

# My experience in social research

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## Abstract

Sociologists and, more specifically, sex work researchers comprise a distinct subculture in the scientific research community. While there is now a large and growing literature on sex work there is little research on the community of researchers who produce it. What researchers produce can have a significant impact on policy which in turn can affect occupational health and safety in the industry therefore it is imperative that we understand how knowledge is produced in this sub-discipline. This study is a participant observation case study that centers around the experience of the author and considers the research and publishing ecosystem through the lens of a neophyte researcher who is only tangentially connected to the university system. This study considers the question of whether it is practically possible for those either directly or indirectly involved in the sex industry to publish high quality research and what limitations are imposed on researchers by the publishing industry. Key findings are that it is possible in a limited way to work independently of the university system and that some publishers are willing to publish authors who need to protect their privacy. However, there are significant financial, ethical, and social barriers that must be overcome when producing and publishing peer-reviewed work.

**Keywords:** sociology, research methods, sex work, academic publishing

## Introduction

In the literature that discusses the social dynamics of social research, the concept of the “outsider” researcher has been proposed to describe the experiences of non-majority researchers (Ray, 2019; Strong, 2019; Treitler, 2019). Treitler (2019) describes how women and people of color are underrepresented and underfunded in the sociological research community. This subtle discrimination extends to institutions as well where Strong (2019) describes the phenomenon of name tag screening at conferences in which participants who are not part of prominent institutions can be at a disadvantage at networking events. Strong describes how researchers based in community colleges can also be at a disadvantage when attempting to fund research given the “hierarchies in grant making” in sociology and research outside of peer reviewed journals may not be given the attention it deserves.

What then can we say about researchers who are not part of any research institution? Is there room for research accepted based solely on its own merits? My experience in publishing peer reviewed research shows that, while difficult, it is theoretically possible for individuals outside of colleges and universities to write and publish social research.

Researchers who focus on the sex industry are potentially at a double disadvantage because of the historical stigma surrounding the industry (R. Bowen & Bungay, 2016; Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008; Weitzer, 2018). Any researcher, even if they are not directly involved either as a worker, client, or third party, may not want to be associated by name with the research they produce. The need for privacy can create additional barriers to publishing when publishers insist on authors using their legal name.

An additional burden on outsider researchers can be a lack of support and mentoring. The effect of institutionally facilitated social relationships is essential for early stage researchers such

as Phd students and the social connections between faculty departments can have a significant effect on career path (Burris, 2004) and researchers who have the opportunity to collaborate, publish more (Akbaritabar et al., 2018).

In this article I discuss my experience participating in research on the sex industry and provide evidence that the “caste” system described by Burris (2004) is alive and well in Canadian sex work research. Nevertheless, despite the obstacles I encountered, I was successful in publishing in a peer reviewed journal (Kennedy, 2021) and currently have one article in press (Kennedy, 2023a) and one in the second round of peer review (Kennedy, 2023b). I hope that interested readers who would like to engage in social research will find this article a useful guide to publishing that research.

## My involvement in sex industry research

My first introduction to the sex work research community in Canada occurred in 2007 when I started collecting classified ads from the Craigslist.com “erotic services” (ers) section. Described in previous research (Chan et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2021), Craigslist.com was one of the first venues where sex workers could advertise for free online. My research contact, John Lowman (Vancouver Sun, 2022) (see also <https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/John-Lowman-76213974>), a Professor at Simon Fraser University at the time, was enthusiastic about the information that this could provide on a hitherto underrepresented population of sex workers. However, he did not have the time to be directly involved and connected me with another instructor at SFU who was interested in exploring what we could learn from this growing collection of advertising data.

Naively I thought that they would prioritize working on this as, at the time, little had been written about this population of sex workers. Furthermore the advertising data added to data that John Lowman had collected in the 1980s on the prevalence of street prostitution in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>. However, after about two years with no indication that any work was planned, I stopped the pilot data collection of Craigslist.

