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Community-Academic Research on Hard-to-Reach Populations: Benefits and Challenges

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In this article, the authors examine some of the benefits and challenges associated with conducting research on hard-to-reach/hidden populations: in this instance, sex workers. The population studied was female and male sex workers working in different sectors of the sex industry in a medium-size Canadian metropolitan area. The authors describe the need for close community-academic cooperation, given the hidden and highly stigmatized nature of the target population that was investigated and the local context in which the research project was embedded. The authors discuss the main benefits and challenges of the research collaboration for the various parties involved, including the community partner organization, indigenous research assistants, and academic research team. They conclude with a discussion of strategies to help overcome the main challenges faced during the research endeavor.

Keywords: *sex trade; hard-to-reach/hidden populations; community-academic collaboration*

Research on sexual matters poses unique methodological problems. A half-century ago, sexologist Kinsey noted that research participants have a tendency to lie about questions pertaining to sexual practices, sometimes concealing their sexual activities and other times inventing a sex life that does not, in fact, reflect their daily reality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1954). Kinsey and his colleagues, as well as others who have followed since, have developed survey strategies to help detect such untruths, including asking questions in different ways on the same survey and checking for inconsistencies in responses.

As difficult as it might be to conduct research on sexual practices of an average person, studying the working conditions and health-related issues of individuals who sell sex services poses an additional set of challenges to the researcher. A cen-

tral reason for this has to do with how sex work is conceptualized and viewed by the public at large. In Canada, for example, sex work takes place amid a myriad of activities and venues ranging from visible street work, escort agencies and massage parlors, strip bars, and individuals' homes, as well as via pornographic video, phone, and Internet. Regardless of occupational location, mode of technology and activity performed, however, sex work is typically depicted in a negative light by most Canadians and is stigmatizing to those who are involved in the activity (Brock, 1998; Davis & Shaffer, 1994; Lowman, 1995; Shaver, 1993). Although prostitution is not illegal in Canada, in effect most of the activities associated with it are prohibited. This includes

every person who in a public place or in any place open to public view . . . stops or attempts to stop any person or in any manner communicates or attempts to communicate with any person for the purpose of engaging in prostitution or of obtaining the sexual services of a prostitute is guilty of an offence. (Canada, 1985)

This legal and social labeling as "outcast"—the whore stigma—typically permeates all aspects of a sex worker's life (Davidson, 1998; Elias, Bullough, Elias, & Elders, 1998; Pheterson, 1993), and, like other stigmatized individuals (Falk, 2001; Goffman, 1963; Scheff, 1966), individuals who sell sex services are subject to direct discrimination and rejection by others (i.e., enacted stigma). As well, because of its semi-illegality and accompanying stigma, sex work is often hidden, taking place in disreputable locations that further add to its labeling as bad and/or dirty. These locations provide little control over personal safety and leave many of those involved in the sex industry open to abuse by those more powerful than themselves and often unable to turn to the authorities for help (Boritch, 1997; Brock, 1998; Hackler, 2003; Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000; Lowman, 1995; Weitzer, 2000). In an attempt to escape from the enacted stigma associated with their line of work (Pheterson, 1993; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994), they also develop intricate strategies to disguise or hide their work activities, isolating it from the rest of their lives (i.e., they experience a felt stigma). The strategies sex workers use to address this conflict—compartmentalizing experiences and emotions, and hiding sex work involvement—likewise weaken their social networks and support systems and increase their vulnerability to stress, depression, and other maladies (Downe, 1997; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995; Wojcicki & Malala, 2001).

For these and other reasons, individuals involved in selling sex services belong to what academics variously call sensitive (Lee, 1993), underresearched (Berg, 1999; Standing, 1998), and hard-to-reach or hidden populations (Spren & Zwaagstra, 1994; Sudman & Kalton, 1986; Watters & Biernacki, 1989). Such populations share three main characteristics: (a) no sampling frames exist, and thus the size of the membership and group boundary is unknown; (b) acknowledgment of belonging to the group is threatening, because membership involves being the object of hate or scorn and sometimes fear of prosecution; and (c) members are distrustful of non-members, do whatever they can to avoid revealing their identities, and are likely to refuse to cooperate with outsiders or to give unreliable answers to questions about themselves and their networks (Heckathorn, 1997). For instance, men who have sex with other men and intravenous drug users also share hidden population characteristics and might find themselves doubly stigmatized if they also trade sex for

money. Yet, the need for reliable sexuality research has become urgent, given public concern over high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as hepatitis, HIV infections, and AIDS among these groups (Bancroft, 1997; Heckathorn, Broadbead, & Sergeev, 2001).

To generalize common statistical findings, sociologists have argued that a random sampling technique is preferable for most sample groups. However, because underresearched, hard-to-reach populations such as people involved in selling sex services do not have sampling frames available, random sampling is all but impossible. Moreover, random or probability sampling designs are best suited to large surveys (Kish, 1965; Moser & Kalton, 1971). Given these challenges, academics studying hard-to-reach or hidden populations tend to combine purposive or expert choice sampling, snowball sampling, and, increasingly, respondent-driven techniques, in sampling the target groups.

