

<CN> Chapter Seven

<A> Talking and Acting for Our Rights

 The Interview in an Action-Research Setting

<CA> Ana Lopes

<FL> This chapter draws upon an action-research project in which the ethnographer became a participant and facilitator of a collective effort that led to the unionisation of sex workers in the UK. It is within this context that I will explore the way in which the interview in action-research settings can be used as a tool for action planning and action generation, as well as ‘authentic’ data generation. As I turned from ethnographer to action researcher, I became a co-producer or co-generator of knowledge that is relevant for action. I ask, in this chapter, to what extent can the agenda of the interview be appropriated by those being interviewed, as a tool to critically understand structures of power and seek social change?

In addition, within the action-research context, where power relations are challenged, and interviewer and interviewees share a practical/political agenda, the interviewer sometimes becomes the interviewee. What happens then? Can the interview in this context be used as a tool for the development of a ‘bottom-up’ anthropology?

This chapter will contextualise the unionisation of sex workers in the UK within an action-research project. To do so, I must begin by briefly outlining the development of the sex workers’ rights movement.

The research project explored here had a practical result, leading to the first successful attempt at unionising sex workers in the UK. This initiative, however, appears as

part of a wider movement for sex workers' rights. I will now outline the key moments of this movement that underpin the unionisation of sex workers in the UK.

<A>**The Sex Workers' Rights Movement**

<FL>The sex workers' rights movement is usually understood as having started in the 1970s in Europe and the United States. It is important, however, to note that sex workers have mobilised, more or less formally, in many different parts of the world, for more than a century (Doezema and Kempadoo 1998). In Europe, the sex workers' rights movement became visible in 1975 – as prostitutes occupied a church in Lyons, France, in order to draw public attention to police harassment and the injustice of existing laws. Shortly after, Claude Jaget (1980) published a key work on prostitutes' rights: *Prostitutes: Our Life*.

In the United States (San Francisco), Margot St James, who was a former prostitute, formed COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in 1973. She is widely viewed as the founder of the modern sex workers' movement, as COYOTE was the first organisation in the Western world to call for sex workers' agency in the struggle for their rights – rather than relying heavily on allies, usually feminist campaigners or theorists.

Sex workers in the state of New South Wales, Australia, were the first to get recognition within the trades union movement, as they were officially recognised by the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union. This achievement by Australian sex workers was followed by the establishment of a closed-shop union in a peep show club in San Francisco, the Lusty Lady.

Nowadays, sex workers are officially unionised in countries such as Argentina, the Netherlands and Greece, as well as in the United Kingdom. In Argentina, the association of female sex workers AMMAR (Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices Argentinas), founded in 1995, is officially affiliated to the National Workers' Union CTA (Central de Trabajadores

Argentinos). This national union counts 1.5 million members. AMMAR has nine branches across Argentina (see Hardy 2010).

In the UK, sex workers have entered the mainstream union movement through an affiliation of the collective International Union of Sex Workers into the general union GMB. Before discussing this development, I will briefly sketch out the history of sex workers' formal organising in this country.

In the mid 1970s, Helen Buckingham established herself as the main spokesperson for prostitutes in Britain. She was a high-class escort, bankrupted in 1975 by the Inland Revenue after they demanded tax payments based on her earnings from prostitution. Buckingham claimed that if the government wanted to tax her, it must also allow her to work legally. She became a researcher and one of the main subjects for Jeremy Sandford's (1975) book *Prostitutes*. Subsequently, Buckingham and others involved in Sandford's research launched PUSSE (Prostitutes United for Social and Sexual Integration). The group later changed its name to PLAN (Prostitution Laws Are Non-sense). She later allied herself to Selma James to form the ECP (English Collective of Prostitutes).

The ECP emerged from within the Wages for Housework Campaign, and it follows a class-based analysis, from which their abolitionist stance follows. Moreover, their position is contradictory insofar as they call for unpaid labour (housework) to become paid labour, while simultaneously calling for a form of paid labour (sex work) to be abolished – therefore, to become unpaid. Together with its sister US-based organisation, the US_PROStitutes Collective it forms the International Collective of Prostitutes (English Collective of Prostitutes 1997: 83).

