants. A questionable notion of objectivity is smuggled back in, signalling an ambivalence which traverses the whole book. Here is perhaps the prime example of this ambiguity, verging on confusion: 'All social scientists should abide by the fundamental principle of cultural relativism and maintain their role as objective observers' (p. 28). It can be argued without much effort, on the basis of a plethora of research produced in the last decades, that neither principle is necessary, let alone desirable, to achieve ethically and analytically sound research.

And how does one square the need to state one's politics on sex work, again advocated especially in relation to participatory research, with objectivity? Why are political positioning and ideology then disparaged *per se* when referring to abolitionism, as if the problem were the fact researchers have opinions and not the kinds of opinions they have and the ways they bring them to bear on their analyses? It is understandable that one would call for accurate and rigorous research (something which the abolitionist camp does not engage in, it is argued), but rather a different matter to claim that any such endeavour can be rid of politics. In this respect, it is also curious that Zheng can claim one should 'eschew making absolute moral judgments against exploitation and agency' (p. 24). Why should researchers not condemn exploitation? It is one thing to understand its nuances, another to engage in some form of cultural relativism over it. Which is different from condemning those who undergo exploitation (or sometimes even those who perpetrate it), or accusing them of false consciousness.

Also, it seems odd that research participants' manipulation of facts should be seen as an ethical issue for researchers, granting for methods that should 'identify and correct false information' (p. 33) by *penetrating* (sic.) 'local, family, and client networks to verify the data' (p. 37). Repeatedly, Zheng makes reference to the 'natural environment' where research subjects live and work. Her language gives the impression she is dealing with some objectifying, natural-scientific observation method (and this despite the fact that she conducted impressively participatory research in very demanding situations, which put her in very close emotional, bodily and subjective proximity with her subjects).

In order to eschew generalisations on 'sex workers', both authors urge researchers to conduct comparative analyses of differently placed subjects in different sectors of the industry. One wonders whether this is really necessary (to focus on a specific sector does not necessarily lead to generalisations), and whether in fact there might be other facets of sex workers' subject positions that could equally be eclipsed by a perspective which focuses too narrowly on their sexual labour only. In good anthropological

fashion, researchers might want to address sex workers' relations with kin, friends, partners (something which Zheng does mention), as well as to institutions and service providers, or to analyse their immigration status or to compare their job to others.

Finally, the need to give accurate, 'non-ideological' representations of sex workers' experiences in their own terms seems to be carried a little far towards the end of the last chapter, when it is also argued that perhaps the best way to achieve this is for sex workers to represent themselves without any external conditioning. Whilst in principle this might be indeed desirable, it could also lead to the somewhat problematic assumption that only those who undergo certain experiences can make sense of it. Sometimes, other experiences and tools of observation are helpful – this, it might be argued, is the whole point of anthropology.