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Survival sex and trafficked women: The politics of re-presenting and speaking about others in anti-oppressive qualitative research

Melissa HardestyAlana J Gunn

Binghamton University, USA

Abstract

Qualitative research grounded in a social constructionist epistemology troubles the assumption, integral in positivist research, that a researcher can be neutral and apolitical. In fact, many scholars are drawn to constructionist epistemologies because they situate the research process as a site of ontological resistance and social change. This essay explores the politics of voice and representation in anti-oppressive qualitative research. Using an example from one author's research on stigma management among formerly incarcerated women, and the particularly pernicious stigma women faced if they had engaged in sex work, we detail the benefits and pitfalls of either re-presenting research participants in their exact words or changing participants' words, a process we refer to as re-linguaging. Drawing upon philosophical and social scientific scholarship on the "crisis of representation" in qualitative research and recent scholarship and news articles about human sex trafficking, we underscore the powerful political effects of language. We argue that researchers' choices about language are neither inherently liberatory nor oppressive, but they are always political. We call for a more reflexive scholarly dialog on voice in qualitative social work research and press scholars to explicitly engage the question of whom and what we represent when we claim to represent marginalized others.

Keywords

Crisis of representation; trafficking women; anti-oppressive research; social constructionism; voice in qualitative research; survival sex

This research is a response to all of those researchers, doctors, government officials, social workers, therapists, journalists, foster care workers and every other adult who said we were too messed up or that we needed to be saved from ourselves. (The Young Women's Empowerment Project, 2009)

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Corresponding author: Melissa Hardesty, Department of Social Work College of Community and Public Affairs, Binghamton University, P.O. Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902-6000, USA. hardesty@binghamton.edu.

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Introduction

This paper was borne out of a qualitative research methods roundtable discussion at the 2014 SSWR Conference in San Antonio, TX. Comprised mostly but not exclusively of doctoral students, roundtable participants were interested both in the practical conundrums students face when proposing qualitative dissertations in an academy and discipline (social work) that privileges positivist if not quantitative approaches to research (Staller, 2013), and the ethical dimensions of conducting research about and on behalf of marginalized others. While roundtable participants tended to agree that research methods ought to flow from the research question,¹ many were drawn to qualitative methods for ethical, not purely methodological, reasons. As scholars trained from a broadly defined social constructionist epistemological perspective, we are skeptical of research projects that claim to separate questions of methods from questions of ethics. With that commitment in mind, this essay engages the entanglement of method and ethics, representation and politics that imbue all social science research projects. Such entanglements are inherent to the research endeavor but are perhaps most pernicious when they pertain to research on underprivileged people, especially when methodological and ethical overlaps go unexamined.

To illustrate the ethical and political underpinnings of seemingly mundane methodological and analytical considerations in qualitative research, we offer an example from one author's research project. Her dilemma was deceptively simple: what term should the researcher use to refer to women who had histories of incarceration and illegal drug use and who had exchanged sex for money, drugs, and other material resources? As we will argue, the second author's eventual decision to use the moniker "survival sex" rather than the research participants' go-to descriptor "prostitution" was not only a decision about analytical precision but also a decision related to the value and meaning of voice in qualitative research and the politics of speaking about/on behalf of, and therefore representing others (Alcoff, 1991). We contend that this decision to "re-language" the experiences of research informants is neither correct nor incorrect, neither liberatory nor an exercise of power in which the voice of the researcher occludes those of the researched. Rather, re-languaging is an ethical, political, and methodological re-presentation of research participants' accounts that is inextricably linked to power differentials between researchers and the researched. To that end, it can empower even as it dominates. Instead of answering questions, we raise them, and in so doing, hope to contribute to a reflexive scholarly dialog on the political dimensions of social work research.

Speech, voice, and representation

Qualitative research has much to offer the conscientious scholar who views research as an opportunity to promote equality and social justice. When conducted from a social constructionist perspective, qualitative research is reflexive and flexible; it takes seriously the notion that research informants or participants have grounded expertise about their own

¹Patti Lather (2012) is one of many scholars who have troubled this aphorism, asserting that this point "should be discussed and not assumed." Lather's critiques stem from her engagement with feminist and postmodernist turns in qualitative research and her persistent questioning of regimes of truth in research. Among her many observations on the subjects of qualitative research, epistemology, and power, Lather draws attention to research questions as evolving over the course of the study.

experience and that the researcher cannot and should not presume to know all of the questions that are worth asking at the start of the research project. With methods such as participant observation and open-ended or semi-structured interviews, participants are not constrained to the researcher's a priori questions and interests, which means that participants have some leeway in structuring the terms through which their lives and interests are represented. For researchers, this flexibility contributes to the development of internally valid (Smith, 2014) and nuanced understandings of people and communities. Indeed, the relatively greater power that research participants have in some modes of qualitative research has been lauded as a means to "give voice to" those whose ideas and perspectives are marginalized in mainstream society and allow them to speak *on* an *in* their own terms. But a closer examination of the terms of qualitative research and its philosophical underpinnings troubles the notion that social science researchers can be a neutral conduit between marginalized others and powerful stakeholders, or that any group of people's grounded experience is an unmediated representation of reality (Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Spivak, 1988).