The difficulty of achieving a representative sample is one of many reasons academic researchers have started to team up with community partner organizations (CPOs) whose local knowledge of and access to members of the hidden population are indispensable. In addition, partnering with community groups can help academics sustain their research over time while enhancing the reliability and validity of their research findings. There are no decisively preferred models for these community-academic collaborations, and past research efforts have varied greatly in how they are defined, ranging from community cooperation with academics to gain access to research participants, to a reciprocal process in which both parties share their respective knowledge bases and learn about the other, to an initiation of research by the community itself to produce local knowledge that has direct policy relevance to those studied (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 1999).

Within these community-academic collaborations, the community is variously portrayed as persons located outside the academy, inside or outside governmental or administrative policy bureaus; the target population itself; persons proximal to the target population (such as service providers); or a constituency of citizens in a particular locale (Ebata, 1996). In this sense, the "community" in community-academic collaborations is a shifting term that can encompass several lifeworlds, perspectives, values, and priorities (Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2002). It is not surprising, then, that community-academic collaborations entail a process of ongoing negotiation through which academic and community partners establish their respective expectations and responsibilities in the partnership, always taking into account changes in personnel, agendas, and budget allocations, among other things.

In this article, we report on one such community-academic collaboration that involved a hard-to-reach population of adults (age 18 years and over) who sell sex services. After describing the study and the methods used to gather data, we provide an outline of some of the main benefits and challenges of the research collaboration. Our findings echo those of other academics who have written about the rewards of community-academic collaborations for the different partners involved (Denner, Cooper, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1999; Ebata, 1996; Small, 1996). Despite the many benefits of research collaborations, however, it would be disingenuous to suggest that they are problem free. Research partners encountered several challenges during the life cycle of the project, some of which were relatively easily

resolved, whereas others were more enduring and have been addressed only more recently in ongoing research on the sex trade and other vulnerable populations.

METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

In this methodological article, we draw on a variety of data sources. Initially, we conducted documentary review of the sex trade literature and government reports on health care services and social welfare reforms currently under way in the province to help frame the research questions posed in the project described below. We continued this process up to the point of writing, and this contributed insight to our interpretation of the primary data.

We gathered primary data on methodological issues raised during the research process from a number of sources. In an attempt to document change in perspectives and personal feelings regarding the research project as it unfolded, we conducted two sets of tape-recorded interviews with the 6 indigenous research assistants (IRAs),¹ one interview at the onset of the project and another near the end. We also conducted two tape-recorded interviews with the community project coordinator, again one at the beginning of the project and the second near its completion. In addition, the community project coordinator carried out interviews with the academic team members. Throughout the project, we also conducted informal interviews with staff members of the community partner organization (CPO) about their views on the research process as it unfolded. We took notes during these meetings and subsequently coded them for analysis. In addition, the first author and the community project coordinator periodically presented progress reports to the CPO staff during the 2-year research period, answering any questions from individual staff members and recording both their positive comments and their concerns.

The interview schedule for these initial interviews included questions about IRAs' personal and work history, their first impressions of the research project, what they had learned thus far, what their experience had been working with academics, their views on team work, the most difficult and least liked aspects of their respective research team jobs, and what their plans were postproject. In the follow-up interview, we asked about changes in their role as IRA/community project coordinator as the project progressed, their perspective on academia and community research postproject, and their plans for the future.

All tape-recorded interviews were coded and sorted into themes. Likewise, we coded notes taken during the informal interviews and progress report meetings and sorted them thematically. As already noted, all qualitative studies are limited in terms of making generalizations about the entire population from a nonrandom sample of research participants (Berg, 1999; Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). Yet, there are also important benefits to pilot studies in which researchers attempt to capture in-depth data on an issue from a small sample of key informants and direct participants (Berg, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Perry, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The data reported below, although in no way representative of all community-academic partnerships, does offer food for thought for future academics attempting to do research with grassroots community groups working with adults in the sex trade or other groups impacted by marginalization and stigmatization.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

We conducted the project in partnership with a nonprofit community partner organization (CPO) located in the study site that is largely staffed by ex-sex workers who offer street outreach services, public education, counseling, and job skills training to women, men, and, more recently, female and male youth wanting to exit the sex trade as well as those currently working in the trade. In 1995, the CPO provided services to 98 clients; in 1999, the number had risen to 500, and the case load has continued to grow at the same rate in subsequent years. With an expanding service need and due to the paucity of reliable information on the working conditions and health status of sex workers, especially those in off-street locations, members of the CPO and its advisory board concluded that research should assume a more central role in the organization's activities. This led to the initiation of the research project discussed below. The CPO's chief aim in applying for research money was to collect data on adult sex workers that would be useful to the CPO's outreach services and educational programs. It was also widely recognized that the research was likely to provide recognition of the valuable knowledge held by sex workers and make available modest employment opportunities for a small number of persons who had left the sex industry.

After passing the letter-of-intent stage of a provincial health funding agency, the CPO sought the expertise of a nonprofit management consultant and the lead author to help reshape the grant application into a collaborative research project focused on the working conditions, health status, and exiting experiences of adult sex workers in the metropolitan region. The grant application was successful, and the CPO was awarded research funds for the 2-year project. An ad hoc advisory board was organized to include representatives from a number of government agencies focused on health and legal issues of sex workers as well as members of outreach organizations helping marginalized women. This multifaceted research team, with representatives from the CPO, the university, the city, and the provincial government, played a central role in shaping the research project into a genuine community-academic partnership.