In the meantime the Bedford decision (*Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford*, 2013; Pivot Legal Society, 2013) prompted the Canadian government to replace the existing criminal code provisions against prostitution with a new legal framework (Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014 (PCEPA) ; Perrin, 2014) that made the purchase of sexual services illegal for the first time in Canada effectively ignoring the recommendations of sex work activists (Pivot Legal Society, 2006), many Canadian researchers (Lazarus, 2022), and the courts (Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014 (PCEPA)). In addition, it severely hampered sex workers' ability to advertise online. At the same time the contact that John Lowman connected me with had gotten funding to do a larger study of online advertising as part of the *Sex, Power, Agency, Consent, Environment and Safety Project (SPACES)* which had been initiated in 2012 at the University of British Columbia to explore health and safety issues experienced by off-street sex workers.(SPACES Team, 2016). In November 2014, I resumed downloading data for them to use this time from a larger group of websites recommended by their advisors. This continued for a year and I provided my collaborator with the collected data and waited to see what would come of it. Once again this was to be in vain as nothing has been published even years after data collection had ceased.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately this pioneering research appears to not be available online but may still be available in hard copy at the Vancouver Public Library.

I found out later that I was never included on the ethics proposal for this study. This seemed odd given that, while publicly available does not require ethics approval to gather and analyze, as one of the main people handling this data I should have been included as part of the study team. While likely inadvertent, it turned out that this pattern of marginalization would repeat itself.

By 2021 I had two years of data from Vancouver Craigslist ers (March 2007 to March 2009) and two years of data from the sites recommended by the SPACES advisors (November 2014 to December 2016). The latter data set was to become the basis for the Silent Majority paper (Kennedy, 2022). I asked my research contact whether they would be willing to collaborate on writing up findings and initially they were supportive, providing references and reading initial drafts of the paper. However, the atmosphere of cooperation evaporated after I sent an initial draft for review to PLOS ONE. When I shared the response from the PLOS ONE reviewers with my collaborator, I was told that they “would have rejected it” and I was strongly discouraged from pursuing publication. Other reactions from researchers connected to this former collaborator have also been negative. Other responses included being told that I was “not authorized” to write on this topic or a connected researcher declining to meet to discuss the research.

Why did I get this response? I had been in a support role gathering data for use by other researchers initially and apparently I had crossed an invisible boundary by attempting to publish my own work. Originally, I had little understanding of how research works with professional researchers. Even when researchers receive high annual salaries as tenured faculty, they typically compete for grants and money appears to have been the gating condition for any research to go forward in this case. In the American Sociological Association (ASA) ethics code (American

Sociological Association, 2018) researchers are expected to only publish research they are qualified to do. However, there can be significant barriers to acquire official qualifications for many marginalized groups (Treitler, 2019). Furthermore, there are research areas where in reality nobody is qualified. The latter is to be expected in scientific research. When grant money is involved, as was the case here, there is a tacit understanding between the funder and the grant recipients that the recipients are capable of completing the funded work. Clearly a team member, who originally only had a functional role transitioning to author research, undermines the notion that the original grant recipients are qualified to undertake the research when they had not succeeded in publishing.

The rejection of the Silent Majority paper by some researchers may also be attributed to its critical view of Canadian research which, while providing important data, routinely excludes many workers and likely over-represents minority groups in the industry. It should be noted that this rejection has not been universal. In fact, decriminalization activists see this archival research as pivotal evidence showing that sex work is not a marginal phenomenon in Canadian society and that Canadian sex workers by and large dictate their involvement in the industry.

It took over 15 years from the time of the preliminary Craigslist study to publication. Should it have taken this long? I think not. This 15 year delay means that there are still many unanswered questions. It may be too late: with the advent of large-scale efforts to identify sex workers online (Dimas et al., 2022), it has become increasingly difficult if not impossible to automatically collect the ad data that was used for my research. While preventing the identification of online advertisers is laudable as a step towards protecting their privacy, these changes will severely hamper archival research in the future. Researchers who wish to gain a

truly representative understanding of the sex industry will have to evolve methods that are effective in this challenging environment.

