



Talking To and About Real People: Lessons Learnt in Conducting Research Among Sex Workers in Johannesburg, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Research about sex workers often attempts to fit them into categories of being either exploited victims or workers (or entrepreneurs) in a free market of sexual labour. However, it does not appear to make much sense to split sex workers into different classes depending on the extent to which they appear to be ‘masters of their own destiny’. Arguably, some sex workers drift into sex work partly as a result of impoverished and otherwise challenging home circumstances, and for some, it is a choice whereby they evaluate the options available to them and enter (and remain in) sex work because it is the most viable way of earning a ‘good’ income. However, in whichever circumstance, it is evident that it would be impossible to do justice to people’s life stories by casting them too confidently into one or the other category. This presentation will focus on the lessons learnt from conducting research among sex workers in Johannesburg, South Africa. The author is cognisant of the fact that “sex workers” include a diverse category of individuals providing sexual services to clients. However, the larger study was based on heterosexual female sex workers. I gathered materials for this research in three overlapping phases. First, I engaged in observation in settings where sex workers gather. Second, I immersed myself in “Project 107 report on adult prostitution in South Africa”. Third, I conducted semi- structured interviews with five female sex workers plying their trade in Johannesburg. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the third phase of the research. (Foucauldian) discourse analysis was used to analyse data. In interacting with sex workers and conducting discourse analysis, I learnt that it is important to attend to discourses and how they are deployed, valorise forms of discursive resistance that disrupt ‘paralysing dichotomies’, and to focus on knowledge not power.

Keywords: discourse analysis, Foucault, Johannesburg, knowledge, sex work, victims