



Navigating ethical issues in participatory research

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Overview

My research background / anchor project
Developing and designing the research
Ethics approval
Making sense of findings
Publication
“Beyond research”

Anchor project

How is sex work represented in anti-trafficking discourses in the Philippines? How do these representations compare with sex workers own reflections on their work?

How are sex workers affected by anti-trafficking interventions such as raids, rescue operations, and rehabilitation?

How do sex workers engage in political claims-making and mutual aid, in political environments where there is no robust welfare state or strong public resonance for sexual rights?

*Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud, deception, or abuse of vulnerability, with the aim of exploiting them for profit (UN Trafficking Protocol)

Some notes from collaborative research with the Philippine Sex Workers Collective

“We don’t trust NGOs or academics”; ‘extractive’ (seek data, but no accountability)

“Distort our reality to fit preconceived notions about sex work”

“Don’t care about our privacy or security.”

“They take platforms that belong to us and speak for us.”

“You work with the police and you want us to tell you we chose this?”

“We don’t need saving”.

”We will tell you sad stories if we think that’s what you want to hear”.

“We would be happy to grant your request but we are careful not to have this construed as a benevolent action on your part.”

“We have to be a partner in research”



Methodological starting points

Research as a response to epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)

SWs are seen as criminals, victims, or resources to be exploited

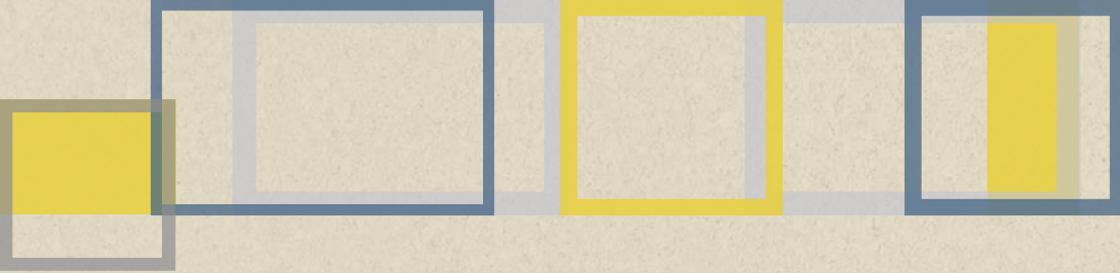
SWs are systematically excluded from these conversations

PAR as an academic/political intervention (assertion of sex workers' dignity and authority)

Attention to power dynamics in the research process: my own social situatedness

Conscious partiality: importance of solidarity & non-judgmental spaces for stigmatised populations; alternatively, epistemic generosity

BUT researchers still need **some** skepticism/academic distance to interrogate interlocutors self-presentations and observe “messiness”, tensions, and contradictions



Developing and designing the research

Why do I want to work on this topic?

How familiar am I with the linguistic and cultural intricacies of the research site?

Do I have to work with gatekeepers? Why would they work on this with me?

What is the relationship between gatekeepers and other interlocutors? How do I navigate that?





Developing and designing the research

When approaching gatekeepers/interlocutors, be transparent about the purpose of the research

Try to ensure that objectives of the research reflect partners' needs and interests

Design research collaboratively (i.e. crafting research questions and system for recruiting interlocutors, designing data collection methods, and reflecting on post-research actions)





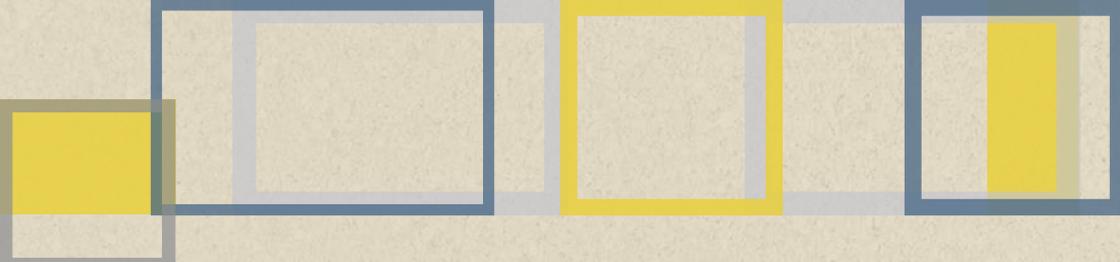
Developing and designing the research

Consider methods that minimise the researcher's power (PAR; semi-structured interviews, story telling, visual methods)

Have the difficult conversations early: "What happens if we disagree?". Are partners willing to have us probe and critique their responses in respectful ways?

Compensate interlocutors for their time; provide food; provide childcare support if possible





Ethics approval

Give a transparent account of methods: demonstrate an awareness of risks to participants (triggering distress; exposure; stigmatisation, etc.) and careful and feasible attempts to mitigate these risks. Include details of compensation and benefits to participants.

Err on the side of overstating rather than understating risks and ethical dilemmas

The formal ethics application is an important step, but “clearance” from research partners is also very important and may involve different expectations around reciprocity: Who benefits from the project?



Making sense of findings

“Reporting back” at the end of the research is not enough: feedback needs to be iterative

Consultation throughout different stages of the research so that interlocutors have an opportunity to engage with researcher’s findings and analysis (this includes transcription and translation, selection of direct quotes and images, and the major claims)

Consultations help navigate differences in interpretation; they also help with conceptual development

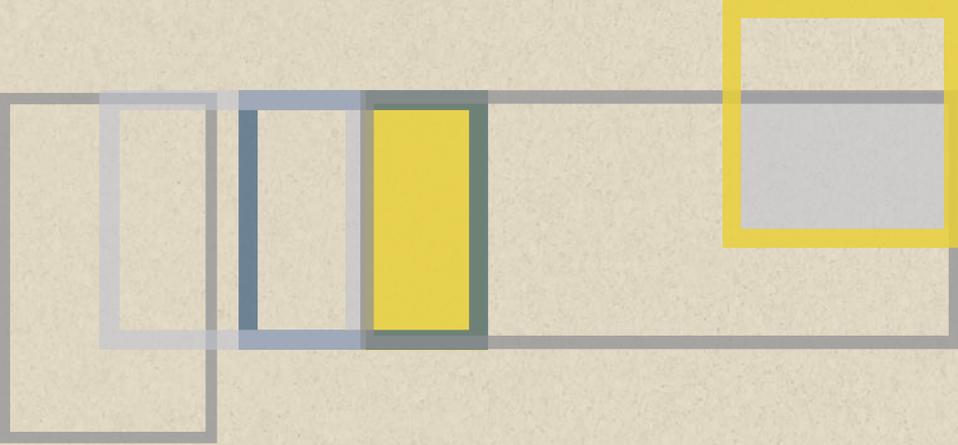
Publication

Safety of interlocutors is paramount; when in doubt - check with them about safety issues, political sensitivities, etc.

Acknowledge intellectual debts through citation; foreground their insights and reflections

Images: How do they represent the subject of research? Who chooses them? (similar questions for blurbs/specific direct quotes that are chosen, etc.)

Avoiding problematic representations (i.e. sensationalist portrayals of suffering; framing interlocutors as passive/ignorant victims; reproducing pathologising/stigmatising discourses; framing the researcher as “giving voice” or “representing” marginalised groups



“Beyond research”

Disseminate key findings in accessible formats

Help create platforms for interlocutors (anthologies, exhibits, interviews, research requests, etc.); ensure that they are compensated

Support them in accessing resources

Ethical allyship (don't self-appoint and certainly don't “speak for”); navigating the dilemma of when to speak (must be consultative)