Social science research always entails saying something about peoples' lives, and because people are embedded in unequal power relationships, the act of saying something about people and representing their needs and interests is an inherently political undertaking (Alcoff, 1991). Unlike deductive research projects that begin with a research hypothesis and rely on structured data collection, statistical tests, falsification, and importantly, the epistemological assumption that there exists a stable, quantifiable, and objectively knowable social world, qualitative research conducted from a social constructionist perspective questions the existence of a stable and knowable social world and the premise that the tools of the scientific method are sufficient for learning everything there is to know about social reality. The assertion that researchers cannot cleanse the research process of their own perspectives and interests marks a departure from positivist research grounded precisely in the assumption that credible research requires a separation between researcher and the researched. The terms *participant* and *informant* imply agentive action on the part of those whom we study; such words draw our attention to research as an interactive process, whereby the researcher and the participant affect one another. In her work on qualitative research, Patti Lather (2012) talks of "breaking the hold of Cartesian foundations on the research imagination," which includes questioning our assumptions about researcher subjectivity, methodology, and what counts as data or evidence.

To avoid treating those whom we research as *subjects/objects* and ourselves as disinterested scientists, we must always attend to our own and research participants' social locations. Social location is a capacious concept that refers broadly to the context in which a person lives and perceives the world in any given instant. This concept has a temporal dimension, which means that an individual's social location shifts dynamically over time and as they move from one context to another. For example, both authors of this paper were educated at wealthy, private universities, within which our more modest economic roots situate us as relatively underprivileged. One of the authors is an African-American woman who has experienced the majority of her academic training and early career in predominantly white institutions. All of these identities, both visible and invisible, have impacted our experiences and our accounts of our experiences in irreducibly complex ways; likewise, our accounts of

our experiences and perceptions undoubtedly shift, depending upon when, how, and in what contexts we are prompted to account for these experiences. The very attributes that situate us as relatively underprivileged in the academy render us privileged in others. This is very often the case when conducting social justice-oriented research. Hence, the conflict many graduate students and early researchers experience when asking participants to share their time with little to no financial compensation or direct benefit (Pascale, 2011).

In Linda Alcoff's words, any given speaker's social location is "epistemologically salient" (1991: 6). Otherwise stated, truth claims or accounts of what is or what happened are always bound up with the history, interests, ideology, race, class, gender, etc. of the person who makes the claim. Every knowledge claim comes from a particular, partial perspective, and all partial perspectives are situated dynamically in a network of power and privilege (Haraway, 1988). Of particular concern to critical, anti-oppressive scholars is the tendency of researchers to dominate research participants through inaccurate, overwrought, and poorly informed re-presentations of marginalized groups. Given power differentials between researchers and the researched, this danger is always lurking. And yet, as social work scholars and faculty members, we are expected to carve out a space on the academic, community-engaged soapbox and speak. For social workers, this imperative is linked to professional mandates to work in the service of and concomitantly speak about marginalized others. Likewise, society beyond the academy grants (some) researchers the authority to speak about our world and the conditions that structure it, while often denying these speaking opportunities to the underprivileged.

A common response to the problem of unequal power between researcher and researched has been for scholars to step aside and allow the marginalized to speak, literally, in their own words. One can flip through the titles of qualitative research papers and find snippets of respondents' exact words in manuscript titles, usually as a pithy way to summarize a thematic finding. The phrase "in their own words" is another common trope in qualitative research titles, abstracts, and papers. This desire to faithfully represent and to let people speak on their own terms is frequently taken for granted as an ethical practice, and this is one reason why our second author was conflicted about replacing her research participants' label "prostitution" with "survival sex." But the rich body of research on the crisis of representation in qualitative research complicates the commonsense assertion that people and words can speak for themselves—that anybody, even the marginalized, has special, unmediated access to reality. According to Jackson and Mazzei, whose exact words we will now pluck out of context to make our own interested point

Letting readers "hear" participant voices and presenting their "exact words" as if they are transparent is a move that fails to consider how as researchers we are always already shaping these "exact words" through unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines. (2009: 2)

Added to all of these concerns is the fact that a researcher's perspectives and motives are never completely transparent to the researcher herself. Therefore, we qualitative researchers find ourselves in a world of shaky and shifting subject positions, amid people who inhabit dynamic and multi-layered social locations, unequal power relationships, and the ever-

present danger of harming others through our representations and misrepresentations. All of these have an impact on how we understand and use voice in research.

Consider the following critiques of privileging “voice” in qualitative research, and the salience of these critiques for conducting research:

- The assumption that grounded experience offers unmediated access to a stable external reality or truth is flawed because it does not account for the impact of social location on what people are able to see and observe at any given time (Alcoff, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Spivak, 1988).
- The idea that speech or voice offers special access to a stable, authentic self—i.e. “a mirror of the soul”—is itself a culturally specific idea about language. This lay theory of language forecloses an analysis of how voice emerges in situated social interactions and how notions of selfhood change across contexts and over time (Carr, 2010; Jackson and Mazzei, 2009).
- Attempts by scholars to step aside and allow the marginalized to represent themselves obscure the role of the researcher in framing and re-presenting research participants (Spivak, 1988).
- We cannot evade questions of power and politics in re-presentation by allowing in-group members to speak for themselves, because there is no single person or group of people who can incontestably be granted the authority to speak for their group (Alcoff, 1991).
- There is in-escapable danger built into the decision (or not) to re-present the marginalized. As researchers, we occupy a discursively dangerous position because we represent powerful institutions and are allied with oppressive forces. But, if we do not use our power to speak and be heard, we are complicit in perpetuating inequality for those whose experiences are unheard.