The most successful campaign for the repeal of prostitution laws was led by PROS, Programme for the Reform of Laws on Soliciting. This loose national alliance was first established in Birmingham in 1976 by a group of sex workers, social workers and a lawyer.

Later, PROS groups would be set up in different cities in the UK. The organisation's objective was to campaign on behalf of street prostitutes and to abolish imprisonment for loitering and soliciting. Its far-reaching achievement was to repeal the law that prohibited sex workers to solicit clients on the streets. Due to a shift in public opinion that had begun to see sex workers as victims rather than criminals, PROS was successful in repealing the legislation that allowed imprisonment for soliciting in the early 1980s. Thus, although the non-payment of fines for soliciting and new pieces of legislation might result in imprisonment, sex workers now had time to make arrangements for themselves and their children, before they are effectively arrested.

PROS was also responsible for starting the debate about unionisation of sex workers in the UK. Their discussion raised both negative and positive reactions from the general public and union officers. In fact, in 1981, PROS received an encouraging letter from a local branch of the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) that read:

<EXT>At our branch meeting the question of PROS was raised and surprisingly received a very sympathetic hearing. It certainly showed how public opinion has changed. Could you tell us what you think we should aim for? The total remission of all laws relating to prostitution or were you thinking of putting some act in to control it? If we start at branch level now, we should be able to raise the matter at the [19]82 Labour Party Conference, the trouble with democracy is it works slow.
(cited in McLeod 1982: 144)

<FL>Sex workers would only finally gain membership of an official union some twenty years later. By the time that happened, PROS was no longer active as an organisation. Unionisation and an emphasis on labour rights is only one possible way for sex workers' organisation and self-empowerment. In this case, it was facilitated by an academically framed

action-research project. In the following section I will outline how the unionisation of sex workers in the UK came about in the context of an action research project.

<A>**The International Union of Sex Workers and Action Research**

<FL>The action-research project I am discussing here can be understood as going through three distinct phases: a pilot phase, unofficial organisation and official unionisation. The first phase – the pilot phase – was based on participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

When I first planned my Ph.D. research project I began by collecting a sample of pilot interviews in which I consulted potential participants on what topics they thought were useful to research. I planned to carry out orthodox anthropological research, making use of the traditional ethnographic methods: observation, ethnographic interviews and field notes (e.g., Spradley 1979).

In order to meet potential participants I approached The Sexual Freedom Coalition (SFC), a group established in London in 1996 that campaigns for the abolition of laws that limit people's freedom of expression of sexuality. This group was relevant to my research because many of its members were sex workers and they were actively campaigning for the legalisation of prostitution. It was through SFC coordinators and at SFC meetings that I met and talked to sex workers who were members of this group. I interviewed three sex-worker members of the SFC and observed and accompanied one of them in her work as a striptease dancer.

The aim of this pilot phase was to try to coordinate the needs of sex workers and the goals of the ethnography: to gain an understanding of the sex industry through the perspective of sex workers themselves. However, what I found from my pilot interviews was more than a research topic. I found that urgent action was needed. Sex workers needed to organise. In the words of a dancer I interviewed at the time:

<EXT>What we need is a platform. The problem is not with the work itself, but our lives could be better. The public has to understand that we're not seedy, we do this for a living.

<FL>In order to address this, I called a meeting or focus group to which all interviewees were invited as well as potential allies: mostly activists and fellow students. The result of this meeting was the emergence of an association called the 'International Union of Sex Workers'. From that moment, I took on the role of catalyst for action and was a resource for the group. As a researcher, my 'mandate' was one of facilitating the establishment of a platform from which sex workers could demand their rights.

During this second phase of the action-research project, this informal organisation campaigned for labour rights, especially the right to join a recognised union and the mainstream trades union movement. A basic website was set up, which in itself triggered international interest and links with sex-worker organisations all over the world. An electronic discussion list to which sex workers and supporters could sign up contributed to strengthening those links, and became an important strategising, communication and planning tool. A magazine, *R.E.S.P.E.C.T. (Rights and Equality for Sex Professionals and Employees in Connected Trades)* featuring articles by sex workers and directed at sex workers was also published and distributed both nationally and internationally.