## What to know when you do social research

The following sections consider a series of topics that are relevant for anyone attempting to publish research on the sex industry. While I mainly consider these from my experience, these topics likely affect all researchers involved in social research.

### Privacy can be tricky

I am not using my legal name for the purposes of publication. Why is this the case? There could be many reasons. Certainly anyone with a direct connection with the industry, especially those directly targeted by the law in Canada, would be ill advised to use their legal identity when publishing. Sex workers, who can legally practice in Canada, may also want to hide their identity. Many workers have other employment (R. R. Bowen, 2015; Cunningham & Kendall, 2017; Pitcher, 2015) and indicating that they are sex workers in published research could jeopardize that employment or negatively affect loved ones. In Canada, the PCEPA is worded in such a way that anyone with any financial links with a sex worker could be charged under the law. However, even someone with no direct connection to the industry might have difficulty explaining to employers, friends, or family why they are involved in such research.

How did journals react? Through the course of over two years (2021-2024) I have been in contact with four journals and one preprint site. The journals were: PLOS ONE, the Journal of Sex Research, Culture and Sexuality, and Culture, Health and Sexuality. The preprint site was SocArXiv (via <https://osf.io/>). The preprint site was the easiest to publish with, requiring only



moderation. However, they were the first to insist that I had to create an “identity” as an author, as they refused to publish under the organizational name Sex Work Population Project (website <https://populationproject.ca/> ). A further complication is the requirement by academic journals for an ORCID ID (<https://orcid.org/>) and “institutional context” which present potential financial and logistical hurdles for researchers who are not already part of an existing institutional context.

The response from peer reviewed journals ranged from outright rejection from Journal of Sex Research, despite the fact they had already published related research (Makbul et al., 2023; Moorman & Harrison, 2016), through rejecting the use of a pseudonym by Sexuality and Culture where the editor in chief said “If a topic is not worth authorship, it is not worth publication.” Typically rejections of this sort were quick, a matter of a day or two. Fortunately, this was not consistently the case: both PLOS ONE and Sexuality, Health and Culture accepted manuscripts for review knowing that I was not using my legal name.

Clearly, in academic publishing, there is a lack of standards for protecting the identities of authors who may be stigmatized by their association with research. Journals requiring authors to use their legal names have not necessarily prevented fraudulent research from being published (Wilson, 2020). Wilson (2020) describes a number of techniques for combating fraud independent of identifying authors of which public data repositories and external review are discussed below. However, the only true way to determine if evidence in scientific research is valid is replication of results. Any provision that attempts to skirt around this requirement is effectively anti-scientific.

## Peer mentoring and reviews

In my experience of writing and publishing research on the sex industry peer mentoring was virtually non-existent. With a few exceptions, most enquiries via email or social media are never responded to and no researchers attempted to contact me after publishing my research. It is possible that email communications could be ignored when researchers are subject to high volumes of spam, a common occurrence for corresponding authors when their email addresses are exposed in academic journals. However, this lack of response could also be symptomatic of the social exclusion described by others when researchers are not seen as part of the mainstream research community (Akbaritabar et al., 2020; Burris, 2004; Strong, 2019).

There were some exceptions to the rule. Notable were Ron Weitzer Emeritus Professor of Sociology at George Washington University and Gillian Abel Professor at the University of Otago who both read over early manuscripts and provided advice and encouragement. Neither of these distinguished researchers could have known of me at the time they read the manuscripts. There were others as well, including friends and colleagues outside of the sex work research community who provided early reviews, and my original collaborator did in fact provide useful feedback on very early versions of the *Silent Majority*. While this was encouraging, what was lacking for me, and this may be the case for many in my situation, was the ability to discuss research issues in depth. This lack of discussion meant that I had to rely on peer review to better understand issues with preliminary versions of my research.