The irreducible complexity of voice and the politics that adhere to representation in qualitative studies are daunting facets of the research process, for sure. But these very features of qualitative research also offer opportunities to cast a critical lens on many of the tacit assumptions that underlie mainstream approaches to research and the values and goals guiding particular bodies of scholarship. In her analysis of the politics of voice and the crisis of representation among feminists in the 1980s and 1990s, Linda Alcoff offered four “interrogatory practices” to guide scholars when deciding when and if to speak about or on behalf of others (1991: 26). This paper focuses on Alcoff’s fourth and main interrogatory practice: scholars should consider the possible and probable impact of their representations. Where might their words travel, and what might they do? Given the growing interest in human (sex) trafficking among policymakers and social work students, the tendency of some anti-trafficking advocates to incorporate forms of voluntary sex work under the trafficking label, and longstanding tensions between academic feminists and workers in the sex industry (Grant, 2015; Kesler, 2002), the question of how to represent women who exchange sex for money and resources is not only methodologically and ethically productive in the abstract but also worthy of serious interrogation in and of itself.

Incarceration, addiction, and stigma

This paper draws from the narratives of women who participated in a larger study of mothers completing their prison sentences in a community-based, residential substance abuse treatment facility. The residential treatment program provided women with multiple supports to facilitate the process of re-entering their families and communities, post-incarceration, while recovering from substance abuse disorders. Using an ethnographic approach, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the second author used an intersectionality lens, with a particular focus on gendered and racialized conceptions of motherhood, to explore the ways women anticipated, experienced, and managed stigma within their interpersonal relationships and communities of origin.

Erving Goffman (1963) defined stigma variously as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance,” a “spoiled identity,” and an “attribute or mark that is deeply discrediting.” The latter definition links the religious and archaic uses of the term as a physical mark on the body to a social process, whereby people are devalued and excluded. Zeroing in on the psychological dimensions of stigma, Scott Burris (2008) described stigma as “a cruel form of social control that turns the individual into his own jailer and own chorus of denunciation” (p. 476). Stigma is attached to the individual, but as Goffman (1963) pointed out, relationships and social interactions are the mechanisms through which a person’s identity and humanity are reduced to an attribute or behavior.

According to Michel Foucault’s (1978) *A History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, the late 19th century was an important period in the emergence of modern sexuality, because this was the time period during which deviant sexual acts transitioned from being understood as mere behaviors—sodomy, homosexual sex, prostitution—to being identities or distinct types of people—the sodomite, the homosexual, and the prostitute. The cultural legibility of the prostitute as a type of deviant woman has thus endured for more than 100 years. Likewise, as Goffman argued, the process through which deviant sexual behavior morphs into an all-encompassing stigmatized identity is a social and cultural phenomenon. In American literature, we see the social process of stigmatization in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s controversial heroine Hester Prynne whose Puritan neighbors convict her of adultery and force her to wear a scarlet “A” on her clothing. Instead of disclosing the identity of her out-of-wedlock child’s father (the local pastor), and exposing the social relationship required to constitute the act of adultery, Prynne literally wears the mark of the townspeople’s contempt as if it points to an individual character flaw. It is no coincidence that Prynne’s offense was a sexual one and that she, a woman, was the locus of stigma.

Many of the formerly incarcerated women interviewed as part of this study bore the distinctly gendered stigma attached to sexual impropriety as if it signaled their own personal failures rather than a social contract under which moral judgment is levied as a powerful form of control. In their peer network at the Recovery Center, those who had used “hard” drugs, crack cocaine and heroin in contrast to marijuana or alcohol, commanded the authority and respect that comes with having dangerously broken the rules and lived to tell about it. By local standards of authenticity, they deserved to be in the coveted program. Their substance use was grittier, criminalized. It usually required closer association with

street crime, and in many instances, with the compulsion to get economic and addiction needs met by exchanging sex for resources. In the RC program, prior associations with a shady underworld were generally viewed as a mark of struggle and endurance, but prostitution marked the point at which tales of rule-breaking provoked more aversion than awe. Even within therapeutic spaces meant to cultivate openness and safety, prostitution remained an almost unspeakable offense. The tales of hardship and narrow misses that sometimes left the hard drug users with more authority and legitimacy ended where commodified sex began. For many, a prior history of prostitution was a baleful reminder of the depths to which drug addiction had led them. It signaled a lack of control and personal degradation. But the sense of shame and fear that led women to keep quiet about prostitution was not unwarranted; the logics that perpetuate prostitution stigma were widely accepted and verbalized by many of the women who participated in this research project (Gunn and Canada, 2015).

Evelyn, a marijuana user, distanced herself from women who used hard drugs,

Yeah, and stuff that happens while they're on these things—heroin, crack—and how they let people take control of 'em, how they let people, like five or six men, rape 'em and just everything just for drugs ... I have this criminal—my thing is the criminal behavior, stealing. That's my thing...but as far as all this other stuff, I can't say I know that life.

Note the peculiar juxtaposition of agency and passivity that Evelyn attributes to hard drug users who have engaged in prostitution. Drugs like heroin and crack are thought to hijack women's agency, rendering them people to which “stuff happens,” but whose culpability for even violent sexual exchanges endures. The heroin or crack addict ‘lets’ men rape her. This linguistic move efficiently shifts the burden of rape from men to the addict-prostitute. Evelyn's logic was shared by others in the program.