The research project began in earnest in May 1999. A number of former sex workers applied for the advertised interviewing, data entry, and transcribing positions. This was the first time that any of the applicants had ever found their past sex trade experiences an essential requirement of a "square job"! Eventually, 10 IRAs were trained in various aspects of the research process. All spent time working as full-fledged research assistants, and 6 stayed with the research team from beginning to end. It is important to note that most of the hired IRAs had experience working in a variety of venues while in the trade, such as escort agencies, massage parlors, their own homes, strip clubs, bars, and on the street. Most had exited the sex trade within the previous 2 years. The combination of these elements meant that IRAs and respondents shared common work experience, trade language, and a basic understanding of the working conditions found in the metropolitan area's sex trade at the time of the study. As well, they had access to overlapping sex workers' networks, which they could tap to help recruit respondents otherwise hidden not only from the academics but, to some extent, also from our CPO itself.

The research team was able to compile a list of potential respondents who were active in the sex trade in the metropolitan area and who agreed to be interviewed.

We recruited the respondents through a variety of means: the CPO's programs; personal networks of the research team members; advertisements in a local weekly magazine, the municipal newspaper, and college and university student newspapers; and announcements on public bulletin boards, in shops, and in clubs. Many of our research participants who were involved in the street trade at the time of contact were located through a local emergency shelter for hard-to-house women. We obtained additional funding to interview 54 research participants who had left the sex trade for 2 years or more at the time of interview to find out if leaving the sex trade had a positive effect on the individuals involved.

The final sample of 201 research participants allowed the CPO, members of the advisory committee, and the academics access to information on the backgrounds, venues, working health conditions, and health and safety of a much larger sample of sex workers in the metropolitan area than originally anticipated. This sample size also made it possible for the team to identify and compare many more respondent subcategories than would have been possible with data gathered on only 50, or even 100, respondents.

Similar to respondent recruitment, the development of the research instrument was also a collaborative effort, involving a number of revisions until all members of the research team were satisfied. In its finalized form, the research instrument, three parts closed-ended and one part open-ended questions, took between 1½ and 2 hours to complete. The questions concerned, among other things, demographic information, education, household background while growing up, factors precipitating entrance into the sex trade, working conditions while in the trade, health and safety issues, and challenges to leaving the work when and if it became desirable to do so. The entire interview was tape-recorded, and the closed-ended answers were filled in on the questionnaire. We later entered these data into a statistical program (SPSS), and two trained IRAs transcribed the open-ended component of the research instrument verbatim. We then checked the closed- and opened-ended components against each other to ascertain reliability. All completed questionnaires were subsequently shredded and the cassette tapes containing the recorded interviews destroyed. We presented a final draft report to members of the CPO for review and comment. Through a process of continued collaboration, we made changes to the report based on the received feedback, and the entire research team then drew up the report's main recommendations.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY-ACADEMIC COLLABORATIONS ON HIDDEN POPULATIONS

Community Partner Organizations (CPOs)

Some Advantages

As noted above, the project was greatly advantaged by having the CPO and academic researchers in consultation from the start. The CPO thus had a unique opportunity to shape the research goals, data collection process, and policy recommendations. Staff members served in many respects as outsiders/insiders for the project

(Jewkes & Letherby, 2002). In the process, the CPO, as a community organization predominantly by and for sex workers, became transformed. Initially, it was a frontline organization responding to the short-term and intermediate needs and concerns of the street sex work population. Through involvement in the research project, however, the CPO slowly began to gain knowledge of the off-street population involved in selling sex services. We advertised the project widely, not only through the CPO's networks and outreach services but also in community newsletters and magazines and local newspapers, as well as through other nonprofit, social welfare, and governmental agencies. The CPO's name was also passed around, and its reputation spread as an organization open to sex workers, wherever they might find themselves. The CPO's reputation among other local groups, agencies, and governments was also enhanced as the project became better known. This was not least of all because the CPO now had a "research profile" that it did not have previously.

The final report proved very useful to the nonprofit organization. The research findings afforded the CPO an opportunity to identify ways to make service and program delivery more effective and accessible, an outcome similar to Denner and colleagues' (1999) finding that investigation of service usage patterns among existing and potential clientele is one of the benefits accrued by programs involved in community-academic collaborations. The information that emerged from the study allowed staff at the CPO to reflect on its programs and service clientele with research evidence that confirmed the value of the organization to the local community. At the same time, it provided fodder for continuing program development and, in some cases, the creation of new programs to meet emerging community service needs. Concerning the latter, the CPO learned from the study that just fewer than 25% of the respondents residing in the metropolitan area reported having unstable or very unstable housing (Benoit & Millar, 2001). However, the organization had no way to help solve this problem with the resources at hand. Equipped with these data, staff members applied for federal government funds through the National Homeless Initiative and were successful in gaining a sizable grant to purchase an eight-unit two-bedroom-suite apartment building as a second-stage housing project for homeless women involved in the sex trade. Based on a harm reduction model, the new home has passed through a number of transformations and today provides housing for what is in many respects a very hard-to-house subpopulation of sex workers.