The first issue, which came out in June 2000, featured an article written by Rona, one of the group's members. In the article Rona expresses her views on why sex workers should unionise.

<EXT>Yes it is a profession – I believe a perfectly respectable profession, and should be viewed as such in the same way as a teacher, accountant or anyone else. I believe that the first step is to obtain recognition for sex-workers as legitimate workers in a legitimate

industry and profession. The first move is to form a union and then press for the same rights as other workers enjoy. (Rona 2000: 4)

Writing and publishing this first issue helped us establish some important links, nationally as well as internationally. Participating and reporting on the May Day demonstration that took place in London in 2000 made us reflect on issues of pride and ways to break up the stigma attached to sex workers. The editorial of the second issue of *Respect* reads:

<EXT>In this number, we reinforce the theme of pride. For as long as we are made to feel ashamed of the work we do, there is no way sex-workers can assert our rights. (International Union of Sex Workers [IUSW], 2002)

During this developmental phase, the IUSW had a marked presence in several demonstrations and parades in London. Such participation signalled support for the events or causes they represented and also aimed at building up visibility for sex-worker activism.

In a third phase, and after several attempts to gain official union recognition, negotiations began between the IUSW and the GMB with the view to forming the first officially recognised sex-workers' union branch in Britain. Gaining official recognition as a union had always been a priority of the IUSW. In July 2001, the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights invited us to the Gay and Lesbian TUC (Trades Union Congress) Conference that took place in London. I took this opportunity to meet with the several gay and lesbian union officers and discuss the possibility of TUC recognition for our recently created sex workers' union.

The rationale behind the move was the belief that gay and lesbian officers would be more sympathetic to the sex workers' cause than other union officers. We drew parallels between the sex worker and gay population: both groups had a history of social stigma;

homosexual acts had been illegal until the 1960s and the removal of its illegality had greatly aided the decrease of stigma and the establishment of rights. Sex workers look to the decriminalisation of their work as key to eradicating the discrimination they are victims of.

Although the conference was fruitful in terms of networking with different unions, no signs of TUC recognition resulted from it. Most officers I approached were interested in our case and sympathetic on an individual level, but no headway was made in terms of getting unions interested in representing our group of workers.

In November 2001, I attended the No Sweat annual conference. No Sweat is a worldwide organisation that campaigns against sweatshop labour. The term sweatshop refers to unsafe working places where workers labour for very long hours and for very low pay. No Sweat aims to publicise, expose and eradicate sweatshop employment. They claim that the way forward is to help unionise sweatshops and that joining a union is the way to enforce existing laws and extend labour rights.

At the conference, a GMB (British general union) London region officer presented a new GMB campaign to unionise sweatshop labourers working in East London. The GMB started as the General and Municipal Boilermakers union but after a series of amalgamations it sees itself as a general union and represents workers from a diversity of industries and sectors. It is the third largest union in the UK, with around 600, 000 members. The campaign presented at the conference counted on the support of No Sweat. The officer argued that it was the duty and responsibility of a general union like the GMB to organise sweatshop workers and to play an important role in helping to minimise their exploitation and improve their working conditions. The similarities with the sex industry became obvious to me.

The GMB were proposing to empower sweatshop workers – not to simply close down the factories and let the workers face unemployment. Likewise, the IUSW campaigns for the

establishment of labour rights in the sex industry, protection from exploitation and the eradication of violence and harassment – not the eradication of the whole sex industry.

At the end of the conference I approached the GMB officer, introduced the IUSW and requested the GMB's help in bringing our organisation onto an official footing. I was impressed by the seriousness of his response. Later, he would confess that, at first, he thought he was being filmed for 'Candid Camera'!¹

Given the opportunity to join one of the biggest mainstream unions in the UK, the IUSW organised a general meeting to which sex workers and allies were invited in order to discuss whether this was desirable and beneficial for sex workers in general. This meeting was intended to be an open meeting – the IUSW felt that it was a small and relatively new organisation, and could not therefore claim to represent the whole sex-worker community. A great effort was put into publicising the meeting.