Jamila, who had a history of exchanging sex for money recognized the stigma attached to prostitution but also assumed responsibility for the dangers associated with it.

You know, men might say like, “Oh, my God. You were a prostitute? You sold yourself to get money for drugs? What the hell? You junkie. What's wrong with you?” Even my ex-husband, he's just, he knew what I was doing and he throws it in my face now. Like he'll send me a text on my Facebook, even to this day saying “hooker ...” I can't believe I did it now, just getting into cars and opening my door to people I didn't know. I mean I could have been killed. But yeah, I feel like they don't look down on me as bad as [if I say I was a heroin addict as they do] if I say, “Hey, I was a heroin addict AND I used to prostitute.”

Women who sell sex on the street are more vulnerable to violence than sex workers who are better able to control their working conditions, but Jamila's thoughts on the dangers of getting into cars with strangers and opening her door to them begs the question of who ought to bear responsibility for violence and why it seems to plague prostitutes, in particular. One may guess that the danger experienced by street prostitutes is linked to their devaluation and perpetrators' perceptions that they can get away with committing crimes against this stigmatized group (Bowen, 2015). It's not just that they are vulnerable because they do risky

things (for women) more often, like riding in cars with or opening doors to unfamiliar men; after all, these aspects of prostitution are also associated with morally unmarked behaviors like riding in a taxi cab or allowing a cable TV installation worker into one's home. The prostitute's culpability for violent acts committed against her, evident in Gloria and Jamila's quotes, stems from the slippery agency of the prostitute and cultural norms that tether a woman's value to her sexuality. According to this logic, a woman's decision to commodify her sexuality is tantamount to relinquishing sexual agency. This explains how Gloria comes to the conclusion that the hard drug users who exchanged sex for money let men rape them.

However, in many narratives, the tipping point at which a woman loses agency comes earlier in the causal chain for the addict-prostitute; she relinquishes agency when she decides to use drugs. This is a familiar cultural trope, seen in everything from safety tips for college women to minimize their chances of being raped (by abstaining from alcohol or avoiding parties) to school dress codes that blame girls' bodies for distracting boys; women are expected to be the cultural gatekeepers of sexuality, and decisions that interfere with the gatekeeping function can render them blameworthy for any violence—sexual and otherwise—that may befall them. In other words, the prostitute's culpability for and the stigma and violence she endures depends upon a well-documented and sexist understanding of gender and sexual behavior.

Sexual gatekeeping requires tight control over one's own and others' behaviors. At the same time, gatekeeping lapses and failures are not read as mere behaviors; rather, these behaviors constitute identity, such that any woman who has ever exchanged sex for money is a prostitute for life. Jamila's ex-husband continues to brand her a "hooker," even though she no longer engages in prostitution. In fact, all of the women in this study understood a prior history of prostitution as an enduring social mark—worse than drug addiction and other criminalized behaviors—that negated their access to hegemonic feminine roles like wife and (good) mother (Gunn et al., 2016). Raven R. Bowen's (2015) study of women transitioning from off-street sex work to "square" jobs in Canada confirms this perception. "Whore stigma" was the biggest barrier to transitioning out of the sex industry for her respondents; one reported losing a job after her supervisor found out about her past sex work. Women also experienced this stigma years after leaving the sex industry, so they learned to be secretive about prostitution. Research participant, Delilah, who exchanged sex for money while struggling with a crack cocaine addiction knew that prostitution was a secret worth keeping, especially when interacting with romantic partners.

I kind of told him my past and the drugs but not all the way, I didn't talk about the prostitution too because I don't feel like nobody need to know all my past. Past is my past, that's for me to know, not for everybody, I don't want my boyfriend thinking I'm a whore or that I will cheat on him or that I'm dirty.

In this context, prostitution is understood as a window into a woman's character—an indicator that she is a "whore" who cannot be trusted and whose body is permanently dirty. This is consistent with Carstairs' observation, "The image of the crack – using prostitute has come to epitomize the ultimate shame and sexual degradation of women" (1998: 70). We would add to this observation that degradation for women is nearly always sexual. It's legible in the racialized stereotype of the welfare queen who, instead of conforming to the

sexual and economic imperatives inherent in monogamous heterosexual marriage, manipulates her own fertility to access government benefits, the woman whose provocative clothing is deemed a sign that she lacks self-respect, and even in the genre of internet threats where women who express an opinion on any variety of subjects are either threatened with violence and rape or accused of deserving this fate. By circular logic, a woman who is sexual has degraded herself, *and* the way to degrade a woman is to take away her sexual agency.

The notion that degradation, for women, is sexual is rooted in the assumption that sexuality is integral to a woman's personhood. This stance exists as a tacit cultural logic but also as a feminist argument against prostitution. For example, Carole Pateman (1999) argues that the difference between masculinity and femininity is "the political difference between freedom and subjection," and that because masculinity and femininity are realized in the sexual act, a prostitute is "selling *herself* in a very real sense" (p. 61). We also see this logic in Jamila's quote above when she imitates how a hypothetical man will react to hearing about her history of prostitution, "You sold yourself to get money for drugs?" she asks. Women frequently talked about prostitution as selling one's body or selfhood. As Kari Kesler, a former sex worker and academic so incisively observed, to argue that women are selling themselves rather than selling sexual services reduces women to their sexuality (2002). This is a rationality with which many women disagree. Yet this sentiment is echoed by participants in this research project, in anti-prostitution arguments by academics (MacKinnon, 1993), in legal arguments (Heath et al., 2016), and in popular culture.