Program innovation also relied on the newfound data that emerged from the final report. These data helped the CPO to enhance its education services by developing strategies to combat the misconceptions that were found among a substantial portion of research participants. Such misconceptions included what sex trade-related activities are legal and which are not under the Canadian criminal code, the nature of municipal regulations governing the sex trade in the metropolitan area, and what can be expected when working for an escort agency. On learning about these knowledge gaps, staff at the CPO applied to the Law Foundation of British Columbia for funds to support both an Escort Liaison Project and a Law Advisory Project. These programs were subsequently funded, the research carried out, findings analyzed, and recommendations made.

These two examples corroborate the value of community-academic collaboration in assessing community service needs (Ebata, 1996). In addition, the CPO has begun to appreciate the value of having an ongoing research agenda, which funders

have come to see as fundamental to the sustainability of grassroots organizations. This is the case in particular for local and provincial government funders, who are increasingly requesting evidence of performance accountability among contractors and grant recipients (British Columbia, 2003).

The indirect consequences of the research project have also been substantial. As noted above, in a funding environment focused on cost saving through reduced public service, the ability of an organization to demonstrate its worth through service-related data collection, favorable program evaluation, and supportive research is critical to sustainability. Organizations that lack expertise in conducting research benefit from academic partnerships where the research produced supports the organization and at the same time provides personnel with skills for further research projects (Weinberg & Erickson, 1996). The latter is especially true of grassroots community partners that are without the financial resources to commission expensive consulting firms and research services to carry out this work. Finally, the contacts that are made in community-academic collaborations continue to promote networking and further collaboration between academic and community partners and among community partners long after a project is concluded (Ebata, 1996; Small, 1996).

Some Challenges

Although the project was largely a positive endeavor for the community partner, community-academic collaborations do pose a number of challenges, some of which are short-term, others of which involve give-and-take between the team members, and still others of which are very difficult to solve. One common barrier in community-academic collaborations is that non-university-affiliated partners and research participants tend to be wary about occupants of the university "ivory tower," especially if past researchers have pathologized or patronized them. Skepticism and mistrust from community members toward the academy has been noted by several researchers and, indeed, this might be an enduring stumbling block for which there are no easy solutions other than persistent efforts with respect to communicating the objectives of the research and working to establish a relationship of trust (Denner et al., 1999; Eccles, 1996; Le Gris et al., 2000). As an example, the initial misgivings of one community partner staff member who eventually became closely involved in the project are described below:

Well, I didn't know who you were. I didn't know if you wanted very much contact with us [or] if you were just coming in and doing your job and leaving, right? I think I was worried about how open-minded or accepting you would be with sex trade people; how much we might have to fight you or something! [But] when you guys came to the meetings, I learned that this was our thing that we were doing it for our community. We were getting support from the University and from women who believe in doing research and helping women. My whole idea of the research project changed after that.

Another challenge in community-academic partnerships such as ours is skepticism among community partners about the ability of the research to produce useable evidence and the likelihood that the research findings will be taken up by those responsible for policy decisions about relevant health and social service delivery. Community partners often find that the research process detracts from their normal

business operations, and some staff might find the university culture confusing or feel dubious about the sincerity of some partnerships (Weinberg & Erickson, 1996). This might be the case especially when projects involve marginalized or stigmatized groups. It is not surprising that at the onset of the project under discussion, staff members tended to be wary and suspicious of the intentions of the academic researchers and how the research would be used. One staff member's comment illustrates:

I was suspicious about what was behind the reasoning for you doing this and I was suspicious about what was going to be done with the material once it was completed and that it wasn't going to be used in the way that you were saying it was going to be used.

In an attempt to diminish such suspicion, we found it helpful to seek continuous guidance from the CPO, including ongoing collaboration on the appropriateness of our data collection method and the subsequent report.

The time-consuming nature of academic research can also introduce potential challenges to work with community organizations. Indeed, community partners might have difficulty maintaining enthusiasm and the commitment required for the rigors of academic research from, for instance, the lengthy procedures required by funding bodies to the time required to merely get the research off the ground. However, the hiring of a full-time project coordinator at the onset of the research project helped to sustain its vitality and maintain the CPO's commitment over time by serving as its bridge to the research team.

Indigenous Research Assistants

Some Advantages

A range of opportunities also emerged for the research assistants who worked on the project, both the graduate students and nonstudents—whom, as noted above, we call indigenous research assistants (IRAs)—hired mainly on the basis of their interest and extensive personal experience with this hard-to-reach research population of adult sex workers. We focus here on the IRAs because of their greater structural marginalization and initial lack of understanding of the research process, and because of the tendency of researchers to discuss in the literature mainly the benefits and costs to graduate students as members of the research team. (For a discussion of issues for graduate and postgraduate students involvement in sensitive research, see Johnson and Clarke, 2003.)

To begin with, the IRAs had an opportunity to work in a collaborative team made up of people from a variety of walks of life and, thus, to be exposed to different ways of knowing. As one IRA put it, "I really feel blessed that I was one of the chosen to do the research. I'm amazed that I'm that good to be part of the team." Another stated, "I don't want to leave. Yeah, I enjoyed coming down to work." In fact, a few of the IRAs from the first project have stayed on to work on one of the researcher's subsequent projects, gaining the advantage of working, in this case, with two additional community partners and a larger network of academic researchers.