This historic meeting took place on 2 March 2002 and was attended by over seventy people. There were representatives of most sectors of the sex industry – from prostitution, to striptease, pornography and phone-sex workers. Although most sex workers present were women, there were also three male sex workers who took part. There were several representatives of service-providing agencies, as well as clients of sex workers. After presentations from a representative of Red Thread, a sex workers' collective based in Amsterdam that had recently affiliated to a Dutch union, and GMB officers and a general discussion, there was a unanimous vote that the sex workers' branch should be formed.

In joining the GMB, a basic labour right was attained for all sex workers in the UK: the right to join and be represented by a recognised union. Much was to be learned by both sides. IUSW activists knew little about union organisation and structure; on the other hand, the GMB officers who helped get the branch off the ground knew little about the realities of the sex industry and the needs of different groups of sex workers.

Branch membership fluctuated over the years. Nowadays it counts over eighty members. They are men and women, biological or transgender, who work in several sectors of the industry. Over the years, the branch has made significant achievements: it has gained union recognition in two different table dancing clubs; it has won a court case on behalf of an unfairly dismissed sex worker; it has given legal help to many sex workers throughout the country; it has offered training (including for exiting the industry) to many sex workers; it has created a safe space for sex workers to organise, meet and talk; and it has given sex workers an organised voice through which to reach the public and the government. Since its inception, other groups and organisations that campaign for sex workers' rights have been founded and developed.

<A>Action Research

Origins and Processes

<FL>The term 'action research' was coined by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1946 to describe research leading to social action. Lewin (1946) attempted to improve industrial relations and minimise hostility between different racial groups in the United States in the 1940s. He described his problem-solving perspective on research as a spiral of steps, each one comprising the stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

This 'action research spiral' is Lewin's main legacy to action researchers.

Action research is also linked to the work of Paulo Freire and his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), which emphasises dialogue, informed action, and educational activity based on the lived experiences of the participants, community enhancement and *conscientização* – a process by which individuals perform in-depth analysis of their own realities. He insisted that knowledge must be created with people and not imparted to them. Freire was a founder of what is now known as critical pedagogy.

Action research has also been influenced by critical theory, which argues for the recognition of the role of values and beliefs. Critical theory asks how a situation can be understood in order to change it. Action research goes further by asking how it can be changed (McNiff and Whitehead 2006).

Feminist theories, epistemologies and methodologies have also inspired many action-research projects. The metaphor of ‘giving a voice’ to those who have been marginalised and silenced in knowledge-creation is common to feminist and action research, as is the idea of embracing experience as a source of legitimate knowledge (Maguire 2001).

The action-research process is cyclical and it is usually visually represented as a circle or spiral (Lewin 1948; Stringer 1999). However, these visual representations fail to convey the nature of the action-research process, as they erroneously imply that those involved in the action-research process ‘return to the point of departure’. They are unable to convey the idea of the process as dynamic and progressive.

Instead, I see the action-research process as a wave: action research embodies a pattern (observation – planning – action), but it is one that moves the situation forward. In fact, action researchers and participants never find themselves back at the starting point, as they are necessarily changing their own situation in the process. Within this process, we start by observing and reflecting on the situation and the possibilities available then collaboratively plan our action. Following action and its evaluation, we are ready to, again, observe and reflect on the new situation we find ourselves in, starting a new wave, rippling outwards from the first.

<Insert Figure 7.1>

Figure 7.1: Action-research process as a wave

In our common struggle for unionisation of sex workers, we found ourselves going through a wave-like process. We would observe and meditate on the situation and the possibilities available; consequently we would plan our action then act and evaluate our action. This would be the starting point for new observation and reflection on the situation and we would follow the same process again, this time on a different level, starting a new wave.

The lack of labour rights within the sex industry was the initial problem (that was highlighted in all my pilot interviews) that triggered the action-research project described in this chapter. That observation led to the awareness of the lack of union representation for sex workers. Thus, the plan designed by the initial group of participants led to the action of setting up a union to represent those who work in the sex industry.

The second major wave of action in this project was triggered by the important realisation that, although the initial problem had been ‘solved’ – that is, there was now a union to represent sex workers’ interests – there was a significant limitation to the effectiveness of such a union, since it was an informal organisation, not recognised by the appropriate body, the Trades Union Congress (TUC). One of the strategies developed by the group of participants was to seek membership in official, existing unions, which led to the emergence of a sex-worker branch in the GMB.