What is this peer review process really like? Firstly, getting a response from a journal, when they are willing to send work out for review, can take a long time. The initial submission of the *Silent Majority* paper to PLOS ONE in 2022 took over four months to be reviewed, *Culture, Health and Sexuality* took around three months, however, later submissions to PLOS ONE in

2023 took two months each. Secondly, I wasn't prepared for the emotional experience of reading reviewer responses. The most difficult was when the decision was to reject. It would take me a few days before I could go back and read the reviews. The strategy I adopted when this happened was to pretend the paper hadn't been rejected and respond to the reviewers, updating a new version of the paper in the process. This had the practical purpose of preventing the same response if I chose to resubmit the paper. However, this was also important as, given my lack of experience, addressing reviewer comments was one of the principal ways I was learning the discipline of writing and publishing. Even when the decision required a revision this could be, as described above, a very stressful experience to anyone unfamiliar with the cultural practices and requirements of academic journals. Journals articles conform to a very specific format which can be confusing to first time writers. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, ethical considerations have to be accounted for when publishing peer reviewed research. Anyone outside of an institution with an Ethical Review Board (ERB) will have difficulty getting research published that is not exempt from ethical review. The ethics guidelines of the American Sociological Association and Canadian Sociology Association can be useful for judging whether any given research project conforms to currently accepted ethics standards (American Sociological Association, 2018; CSA-SCS Policy, Ethics, and Professional Concerns Subcommittee, 2018).

Up to this point I have had twelve reviewers comment on my work as part of blinded reviews.<sup>2</sup> Even when the article is allowed to move forward, some reviewers can be frustratingly terse. This was the case for three of the twelve. Some reviewers can let their own preferences take precedence over what is relevant for the research, the case for four. This was particularly true of the Meaning of "No" paper (Kennedy, 2023b) where the subject matter was more

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<sup>2</sup> See the Supplemental materials section for a chronological listing of reviews with author responses.

controversial than in the others. In two cases the reviewers made mistakes. However, in many cases, even when the research was rejected, reviewers often provided very detailed, actionable feedback that made it much easier to know what needed to be added, clarified, or removed. In both the Silent Majority and Meaning of “No” papers, reviews inspired better, more precise numerical analyses significantly improving the end result.

What did the reviewers identify as problems in my submissions? I would say that the bulk of the comments especially after the original Silent Majority submission related to the organization of the document. Less common but very important were comments on the statistical analyses. A few reviewers commented on my writing style. Lastly, some reviewers disagreed with some of the positions I had taken. Responding to the reviewers typically took between one and four weeks working part-time.

There is clearly a need for peer review outside of academic journals. In particular reviewers should be rated similar to how Stack Exchange (<https://stackexchange.com/>) anonymously rates members who answer questions on their network. My experience with reviewers is, while many make a sincere effort, I got, similar to the response from my former collaborator, a sense that some were engaging in gatekeeping. Given that the peer review process is blinded, this gatekeeping may reflect the cultural expectations of social researchers described in (Burriss, 2004). Indeed, all of the issues flagged by my reviewers were easily remedied in a few days or weeks working part-time. Standards clearly need to be established on what criteria are acceptable for accepting or rejecting research.

I would be remiss for not acknowledging the support of sex work activists who came forward after the publication of the Silent Majority. As early reviewers of subsequent research

they provided invaluable advice. Furthermore, their interest in my research indicated that it was relevant.

## Costs and technology

Apart from institutional hurdles that need to be overcome, the cost of publishing research can be prohibitive. For the Silent Majority paper, apart from funding a website for the research<sup>3</sup> (CAD \$978), the main cost was the PLOS ONE publication fee (CAD \$2378). In addition to these hard costs, I estimate that the unpaid labor of working part-time over a two and a half year period could have amounted to approximately CAD \$27450 (based on a rate of CAD \$25/hour averaging 2 hours per day from 2021-05-15 to 2022-11-15). Researchers outside of institutional settings who are self funded are faced with the conundrum of either not having to pay to publish but having no access to their work after it is published or high up front publishing costs.