As researchers committed to combating the stigma experienced by the women in this treatment program, and as women who also experience the pernicious effects of gender oppression and sexualized degradation in our everyday lives, we resist the cultural logics that simultaneously elicit and degrade women's sexual labor, paid and otherwise, and we do so in part by re-languaging prostitution. Yet, as we remarked above, re-languaging has positive and negative potential effects.

The politics of speaking about prostitution

In this section, we detail the epistemological and ethical quandaries we faced when deciding how to re-present sex work among women at the Recovery Center. We have italicized important and generalizable points about re-presentation and qualitative research throughout our analysis.

The decision to use the moniker "survival sex" rather than "prostitution" to describe women's experiences exchanging sex for money or drugs was motivated by two factors. The first was analytical precision. Many of the women indicated that they would not have engaged in these exchanges if they were not resource poor and seeking material support or drugs; they occupied the niche in the sex industry referred to as "survival sex." The second motivating factor was a desire to reaffirm the women's humanity and value in the face of intense and enduring stigmatization. As we argued previously, researchers do not neutrally and comprehensively translate their participants' lives onto the page, so research necessarily entails re-presentation.

Though an imperfect tool for social change, re-presentation opens up opportunities to interrupt, disrupt, and complicate social processes implicated in marginalization and oppression.

“Survival sex” cued into the constrained choices and limited agency these women faced when deciding whether to exchange sex for money. Survival sex also points to the desperation and pain women associated with their experiences trading sex for resources and drugs. Re-languaging aimed to combat the self-stigmatization and culpability respondents felt due to prior engagement in prostitution and shift the focus to the structural factors implicated in their entanglements with therapeutic and carceral arms of the state. In fact, while all respondents in the study were participating in a transitional re-entry program for incarcerated women with histories of drug addiction, more than half ended up in prison precisely because they had been arrested for prostitution (55%) and/or drug possession (65%). The cultural, symbolic stigma attached to sex work and addiction is inextricable from the institutionally generated stigma of being labeled a criminal.

Survival sex rearticulates criminally coded behavior as the effect of social and economic marginalization, not individual character flaws. It has the potential to more accurately describe women’s experiences while assuaging stigma.

Yet we had to concede that re-languaging, no matter how well-intentioned or reasoned, is re-presentation. And our re-presentations may be ones with which research participants disagree.

To get a better grasp on the articulation between the accuracy and politics of the research project and the perspectives of the women who participated in the study, we followed up with a handful of participants.

For some women in the study, such as Kim, using survival sex to replace the word prostitution made sense and created an opportunity to more accurately depict her experiences:

I had sex to have some place to sleep, I had sex to get drugs, I had sex to get umm you know to get me a-enough money to get something to eat so, umm, the description that you are using right now is, umm, more appropriate because, umm, I did what I had to do and, umm, it wasn’t always about getting high. It, it was, you know, just a means of survival to make it through the day or that night ... but for me when I hear the name prostitution, it’s not fitting to what happens to me. To me it was, umm, it was like it was like a child being molested or something that’s mentally ill. To me, that’s the way I see it now. It’s like I was sick and people were taking advantage of me being sick by forcing me to commit acts that if I was not sick, if I was in my right mind, I would have never agreed to do.

For Kim, the sex trade was a mode of survival, whether that was to afford housing, food to eat, or her to sustain her drug habit. In fact, she compared her decisions to engage in sex for resources to the situation of a child being molested or an individual with a mental illness, seeing herself as someone who was taken advantage of, sexually, while she was managing her a drug use illness in an incapacitated state. Thus, survival sex communicates an

understanding of her complex narrative in a way the word prostitution does not. Kim contests the “women as sexual gatekeepers” narrative by arguing that women with substance abuse problems cannot exercise sexual agency and are, consequently, victims. As we will show, this constrained agency/victimization narrative is common in anti-sex trafficking discourses, but it, too, has been subject to intense criticism. For now, it is sufficient to note that “survival sex” resonated with Kim’s worldview.

For others, re-language was more complicated. While Tanya agreed that using the descriptor survival sex would provide a more accurate understanding of the constrained choices drug-addicted women faced, she argued that the word “survival” conflated addiction needs with material and economic needs. She also endorsed the viewpoint that prostitution is morally bad.

In addressing the politics of re-presentation in qualitative research, we can identify and acknowledge potential discrepancies between our political motives as researchers and the political stances and motives of research participants.

Tanya’s response to our re-presentation showed that her political stance on the morality of sex work is at odds with the political stance we take in this paper.

To me there’s a difference of a woman who is out there having sex so that she can go get high on crack than a woman who’s out there doing survival to take care of her family, her kids. It’s still not good, but I think that there’s a difference now. I think that that’s survival sex and the one that’s doing it just so she can go off and get high, that’s prostitution.