This process necessarily gains a life of its own, independent of the action researcher. Since the activities prompted by action research are fully integrated in the group’s activities, they are likely to be ongoing after the research has been ‘written up’. In fact, although I and other original project participants are no longer involved in the sex workers’ rights movement in this country, the union that resulted from this action-research project continues to grow and develop.

Nevertheless, it is clear that action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step-by-step to the end of a process (Ojan and Smulyan 1989: 176; Stringer 1999). As the project developed, the participants and I found ourselves working backwards through the stages, rethinking interpretations, skipping steps and sometimes making radical changes in direction.

As an action researcher my role was not one of a detached observer, however, but that of an ‘experiencing subject’ (Paget 1993) embarking on a systematic knowledge quest for social change. While not aspiring to objectivity, action-research approaches demand that those involved are reflexive and explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created (Reason and Bradbury 2001). The notion of validity in action research challenges mainstream research cultures. In fact, action research values the process of research, as much as its products and its ‘success’ is based to a large degree on how much participants’ knowledge and capacities are developed within the process (Kindon, Pain and Kesby 2007).

Action research, which at its core contains a vision of transformation for social justice, represents an epistemological challenge to mainstream research traditions. By assuming that those who have been most systematically excluded carry the most valuable wisdom about themselves and their own lives, action research is a counter-hegemonic approach that fundamentally challenges the role and value of the expert in knowledge production.

<A>**What is Action Research?**

<FL>Action research evades simple definition, since there are so many strands and traditions within this methodological approach. Although it has been used in the sex industry before, this project is the first application of action research to the movement for sex workers’ rights.

There are many traditions within action research, and in fact there is no consensus as to what exactly action research is. However, the tradition that I have followed in the course of my research project derives from the tradition of community-based, emancipatory action research. Within the context of community-based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does research but that of a resource person who acts as a catalyst, who stimulates people to change. I have been a catalyst for action and a resource person, available to, and at the service of, a group of sex worker activists and advocates – rather than an outsider/observer.

In *Handbook of Action Research*, Reason and Bradbury (2001: 1) define action research as ‘a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes’. Action research is based on the assumption that the mere recording of events and formulation of explanations is inadequate (Stringer 1999); and that those who are designated as ‘subjects’ or ‘informants’ in other types of approaches to research should actually participate directly in research processes. Moreover, those research processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly.

Action research has three major distinctive elements: people, power and praxis. It is people-centred, as it is informed by, and responds to, the needs of the (oppressed or disenfranchised) people. It therefore promotes empowerment of the research participants, and it is about praxis – it recognises the inseparability of theory and practice. Action research challenges the power relation between researcher and ‘objects’, since the action researcher is a peer of other research participants. Its key methodological feature is dialogue (Sohng 1995: 6). Sohng further argues that ideally, dialogue within action or participatory research empowers by bringing ‘isolated people together around common problems and needs’ (ibid.: 6). This process has been clear within the context of my project. Indeed, the action-research project and the organisations it has resulted in (IUSW and GMB branch) have become a

forum for a group of workers who – due to heavy competition within a clandestine and stigmatised industry – have few other opportunities to collectively reflect on their own practice, problems and needs. From the process of creating opportunities for collective reflection, empowerment has flowed.

Action research, rather than a method per se, is an orientation towards research that rests on an ontology that attributes to human beings the capability of reflexivity and self-change, and on an epistemology that embraces that capability within the research process (Kindon, Pain and Kesby 2007).

Action researchers work with communities and groups that have traditionally been marginalised or oppressed, and through dialogue facilitate the process by which those groups identify issues of concern to them, gather relevant information, and test and implement possible solutions (Brydon-Miller 2002). Thus, action research is explicitly political and demands that the researcher play a dual role – that of scholar and activist.

<A>**The Interview in an Action-Research Setting**

<FL>During the course of this project, I carried out participant observation, working in the sex industry myself for five years, as a part-time telephone operator on an adult chat line. Although the nature of sex work per se has not been the focus of the action-research project, this has enabled me to experience first-hand some of the problems and vulnerabilities faced by sex workers: mainly, stigmatisation and lack of labour rights.