A second positive outcome is that the IRAs are able to list as potential referees representatives from the community partner organizations as well as academic researchers from the University. One IRA stated,

I remember I was trying to write a resume when I was doing upgrading. I was like putting my friends' names down because who else could I put? I hadn't worked in straight job in a long time and in the straight jobs that I did have, I was transient and I had nothing and no references.

The IRAs have also acquired important numerical and writing skills, in addition to work habits that are essential to many "square" jobs. As one of them put it, the project taught "me a work ethic because all those years before, I kind of did my own thing whenever I wanted to." Other IRAs likewise noted the long-range personal benefit of having to work within schedules negotiated with a research team rather than set by the rhythms of the sex industry. Furthermore, they subsequently had non-sex trade work experience to enter on their résumé, which, in turn, linked some of them to educational and employment opportunities that were previously inaccessible. For some, this has involved going back to high school and gaining their matriculation. Others with their high school certification behind them have enrolled in noncredit and credit courses at local colleges. On the employment side, some have worked for short and longer periods at one of the community partner organizations or secured employment at local health and social service agencies.

Another opportunity for the IRAs involved being able to speak in public venues about their research involvement at local and national meetings and workshops. Through this process, the IRAs have mastered /are mastering a number of technical skills that have not been accessible to them or were not put to use before their involvement in the projects. As one stated, "Working with new kinds of software and learning about data entry on an intimate level and creating a template and a database. That really turned me on; I really liked it." In addition to acquiring valuable work experience, the IRAs were also building confidence in themselves and their job skills. One describes her involvement with the project: "It makes me feel really good because it makes me feel that I'm doing something . . . the start of something really big."

Finally, and not least of all, the IRAs, many of whom at the time had been either on social assistance or barely making ends meet, have had an opportunity to make a wage for the time and effort they put into the research endeavors. According to one of them,

I can tell you another thing that's been very empowering is just to be paid a good wage . . . So often people go in the sex trade and go back because of the money. You don't have any other skills or an education that you can fall back on. You know, \$7/hour if you're lucky. So it's good to be earning good money.

Beyond the benefits associated with having legitimate, comparatively well-paying, skilled employment, the IRAs also said that the project provided an opportunity to feel like they were contributing to positive change for sex workers and the broader community. One stated, "I thought the project would be good for me too. I want to get out there, I want to use my brain and I want to help, right, and like I feel I'm in a position to help." At the same time, they gained valuable experience as members of a large research team, which brought together individuals with differ-

ent skills and experiences. The IRAs learned valuable academic knowledge and technical skills, but they, in turn, were able to teach lifeworld knowledge and practical tips in researching marginalized populations. The IRAs acknowledged the benefits of working in a team environment with people from a variety of different backgrounds: "I think that it's important to have other people, because you need people to see from another angle than maybe someone from the trade sees from."

Some Challenges

Not everything about the research process was positive for the IRAs. One continuing struggle was how to achieve the right balance between the positive acknowledgment and recognition of the experiential knowledge of the IRAs and the negative stigmatization they frequently experience resulting from their previous sex trade involvement. For some, the first step toward a desired change in their lives was an acknowledgment and subsequent acceptance of a stigmatized label (alcoholic, prostitute, substance addict). At the same time, it must be acknowledged and remembered that for other individuals, creating and identifying with new labels was an important part of a desired change. The research team members made efforts to acknowledge the diverse strengths of the IRAs and to enhance emerging ones, with the overall goal that they had more than one identity to choose from at any point in time. In addition, the research team had to be particularly cognizant of which the stage the IRAs were at in dealing with their own past experiences in the trade. For some, conducting the interviews, in which they heard firsthand about respondents' experiences, proved to be too much. As one IRA describes,

It was easy for me to go through the process of the interview, but what I found I was doing was taking on a lot of baggage that I didn't know how to process. . . [So] yeah, I focused more on data entry, which I really enjoyed; I loved data entry because I still get to witness, from a safe distance, these things that happen to people.

Other challenges include the major amount of up-front time invested by the research team merely to get the project off the ground. One reason was that IRAs typically lack formal training in conceptual thinking, research methods, and data analysis, a problem noted in other research using indigenous researchers (Weiss, 1974). As such, a great deal of time and effort was devoted to training them in developing a sociological eye, acquiring interview techniques, and data input and transcribing skills. In addition to training workshops, we held several lengthy sessions with IRAs to give them practice by doing mock interviews with each other. We also devoted considerable time and effort to helping them keep track of receipts, fill in time sheets, and so forth, all aspects of a square job that some team members have had to learn from scratch or relearn. One IRA's comments illustrate what it was like for them: "What the [research team] are giving to us is what it's like to work in that end of the world . . . [that] bridge hasn't been open to many of these people either." On the other hand, some IRAs were disappointed that after acquiring the basic skills in the research project, they did not have an opportunity to move on to the more sophisticated aspects of the research project that were being handled by graduate students or the academic researchers.