Tanya’s beliefs echo those of other women at the Recovery Center who looked down upon women whose engagement in sex work was inextricably linked to their addiction to drugs. Like Evelyn, Tanya’s perception of the proper use of the word survival sex communicates her underlying belief that women who use hard drugs and engage in sex work represent a more deviant lot of women on the margins. Intersecting drug use and sex work scripts a woman as immoral, self-centered, unable to make rational decisions, and therefore, wholly devalued. Tanya’s excerpt, in particular, communicates that being driven by addiction negates a woman’s claim to the descriptor survival sex. For Tanya, a woman who sells sex to feed a drug habit is acting selfishly and choosing to devalue herself by engaging in shameful behaviors. Addict women are simply prostitutes; they deserve the stigma that attaches to the term. On the other hand, a woman who engages in sex work for money to feed her kids is seeking to fulfill and embody normative expectations of acceptable motherhood. A woman’s engagement in sex work is rationalized, and its stigma attenuated, if she uses the work as a means to enact motherhood. Selling sex is still degrading, but if it is understood as self-sacrifice made on behalf of one’s kids, it complies with the demands of motherhood as an all-encompassing and identity-defining role. In this situation, according to Tanya, survival sex is an appropriately empathetic and socially acceptable term. Others liked the term but did not think changing language could impact stigma.

Research participants may not see strategic re-presentation as a viable political tactic.

Sarah pointed to the long history of stigmatizing prostitutes when she voiced her skepticism about re-languaging.

They have a name. I mean prostitution/survival sex has been looked down on for so long that like if you're like police officers, parole officers—they're always going to look down on you for that because they think you're the scum of the earth once they hear that. I feel like until you you're put in that position, or until you understand the person, they're always going to look down on them no matter what it's called. Cause its negative, how do you make prostitution positive?

According to Sarah, a word change will not eradicate the enduring and undeniable discrimination women face at the hands of the policing and criminal justice systems. Thus, it is just a Band-Aid for addressing the root problem: the longstanding perception that prostitution violates a woman's claim to humanity.

We can get a better grasp of research participants' perspectives and politics by triangulating their accounts with historical data and research.

Recent history shows that language changes and victimization narratives are effective tools for changing the criminal justice system's approach to prostitution; but they do not assuage the penalties that come with a criminal record, even if the offenses on that record have been increasingly placed under the jurisdiction of social service-intensive diversion programming and therapeutic professionals. As we will explain below, so-called abolitionist social service workers (those who want to abolish the sex trade entirely) frequently work with and through the law enforcement agencies, justifying what may otherwise be viewed as punitive or coercive modes of intervention in the name of victim rescue (Bernstein, 2001, 2007; Bromfield, 2016; Wahab and Panichelli, 2013). Although "survival sex" captures the constrained agency of lower income, drug-addicted women, this descriptor sidesteps the question of whether sex work is inherently dangerous or exploitative, and the more pressing question of who benefits or loses from pathologizing sex work and criminalizing its producers or consumers. Prostitute or whore stigmatization is, after all, a social process dependent upon cultural valuations of gender and sexuality. Combating stigmatization requires one to grapple with the norms that enable it.

As Bernstein (2001) detailed in her work on sexual exchanges under late capitalism, the discourse of prostitution has shifted over recent decades, such that, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, prostitution was normalized under the banner of two competing critiques. One situated prostitutes as victims of pathological heterosexual male desire. The other was spearheaded by prostitutes trying to secure employment protections and decrease moral and literal policing of their work; they advocate for viewing prostitution and other forms of sexual labor as "sex work"² (Bernstein, 2001; Grant, 2015). Bernstein (2001) links increasing demand for sexual services, and the crackdown on street sex workers and the increase in "John schools" (diversion programs for men arrested for soliciting prostitutes), to

²There appears to have been an uptick in sex worker activism or visibility in the past decade (perhaps in response to anti-trafficking advocates), but sex worker activists have long been pressing for decriminalizing and destigmatizing sex work. The San Francisco based group COYOTE (COYOTE, 2017) (Call off Your Old Tired Ethics), started by former sex worker and feminist Margo St. James, has been advocating for sex workers' rights, including employment protections and ending police violence, since 1973 (coyotela.org).

the rise of the post-industrial service economy, under which working class business owners and big businesses interested in gentrifying neighborhoods target the most visible portion of the sexual services sector. Accordingly, working-class men and women at the lowest rungs of the sexual economy are subject to policing and intrusive interventions, while middle and upper-class portions of the sex industry are left unchecked.

Policy responses to prostitution over the course of the 2000s have been influenced, overwhelmingly, by victimization discourse. This discursive shift has had a powerful impact on policing and social service approaches to sexual commerce. Reporter Richard Ruelas pointed to the power of linguistic shifts on public perceptions of and policy support for prostitutes in Arizona in recent years. In particular, the transition from talking about “prostitution” to talking about “human trafficking,” ushered in a mindset according to which prostitutes have come to be construed as victims of the sex trade or “modern day slavery” (Bernstein, 2007; Staller, 2006³), rather than criminals. This trend is visible in crime statistics from major US cities in the late-1990s, a time period during which arrest rates for male customers or “Johns” began to rival arrest rates for prostitutes (Bernstein, 2001). The practice of criminalizing customers and construing prostitutes—whether coerced or not—as victims is known as the “Swedish model,” and is frequently enacted via “end demand” legislation in the United States. Importantly, the act of situating adult prostitutes within the boundaries of the phenomenon known as human trafficking requires advocates to adopt a much broader definition of the word than the one used in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, which focused mostly on international human trafficking and the reauthorized act of 2003, which was expanded to include funds for victims of domestic trafficking. What both versions of this bill have in common is a definition of trafficking as labor provided under “force, fraud, or coercion” and of any sexual labor provided by people under the age of 18. Accordingly, much of the work done by anti-trafficking organizations in the United States does not address forms of labor that meet the official definition of trafficking, although it is worth pointing out that the 2003 version of the TVPA included an amendment prohibiting grants to organizations that “promote, support, or advocate the legalization of prostitution” (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012: 145).