The core of my participant observation, however, took place within the movement for sex workers' rights: meetings, conferences, actions and demonstrations. I collected numerous documents, including meeting minutes and notes, newsletters, reports, position statements, motions and resolutions, newspaper clippings, correspondence and other documents. I also

kept a personal journal in which summaries of daily research activities, observations and reflections on research and action were recorded.

The ideal method for data generation in an action-research setting is dialogical. Focus groups, therefore, are a popular method. Although several focus-group discussions were organised throughout this research, I also carried out semi-structured ethnographic interviews with activists and advocates I met or worked with in the course of my involvement in the sex workers' rights movement. The interview sample reflects my own experience within the international sex workers' rights movement. Normally, I met people in their homes or workplaces, though some interviews took place in hotels – as conferences were privileged places to meet activists from different countries.

Within the context of this action-research project, reaching out or recruiting sex workers to be interviewed, both nationally and internationally, was not problematic, bar logistical issues related to international travel. Being aware of the aims and action element of the research project, sex workers were forthcoming. In fact, some were proactive in initiating the process and requesting to be heard.

This contrasts with Gall's (2006) research on sex-worker unionisation based on secondary sources, as he admits to having failed at interviewing sex workers from all countries studied except Britain. Gall points to the difficulties in contacting sex workers as a reason for not having conducted interviews. Sex workers, he says, are a 'hard-to-reach (research) population' (Gall 2006: 14). Thus, he gathered his data from websites, activists publications, and mostly newspaper clippings and television documentaries. This is highly controversial, as sex workers have often complained about the ways in which the mainstream media represents them. My own research work pointed at this misrepresentation as one of the reasons why sex workers engage in activism (Lopes 2006). Sex workers have good reasons to

be suspicious about academic research that does not take into account their own agendas. It is not surprising, then, that they were not cooperative with Gall and other researchers.

Within an action-research setting, research is guided by action needs. Those needs were discussed collectively with project participants. The aim of interviewing sex-worker activists was to find out what works and does not work in sex-worker organising efforts. Interviewees were aware of the role of the researcher and the aims of the project. However, the same interviewees also knew the researcher in her role as sex-worker activist. Many had previous experience of collaborating in political activities with the researcher – such as organising meetings, demonstrations, etc.

It was therefore also of interest to the interviewees to find out about the researcher's (and the group she was working with) experiences of organising within the sex industry. This interest may have been conscious or not; it may have taken place previously or may have been triggered by the interview itself. This often triggered return questioning. So interviews took directions sought after by the interviewee, becoming what I would like to term a bottom-up ethnography.

Occasionally, the return questioning went further. Roles became reversed when I was asked to take the place of the respondent. Below I explore these cases in more detail.

<A>**The Reverse Interviews**

Sarah

<FL>Sarah was a very active member of the IUSW. I interviewed her at her own request, at the flat where she saw her clients. In the interview I asked her about her work and also about the political organisation we were both part of: What should our future strategy be? What needed to be done? What could we do? At the end of the interview, I was energised with a sense of hope, optimism and camaraderie. But I also felt the pressure of taking up her time

and was concerned that I might be responsible for her loss of earnings. I was therefore relieved to hear Sarah say:

<EXT>I love talking about my work and there's always more I can say about it. It's really interesting. One of the things I like is that every time I talk to people it keeps unfolding itself to me.

<FL>But when I said that what I had found really 'useful' had been the second part of the interview, where we reflected about the course of the political campaigns we were involved in and how to proceed, I saw a light appearing in her eyes. Sarah then said that she thought it would be really 'useful' for the organisation (the action part of the project) if I were to be interviewed as well, and that she would like to conduct the interview. We arranged a date and time to meet in Sarah's work flat again.