The cost of publishing and disseminating research may be high but there are many free tools available for researchers that make it possible to manage research projects. These include Google Docs (<https://docs.google.com>) for collaborating on documents, Zotero (Zotero, 2024) for managing references, and Open Science Foundation (<https://osf.io/>) which provides a free to use project management environment for supplemental materials and related project data and files. Google Docs has modest support for academic articles, such as line numbering and a basic citation manager, and can be used with Zotero as a plugin. Being able to share and get comments on early drafts of my research documents was essential.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://populationproject.ca/>

Environments such as OSF also facilitate data sharing. This is a requirement for some journals such as PLOS ONE. Data sharing allows for replication of results particularly when the original data is unavailable, an essential component of the scientific process as discussed above.

Furthermore, my research would not have been possible without free to use open source technologies. These ranged from the freely available Ubuntu operating system including tools for downloading web data such as `wget` and `curl`; languages that make processing text relatively concise such as Perl (Wall, 2019) and Python (Van Rossum & Drake, 2009) and Python's associated toolkits for processing images (Khelifi & Jiang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2016); the R environment for statistical analyses (R Core Team, 2021); MariaDB for flexible data storage (MariaDB & Widenius, 2017); and QualCoder a free to use replacement for NVivo for managing qualitative research (Curtain, 2023). In addition to these tools, the Git version control environment (*Git*, 2020) and GitLab (<https://gitlab.com/>) simplified management and dissemination of source code.

One hidden cost of research is journal access. While there are now many open access journals such as PLOS ONE, most of the reference materials I used would not be available without access to an academic library. In my case, I had been volunteering at a lab for a number of years and was able to get library access through my work in the lab. For researchers without this access, publishing research may be difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, there are tools available such as Inciteful (<https://inciteful.xyz>) and Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com>) that can be used by researchers to find relevant research without paying high up front fees to academic journals. All journals make abstracts, which typically summarize the results reported in research, available for free.

## Ethical concerns

Ethical standards are essential if social research is not to exacerbate the harms it often describes. Like the peer review of research results, peer review of research design is a requirement for most studies in the social sciences. In an institutional setting typically these comprise Ethics Review Boards.

In my volunteer lab work I have seen this process in action. From what I have seen the review process essentially stops once a study has been approved and there is no practical oversight of the implementation of the proposed study design. While passing an ethics review forces researchers to consider this dimension in their research, in practice there is little to stop researchers from crossing ethical boundaries.

For researchers outside of an institutional context, there appears to be no way for researchers to get ethical reviews of study designs. This significantly limits the research that can be carried out. For example, even with adequate funding, no research that involves interaction with human participants is possible either directly, such as in qualitative interview studies, or indirectly, such as in qualitative questionnaire-based studies. However, there are some types of studies that are exempt from ethical review according to ASA and CSA-ACS guidelines. For example, studies that review existing research and studies that involve participants who would have no reasonable expectation of privacy are exempt. Archival research on publicly available internet data is an example of the latter.

Nevertheless, in my research, I am collecting data that contains personally identifying information. Given that data sharing is an important component of my research, anonymizing data as much as possible is required. Best practices include sharing the least amount of data to

reproduce results, changing any identifiers that could be traced back to the original sources, and having others review the anonymized data prior to publication.

Ethics review, like peer review, would have to be decentralized if researchers outside of institutions are to be able to contribute to the literature. However, unlike peer review, it may be possible to automate this process somewhat with expert systems. For example, a questionnaire could identify what type of research is being carried out and check that the researchers are following a prescribed set of guidelines before allowing a research project to go forward. This information would then be shared with a prospective publisher as part of the editorial review process.

## Discussion and conclusions

I have discussed my experience as a sex industry researcher mostly working outside of the institutional context. My experience has highlighted some of the inequities and opportunities that “outsider” researchers may experience. Indeed it is possible in a limited way for researchers in this area who are not associated with an institution to produce and publish in peer reviewed journals.