Complicating matters further was the possibility that the interview process might trigger an emotional response from the IRAs' personal history, which might

not be a problem for academic researchers who have a blank slate in regard to sex trade involvement and are less likely to have been harmed or neglected in early life than are individuals who have entered the sex trade. One way around this problem has been to encourage IRAs to take time out (with pay, in this instance, as research finances allowed) to help a colleague who has been triggered by something that came up during an interview, when the data were being entered into the SPSS file, or during an interview transcription. Other researchers have also found a "transcriber effect," in which individuals hired to input data or transcribe interviews report being affected by the sensitive material they worked with (Gregory, Russell, & Russell, 1997). One of the transcribers for the project under discussion stated, "The atmosphere of the stories were sometimes just really depressing. It brought me back to there." They also mentioned the solitary nature of the work as a contributing factor. To cope with this situation, we developed a strategy that included two transcribers' working side by side and having each other for companionship when handling sensitive material: "I think that working in a team is very effective if something's upsetting to you or it triggers up a memory because you have someone to bounce [it] off [and] you can talk about it." Although the project under discussion here had enough additional funds to allow for such team debriefing among research assistants (which was also extended to those entering statistical data), this might be of greater concern if the research budget is restrictive, with fewer resources to use in this manner.

Another potential challenge of working with IRAs is that a more intensive investment was required on the part of the academic researchers and the community coordinator to make sure that similar procedures were carried out by all interviewers, that the coding was accurate and consistent, that the open-ended portions of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and that research ethical considerations were clearly understood. (See also Boynton, 2002.) Because the academic team members did not carry out the interviews, they spent hours checking each interview to ensure that all questions were asked and that probing was as uniform as possible across the interviews. To check that this was indeed the case, they needed to spot-check the transcriptions against the raw data recorded on the questionnaire and to compare transcriptions of the open-ended portion of the interview with the verbal portion of the tape-recorded interview. As well, duplicate questions were asked on the open- and close-ended portion of the interview schedule to add another check for reliability.

A final challenge is that indigenous interviewers might not always be preferred by stigmatized/marginalized populations, especially when the communities are not large, and there are concerns regarding confidentiality among persons who might come into contact with one another outside the research context. In a small number of instances in the project reported on here, respondents specifically requested that they not be interviewed by an IRA.

Academic Researchers

Some Advantages

There are numerous benefits for academic researchers (including graduate students) in conducting community-based research in partnership with nonprofit

organizations. CPOs can provide access to expertise regarding meaningful measures and effective procedures for recruitment, as well as information about the local context of the research and explanations for baffling or non-intuitive results (Ebata, 1996). Given the general lack of social scientific knowledge on the hidden sex trade population, insider information is especially crucial when developing the research tool. Information provided by the community partner attached to the research project under discussion made it possible for the academic researchers to design a data-gathering instrument that closely reflected the research objectives of both the academy and the local community and in a manner that was more congruous with the experiences of the respondents than if the research was driven purely by ourselves. Moreover, the legitimacy provided by the CPO and IRAs helped us to develop a firmer basis of trust with respondents, increase response rates, and, we believe, enhance the honesty of answers from those interviewed. A comment from one of the IRAs highlights this point: "I think that one of the best parts of [the project] was that the people were interviewed by their peers, so to speak. I think that's really important and I think that helped to bring people out more."

CPOs also played an important role in helping to analyze the collected data and suggest policy implications and future research directions, all of which continued to push the edges of the academic researchers' thinking about marginalization and stigmatization as they apply to the sex industry.

Collaboration with CPOs, at the same time, served to legitimize the research to a greater number of audiences (Small, 1996). In this context, the university's reputation (and usefulness) has been enhanced in the eyes of community groups and other stakeholders. There has also been a significant increase in legitimacy from some academic audiences, including colleagues oriented toward merging academic research with social policy.

In addition to these highly valuable academic benefits, these collaborative efforts have provided unexpected learning opportunities for the academic researchers, helping them to chase away some of their misconceptions and stereotypes of marginalization and come to a better understanding of the complex nature of the sex industry in Canadian society. Working with community groups and nonstudent research assistants has been a highly valuable learning experience, opening up spaces for different ways of knowing that the academic researchers had not thought about previously. This is not least of all because community-academic collaborations challenge scholars to incorporate the complexities of the social context in the research results and to answer questions that might exceed disciplinary domains but are, nevertheless, relevant to community partners (Eccles, 1996). Similarly, the task of orienting the CPO and IRAs to the formalities of the research process challenged the academic researchers to articulate their methodological and epistemological beliefs in an accessible way to audiences who were, in some cases, unconvinced of the ability of academic research to provide relevant and usable information to the local community. Working within the community has also afforded academic researchers a chance to give back something to community partners and research participants by teaching sociological concepts and techniques in a nonconventional teaching environment.

In short, the academic researchers have become more seasoned scholars as a result, better able to analyze the collected quantitative and qualitative data with a discerning sociological eye and compare it with existing research on similar hidden populations in other jurisdictions.

Some Challenges

Despite these benefits, there were difficulties and drawbacks as well in carrying out the community-academic research collaboration, some that could be avoided in the future and others that appear to be integral to this type of research endeavor. One initial and especially difficult challenge in the research collaboration was that we had to be willing to relinquish exclusive control over the research process (Small, 1996), which was new territory for some of the academic researchers. It was hard not to feel somewhat isolated from the raw data, because we had not conducted the interviews.