As we sat at her table, Sarah produced a list of typed questions and a tape recorder. The questions were mostly about the history of the organisation, its set up (Sarah had not been a founding member) and my ideas about the future of the organisation. She also gave me an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss the difficulty of combining the role of researcher with that of activist, as well as ethical issues in action-research settings. This is an excerpt of my response to her (Sarah transcribed the interview and subsequently emailed it to me):

<EXT>Individually it has been very difficult at times to balance the activist versus researcher roles, mostly in terms of being fair and open and honest. Because everybody who comes regularly to the meetings knows that I am doing a study. But I don't tell people immediately because there are other issues that I feel are more important and immediate. If I'm trying to recruit someone, the important thing is to let them know about the group, how it works, etc., and deal with their worries. And it's only after

I've spent some time with them that I will talk about the research. But that creates ethical problems for myself.

What was it about this type of research – action research as opposed to a more regular form of research (whatever that might be!) – that made it possible or likely for interviewees to turn the tables on the interviewer? The answer is that they had a stake in the research from the outset. They were not merely contributing to someone else's academic research and career but could see the direct benefits that would accrue from the project.

Michelle

<FL>Michelle and I had met at a conference on sex work. She was the founder and leader of a sex workers' rights organisation in a European country. The organisation had been set up in the 1980s. I saw her as a senior leader in the movement. A few years later, we met at another conference. This was a much smaller event, organised by a German trades union that had begun to organise sex workers. We were staying in a small hotel where the conference also took place. I was eager to use the time left after the sessions for networking and interviewing. Michelle was happy to be interviewed, but she made it quite clear from the outset that the 'price' would be that she would also interview me. So when I had finished asking her about her organisation, the state and future of the sex workers' movement, we turned the tape recorder around and swapped places as interviewer and respondent. Michelle asked me about my motivations, the history of the IUSW, the benefits of unionisation for sex workers and to what extent I thought society was ready to accept sex work as labour, and sex workers as recipients of labour rights.

Michelle seemed to have a clear agenda – to understand how UK sex workers achieved unionisation, whether it was a good thing and whether it would be something for

sex workers based in her country to pursue. Some of her questions were the same as mine. I had asked:

<EXT>Could you tell me how you became involved in sex-worker activism?

Michelle asked me:

<EXT>Can you tell me a bit about your personal story, how you became involved in sex workers' rights?

<FL>The cases I described here were atypical, in the sense that the questioning back became 'formalised' and framed as an interview. The sex workers who 'turned the tables' on me as an interviewer were not more 'enlightened' than other sex workers I interviewed. They were, however, like other people I interviewed in the course of this project, activists for sex workers' rights. The possibility for this kind of role-swapping had more to do with the particular setting of the research (the sex workers' rights movement) than with the type of research itself (action research).

<A>Conclusion

<FL>When one carries out an action-research investigation one does not investigate a theory to be applied. Rather, one investigates methods for the 'implementation of a political idea' (Sohng 1995), and those most concerned with the results of one's investigation are the research participants themselves.

Action research relies heavily on relational approaches (Coghlan and Brannick 2010: 29), that is, on interpersonal relations and communal processes. However, when traditional semi-structured interviews are used, the power structure that underpins traditional, non-participatory and non-action-oriented research is maintained. Two ways of challenging such

power structures have been firstly to see the interviews as part and parcel of the action – as well as the research; and secondly, by alternating the roles of interviewer and respondent. Turning the tables and swapping places shorten the distance between the researcher and those ‘researched’. Power relations are challenged.

Since my aim was to contribute to the sex workers’ rights movement, this approach was the more useful, since often sex workers challenge the value of being part of research projects from which they get no benefits. Sue Metzenrath (1998), a representative of the Scarlett Alliance (Australian national forum for sex-worker rights organisations), puts it succinctly when she writes:

<EXT>research [on sex work] should not only be driven by the personal and academic interests of researchers alone but they should try to support the research needs of sex-workers and their supporters...For far too long researchers have been using sex-workers as guinea pigs without any benefit accruing to sex-workers as the result of research.

(Metzenrath 1998: 11)

Although it would be naive to believe that reciprocity is ever fully achieved or that privileges and hierarchies are ever completely absent, the notion of reciprocity – the ongoing process of exchange aiming at establishing and maintaining equality between parties – is part of the basis of ethical practice in action research (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson and Wise 2008). It is ideally a type of ‘bottom-up’ research, which is in tune with the aims of action research.

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<A>Notes

¹ Old reality TV programme in which people were put in awkward or ridiculous situations
and their reactions secretly filmed.