Prominent “abolitionist” researcher and social work professor, Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, refers to the type of women in study discussed here as “trafficked by circumstances” (Ruelas, 2015). Her problem frame situates nearly all women working in the sex trade as trafficked. Roe-Sepowitz is part of a larger movement of anti-trafficking advocates and researchers and has been a vocal advocate in the shift from talking about “prostitution” to talking about “trafficking.” In a critical review of anti-trafficking NGOs, Moore (2015) noted a slippery mobilization of the term trafficking, which could stand in for porn, prostitution, and sexual exploitation. Human trafficking has been a popular if controversial rallying point for the strange bedfellows (feminists and women allied with the Christian right) who have dedicated themselves to rescuing women from prostitution. As Bernstein

³Karen Staller described a similar discursive shift in media coverage of runaway youth between the early 1960s and late 1970s. While the early 1960s runaway was depicted as an adventurous boy from a happy home, later narratives told tales of kids lured to coastal hippie communities with their attendant vices; finally, the paradigmatic runaway was constructed as a girl from an unhappy home, at risk for exploitation and victimization. This latter version of the runaway, Staller noted, was fertile ground for creating many of the policy and social service interventions that exist today.

(2007) pointed out, human trafficking is one of few issues around which these two groups ally. And numerous non-profits have been formed in the US since the late 1990s to rescue women and children from alleged “sexual slavery.” Examples include the Polaris Project, “named after the North Star that guided slaves to freedom in the U.S.,” and the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) (2017), which “envision[s] a community free from all forms of sexual exploitation, including sexual assault and the commercial sex trade” (Polaris, 2017). Note that the Polaris Project’s identity is built upon a slavery metaphor, while CAASE aggregates wide-ranging social phenomena (sexual assault and the entire commercial sex industry) as forms of sexual exploitation. Nicole F. Bromfield (2016) traced contemporary anti sex-trafficking discourse in social work back to the Progressive Era, when social reformers like Jane Addams drew inspiration from chattel slave abolitionists and identified “white slavery” as a pressing social problem. Reformers deployed victimization discourse to frame all (white) prostitutes as sexual slaves trafficked against their will, while excluding and tacitly denying the possibility of sexual exploitation of women of color, allowing abuses against them to go unchecked. Contemporary anti-sex trafficking campaigns have dropped the modifier “white” from their slavery metaphors, but victim imagery remains disproportionately whitewashed (Shane, 2011).

Groups such as the Polaris Project and CAASE rely on rhetorical strategies that collapse quantitatively, and many would argue, qualitatively distinct kinds of potential harm. Anti-sex trafficking organizations have become increasingly powerful players shaping discourse and policies about human trafficking and prostitution in the United States (Moore, 2015), much to the ire of sex worker rights activists (Berlatsky, 2014; Robin, 2016), and anti-human trafficking advocates focused on combatting non-sexual forms of trafficking. Recent reports suggest that forced or coerced sexual laborers comprise just over 20% of all exploited workers, meaning that the vast majority of forced laborers are not sex-trafficked (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012; ILO, 2017). The term human trafficking thus connotes an ever-widening category of sexual harms—many of which do not meet the government codified definition of the term—and an overly narrow conception of coercive and forced labor practices.

Going back to Alcoff’s interrogatory practices, we must continue to trace the trajectory of our representations of people who trade sex for money and question the real and anticipated future impact of our discourse on the research participants and clients we endeavor to help. While anti-trafficking and anti-sex work advocates aim to liberate women and girls from exploitative circumstances, many of those deemed in need of rescue have opposed such efforts.

Researchers and social work practitioners must be willing to listen to and engage in dialog with activist groups opposed to our re-presentations and politics.

The quote that begins this paper comes from a self-study conducted by the Young Women’s Empowerment Project in Chicago (YWEP, 2009). YWEP militates against the assumption that researchers and service professionals know more about young women involved in sex work and the underground economy than the women, themselves, know. We don’t need to be saved from ourselves, they assert. Many of the women in their study experienced physical violence, threats, and refusal of services from the institutions meant to protect them; these included police, hospitals, child welfare systems, and social service agencies. YWEP insist

that their members know what is best for them and that, sometimes, this includes trading sex for money (YWEP, 2009). Similarly, Robin D of *Tits & Sass*, a pop culture and news site created by people in the sex industry, ran a series of articles titled “Big Mother is Watching You,” in which she took aim at “anti-sex worker activists” for misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and thereby harming the sex workers they claim to be saving (2015, 2016). A 2016 series on the same news site documented police violence against sex workers of color, a longstanding issue that was brought to the fore when Oklahoma City police officer, Daniel Holtzclaw, was convicted of sexually assaulting and raping multiple African American women. Most of Holtzclaw’s victims were not engaged in prostitution, but his modus operandi is familiar to poor women and women of color who work in the street-based commercial sex trade and have experienced similar forms of victimization by police (Hooker, 2016).