Moreover, in opening up negotiations between those who qualify as “researcher” and can be seen as an “expert” in terms of instrument development, data gathering, coding, analysis, and report preparation, we exposed ourselves to criticism from our colleagues for undermining traditional “scientific” standards of objectivity. Most community-academic collaborations combine some form of local participation and research gathering, and we found ourselves having to convince other academic researchers that we were not rejecting scientific principles in our research (Allison & Rootman, 1996). As Cancian (1992) has noted, community-academic collaboration can strengthen scientific standards by suggesting “ways of improving the quality of evidence and generating more vigorous debate among researchers of diverse backgrounds” (p. 630). It was also difficult finding a common language that was acceptable to the academic community yet at the same time understandable by lay audiences.

On the flip side, we encountered resistance from members of our CPO and IRAs as well, who were struggling to appreciate the importance of obtaining an unbiased sample and the need to be aware of ethical and data collection concerns that might emerge when IRAs are put to work in their former or present peer community. This tension between academic and lay ways of knowing, scientific rigor, and practical experience remains (Allison & Rootman, 1996), and there is a continual need to negotiate the “art and science” of sex trade knowledge in our new community-academic research endeavors. It might be that such tension in research collaborations is actually healthy and keeps all involved conscious of different perspectives on the social world, much like sociologists adhering to different perspectives on society have had to learn to live and hopefully, learn from each other.

An additional challenge in the research collaboration concerned the competing needs and interests of individuals and organizations involved in the project (Le Gris et al., 2000). Small (1996) has described the political side of community-academic collaborations as one of its greatest strengths but also greatest challenges (p. 20). As an organization that advocates for and serves the needs of currently active and former sex workers, our CPO represents a definite stance toward sex work that is neither in support of nor against it. However, other nonprofit organizations in the region are more focused on the sexual exploitation of women and youth who sell sex services. Moreover, the CPO’s viewpoint is continuously under debate within these organizations as well as throughout the local community. As academics, we need to be continually aware and respectful of these differences in viewpoint among our respective community partners.

Another challenge presented by the partnership was the constant flow of change within the CPO. During the 2-year life of the research initiative described

above, the CPO went through numerous turnovers of both frontline staff and leadership, and even partly revamped its main service orientation toward clientele. We found ourselves having to invest additional time in staying abreast of such changes and other organizational developments that we expected might affect the research project or our relationship with the organization.

The community partner for the project under discussion was partly dependent on local government funds, as well as private donations, to sustain its activities. This has been and remains the case for community partners connected with our other research projects. Although it was our common view that an increase of funding for one community agency is likely to lead to increases in funding for all agencies because of service efficiencies present in these community organizations, there have at times been tensions within this web of service agencies aimed at improving the lives of those living on the margins of our society. Of course, academic researchers have their own viewpoints and ideologies to remain conscious of. We must be vigilant about rejecting the perspectives of community partners or IRAs because, for example, they are not feminist enough or seemingly identify with dominant patriarchal interests. This is nevertheless sometimes very difficult to do, especially when, for example, the community partner or IRAs continue to cite other research findings that are contradictory to findings that emerged in the community-academic collaboration or depict the sex industry in ways that challenge the convictions of the academic partners.

Political changes at municipal and provincial levels are also likely to affect the resources that community partners can contribute in kind to the research efforts and the data collection process, as well as the health and social services available to the hidden target population. Carrying out collaborative research in the “shifting sand” of politics can be both frustrating and might even change the direction of the project (Boutilier, Badgley, Poland, & Tobin, 2001). As previously noted, tension among community partners increases noticeably during times of fiscal restraint, which was the case for our community partner and other local community groups at various times throughout the life of the project. The natural setting of the research environment permits only partial control of the measurement process, as the interplay of dynamic and multiple forces threatens both internal and external validity (Le Gris et al., 2000; McHale & Lerner, 1996).

A final challenge concerns the relationship between policy and research or between research and decision making. The relationship between knowledge and policy is not a direct or straightforward one, particularly where politics are concerned (Lomas, 2000). Even as governments and other organizations tout the rhetoric of performance accountability and evidence-based decision making, controversial decisions in funding allocations and policy adoption continue unabated. Such instances underscore the possibility that policy and funding allocation are less often the result of supportive empirical data and rational argument than the opposite—that is, policy might, in fact, precede rational arguments and evidence to legitimize policy (Boutilier et al., 2001). Likewise, in the case of our respondents, stereotypic notions about people who sell sex services that abound among members of the public might be more salient to policy discussions than empirical findings (Eccles, 1996). Similarly, decision makers might (mis)represent research findings and/or be inclined to dismiss evidence that is acceptable in scholarly circles but highly contested in the public arena. Indeed, academic researchers need to be particularly aware of the impact the release that research findings might have on their commu-

nity partner(s). The timing of research and the difficulty of analyzing the latent effects or the long-term impact of knowledge must be considered carefully, especially for community partner organizations whose need for evidence to inform community action might be very immediate (Boutilier et al., 2001). With regard to the project discussed here, our CPO needed analyzed data on the educational status of our respondents even before all the data were collected so that they could justify continuation of their training programs to the funding authorities. As noted previously, community partners might also be grappling with turnover rates and rapid organizational change to such an extent that research objectives (and a related factor, the relevance of research findings) might change over time and be incongruent with the time frames within which academics work.