Many of the issues described above are a direct result of the social organization of research internationally. The inequities I experienced are shared by many researchers (Burriss, 2004; Ray, 2019; Strong, 2019). It is worth noting that highly ranked institutions do not necessarily produce more research than lower ranked institutions (Akbaritabar et al., 2018; Burriss, 2004) and emergent “class” behavior among social scientists may be a cause of social fragmentation in the social sciences (Akbaritabar et al., 2020).



My experience creating research over the last two and a half years has been a frustrating process. Forging any kind of exchange of ideas beyond a superficial level has not happened within the research community. The researchers who were skeptical of my research did not communicate their concerns with me. In my experience researchers, especially senior researchers, can have strong opinions which may not be supported by evidence.

On a political level it appears that, for some Canadian researchers, there is little urgency on their part to work towards decriminalization. Specifically in a political movement with few financial resources at its disposal, should research funding gate the accumulation of evidence? Furthermore, after reading many research reports on the sex industry there seems to be an overemphasis of the perspectives of specific groups, typically workers, and reduced emphasis on other equally important populations involved in the industry. This can only result in dysfunctional policy.

The majority of sex industry studies are relatively small-scale qualitative studies that may not accurately represent the industry. Compared to the large quantity of research using internet sources supporting law enforcement (Dimas et al., 2022) there appears to be only a handful of studies using sufficiently large datasets that provide a more representative picture of the industry (see Kennedy, 2023b Introduction). This lack of research may be a result of lack of training in the use of archival materials in social research, perhaps echoing the lack of prestige afforded teaching in the social sciences in general (Strong, 2019).

The lack of access to paywalled academic research discussed above, much of which is government funded in Canada (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023), is a significant structural inequity. While this has not gone unnoticed, for example, the European Union Plan S proposes to greatly expand the availability of academic research (Else, 2018), the high cost of

paywalled research currently prevents researchers outside of institutional settings from accessing it. This not only affects researchers but also negatively impacts those advocating political change.

One solution may be, as was the case for myself, that volunteer work as a research assistant can address some structural inequities. Hands-on experience producing and disseminating research is essential to learn the culture and processes involved. For prospective researchers who are interested in learning, some research projects have involved sex workers or other experiential people in the research process (for example Benoit & Millar, 2001; Bernier, 2022; Machat et al., 2022). Often these projects are qualitative research looking for participants. Alternatively NGOs often publish their own research (for example Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), n.d.; Lam, 2020) and may be open to experiential people getting involved.

Many of the barriers for researchers outside of institutions might be resolved by decentralizing the review process. Peer review is typically voluntary and tied to the specific journal where a paper was submitted to. Providing peer review outside of the context of publications could make the process more efficient and more transparent. Peer reviewers could develop a reputation and authors could be assured that the reviewer was not simply “going through the motions” when doing a review. Decentralizing the review process could also serve as the basis for developing standards for peer reviews.

In sex industry research experiential people provide critical roles in both producing and, as advisors, reviewing research. For their voices to be heard, a significant shift in the organization of research is needed that specifically addresses their needs.

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No potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article are declared.

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## Supplemental materials

### Review history in chronological order:

Links are to the original Google Docs documents.

1. [The Silent Majority Response to Reviewers](#)
2. [The Silent Majority Response to Reviewers 2](#)
3. [Meaning of "No": Culture, Health and Sexuality - Decision on Manuscript ID TCHS-2023-0049](#)
4. [Meaning of "No": Culture, Health and Sexuality - Decision on Manuscript ID TCHS-2023-0203](#)



5. [Response to Reviewers PONE-D-23-35872 Estimating turnover and industry longevity of Canadian sex workers](#)
6. [Response to Reviewers PONE-D-23-33995 The Changing Meaning Of “No” In Canadian Sex Work](#)