The mismatch between rhetoric and statistics on prostitution and sex trafficking is enough to warrant interrogation. Vocal resistance on the part of those whose best interests anti-sex trafficking activists and researchers claim to represent is an even more compelling indicator that social workers need to be better attuned to the political implications of documenting and re-presenting the lives of others.

Conclusion

Language and representation play powerful roles in the politics of qualitative research. In this essay, we question two potentially harmful notions about the role of social work researchers vis-à-vis marginalized research participants. First, we argued against the commonsense idea that researchers can simply step aside and allow participants’ words to speak for themselves. This practice washes over the role of researchers in framing research questions and disseminating results. It also ignores the possibility that participants will rearticulate behaviors and practices that reinforce marginalization and oppression. In our example, the tacit acceptance of prostitution stigma by participants is harmful for the women in this study (and for women more generally) since this stigma relies on logics that reduce women to their sexuality while blaming them for violence perpetrated against them. But even though we stand by our assertion that prostitution stigma is bad for women—and that we, as women, ought to play a role in shaping discourse about women and sex work—we must also recognize that our research participants may not share our vision about gender and liberation. Additionally, our argument that women who have engaged in sex work should not be stigmatized or feel devalued does little to detract from the shame and devaluation women nonetheless feel while navigating the intricacies of prostitution stigma amid everyday sexism, racism, and policing. Prostitution stigma exists even if we think it should not.

The idea of client/participant as “expert of her own life” is codified in social work education, but an analysis of anti-sex trafficking efforts suggests that social workers do not always enact this ethic. Therefore, our second argument takes aim at the idea that social work researchers can claim expertise about the lives of our participants, including their needs and how they ought to be met. Social workers have a long history of shaping discourse about prostitution, yet many of those whom social workers purport to help resist the terms and tactics used to represent and save sex workers. Perhaps, this ideological mismatch has to do

with the pervasiveness of sexual exploitation in the lives of all women and the shared stake that woman-identified researchers have in defining what is or is not harmful and degrading for women. Maybe the motivations are tacit, even opaque to those driven by them. As Bernstein (2007) and others have noted it, the salaciousness of prostitution amid restrictive sexual norms can be a draw. Studying or intervening in sex trafficking and prostitution allows researchers and activists the opportunity to engage in a world that is morally off-limits without accruing the stigma that attaches to those who actually participate in the sex economy. Such a motivation among social workers would not be surprising. Sex is enticing, oftentimes offensive, visible almost everywhere, and yet remains curiously taboo. To boot, social work education rarely includes content related to sexual behavior and social norms. If not overtly heteronormative, social work education accepts by omission, the idea that healthy sexual behavior ought to occur in dyadic, sentimental, and uncommodified relationships. We have rarely seen social work course content that interrogates the politics of sex under advanced capitalism. Indeed, the problem with social work expertise with regard to sex work may not be that our profession mobilizes expertise; it may be that we simply do not have expertise.

In any case, our analysis of the politics of talking about prostitution shows that language has a real and important impact on social work research and activism. Language meant to translate marginalized voices without alteration, and carefully reshaped language crafted by researchers intent on re-presenting and resisting stigma and oppression has complicated political effects. Both methodological tacks can be used to further social justice, but neither is a surefire route to ethical representation. Participants' words, whether carefully plucked from the data and reported verbatim, or explicitly re-linguaged, can legitimate exploitation, deny marginalized participants agency, and precipitate the very modes of oppression our scholarship is meant to interrupt. Oftentimes words are liberatory and oppressive in the same instance, as our example of survival sex illustrates. There are no easy solutions to this dilemma, but we can be more productive and ethical researchers if we recognize and accept the political diceyness of voice and continually reflect on our re-presentations and their real-world effects. We offer the following questions as a preliminary guide for researchers grappling with the politics and ethics of conducting research with marginalized populations:

- What are the potential political consequences of the language and conceptual frames I use to re-present research participants?
- Do I disagree with or oppose the language or conceptual frames used by some or all of my research participants? If so, why?
- Do my re-presentations of participants (particularly when I disagree with their own language or conceptual frames) adequately account for participants' social locations, especially the ways structural oppressions impact their experiences and perceptions?
- What is my own social location vis-à-vis research participants? What group memberships or identities do I share (or not share) with participants?
- How does my own social location inform my political orientation to research participants' lives and the way I re-present them?

- Who stands to benefit or lose from my re-presentations?

Ultimately, this essay begs the question of whom and what we represent, politically, when we re-present linguistically. Might we rightfully stake a claim to liberating women from harmful constructions of gender without representing the political interests of all of our research participants? This would entail recognizing that researchers use data to promote our own values and politics, even when they do not align with the viewpoints of some or all of our research participants. Representation, after all, means speaking on behalf of a group even though groups frequently lack consensus. Might grappling with the politics of voice prompt us to qualify our claims about client/participant expertise and own up to the reality that we sometimes feel justified in our claims that we know what is best for others? When we find ourselves re-presenting participants in order to represent our own politics or those associated with the social work profession, what does this mean for ethical participant recruitment? Perhaps we should be upfront, not just about our research questions, but also about our values and politics. In the end, there is no simple answer to the question: whom and what do we represent when we claim to be representing others?

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