Conversely, the results of research might be unfavorable toward programs, reveal conflicts among stakeholders, or otherwise yield controversial findings unanticipated by the researchers. Researchers face difficult ethical dilemmas during the report writing phase, particularly in the social sciences, where it is recognized that findings often rest on contestable assumptions and perspectives (Louis, 1999; Reitsma-Street & Arnold, 1994). Regarding the research discussed here, it became obvious to us that our CPO staff ranged in opinion along the continuum of the sex trade as inevitably "exploitative" of women (and men) to a "free choice" of work activity. This diversity of opinion followed us all the way through the project and was also evident during the stage during which recommendations were being drawn up. We eventually came to the conclusion that the heterogeneity of views among our CPO's staff contributed to the data analysis and policy recommendations, though it did mean that we had to negotiate carefully and always try to use evidence to back our statements.

It was our experience that we had only partial influence over the wider dissemination and uptake of the research findings. As Louis (1999) has observed, some forms of knowledge will spread with little effort, whereas others cannot find a niche in public conversation. Dissemination might be better viewed as a complex system of two-way linkages (Tenove, 1999). We found the need for sustained conversation with our community partner and other community groups to enhance to the use of the research findings. However, such interaction is only part of the solution to research use, as the politics of research use encompass issues such as the marginalization of ideas and other forces that are endemic to the chaotic nature of policy arenas and the complexity of community systems (Louis, 1999). As a case in point, even though the research evidence questions the strength, direction, and universality of the link between victimization and sex work, we have witnessed overwhelming resistance by the media and others to alter the socially constructed link that sex work always leads to victimization.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has involved a reflection on some of the methodological lessons learned to date from a community-academic collaboration on a hard-to-reach/hidden sub-population: adults who sell sex services in one medium-size metropolitan area of Canada. We have argued that this particular project could not have been carried out without the ongoing involvement and commitment of the community. This is not

least of all because of the difficulty of accessing a highly marginalized and stigmatized population without strong support from a community partner organization that is cognizant of the social worlds of the potential research participants and have developed effective strategies for reaching them (Heckathorn, 1997; Heckathorn et al., 2001; Lee, 1993).

We have highlighted some of the main benefits such research has had for the community partner organization, indigenous research participants, and academic researchers, yet it would be shortsighted to assume that such community-academic collaborations as the one described above are easy to implement or are without inherent problems. In this article, we have, thus, also presented some of the main challenges and difficulties for the three groups differently engaged in the research endeavor. Some of these challenges have been quickly resolved, but others have proven to be more testing, and some will likely endure indefinitely.

Despite these ongoing challenges, however, we believe that this community-academic venture has been and continues to be largely successful for all parties involved. This opinion was shared by our community partner, with one staff member noting that the project was

excellent, totally excellent. It just shows that everybody's not stuffy and everybody doesn't just fall under society's rules. A few years ago, I just never would have thought, you know, it just never would have occurred to me [that I would know] actually somebody from the university, like a professor. You know, cuz you just think of those people, that's their end of town. They just don't come over here to our end of town. But yeah, I think it's totally cool.

We agree that the gains of collaborative research far outweighed the downsides (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000). In any event, it is highly unlikely that academic researchers without sex trade experience would have gained access to the worlds of adult sex workers in the first instance, or, even if they had, respondents would have opened up to them to the extent that took place in this project without the ongoing cooperation of the community partner organization and involvement of indigenous research assistants. As suggested by some researchers, perhaps a slightly altered methodology that makes room for both academic researchers (leaders and graduate students) and indigenous research assistants to conduct interviews would be the way forward, drawing on the best of both worlds and at the same time adding rigor to the methodology. Interviews conducted by the different types of interviewers could be compared for accuracy in data collecting as well as depth of knowledge gained from probing, among other strategies (Weiss, 1974).

In short, although people who sell sex services are often described as hard to reach, findings presented here on one academic-community research collaboration focused on this population's working conditions, health, and related issues illustrates that viable research projects involving sex workers and other marginalized people are not only possible but can also be relatively successful. We have learned that positive partnerships involve a revision of the traditional view both of the researcher role and of those being researched. The research project reported on here has also helped us to recognize the value in opening up the process of research to include the community partner at all stages. The varied and different contributions brought to the research process by both academic and community members are equally valued and respected.

No doubt, community-academic collaborations can be difficult and time consuming, and always involve ongoing negotiations—a reciprocal give-and-take. However, if academic researchers are prepared to revise traditional visions of the researcher role, such ventures will result in fruitful learning opportunities for academic and community partners, and study participants alike.

NOTE

1. For this research project, *indigenous research assistant* refers to research assistants who had previously been involved in the sex industry but had since left and were interested in being involved in research on the occupation. Some of the IRAs had university training, but it was not a prerequisite to being hired. Our main community partner, PEERS, assisted in advertising for, short-listing of, and final selection of the indigenous assistants.

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