



## Sex worker collaborative research: Best practice criteria

Best practice criteria for research with sex workers - outcome from the TaMS [Transgender and male sex workers] study

Sexual Health Society Clinical Meeting 20th March 2018



## What is Respect Inc

Queensland sex worker's organisation

- 100% peer led and peer run
- Funded by Queensland Health to do peer education
- Advocacy for sex workers in public policy, research etc



## Advocacy in research

- More than just supporting or dis-endorsing research by others
- Collaborative / partnership approach
  - Means sex workers are consulted and involved at all levels of research: consulted prior to ethical clearance, on survey tools, questions, actual collection of data, analysis and write up
  - Why?

## General importance of collaborative approach

Elena Jeffreys (2009) *Sex worker driven research: best practice ethics*

- Relevance & validity
  - Research topics have been conceived by non-peers who may have biased or inaccurate ideas about sex work - sex workers must be positioned as active voices in research about our work
  - 'Horror stories' exist of research conducted by anti-sex work feminists and drug corporations - eg. failed HIV Prep trial in Cambodia - which show how unethical research harms sex workers

## General Importance of collaborative approach

Elena Jeffreys (2009) *Sex worker driven research: best practice ethics* (Cont):

- Social equity
  - Non-collaborative research is top-down with sex workers or sex work organisations being used as a 'bridge' to gain access to participants
  - Academics have used sex workers lived stories to build careers which socially & financially benefit academics, not sex workers

## Best practice criteria for research with sex workers

- Developed during TaMS research as a part of Sam Brookfields' systematic literature review

1. Researchers recognise that sex work is an occupation (Metzenrath, 1998).
2. Researchers explicitly attempt to use participant-centred, harm reduction, and strengths-based approaches (Shaver, 2005).
3. Consideration is explicitly given to the positionality of researchers, and how normative identities can also influence the structure and direction of research (Galupo, 2017).

Best practice criteria for research with sex workers

4. Theories are clearly articulated with regards to gender, sexuality, and sex worker agency, and how these inform methodological choices is explained (Singh, Richmond, & Burnes, 2013).
5. Research is designed with adequate planning for resources and infrastructure to ensure sufficient reimbursement or compensation for participants and consultants.
6. Research is conducted with a shared leadership structure that promotes participatory decision making, and the development of a shared vision between professional researchers, peer researchers, and non-researcher community members (Israel, Lantz, McGranaghan, Kerr, & Guzman, 2005).

Best practice criteria for research with sex workers

7. Research addresses priorities identified by sex workers (Jeffreys, 2010).
8. Sex worker representatives connected to peak-body peer sex worker organisations are demonstrably involved during the design of research, data collection, data analysis, and editing and dissemination of final report (Jeffreys, 2010; van der Meulen, 2011).
9. Researchers ensure sufficient familiarity with the diversity of the community being researched to avoid exclusion of minority or hard to access populations.

Best practice criteria for research with sex workers

10. Effort is made to reduce the power differential between researcher and the researched (Baum et al., 2006).
11. Researchers provide sufficient transparency in research process to verify the absence of bias or pre-existing sex work narratives (Ostergren, 2004).
12. Consideration is given to potential misuse or misinterpretation of research results by media, government, policymakers or anti-sex work campaigners (Jeffreys, 2010).
13. The research is oriented towards working in partnership with communities, sex workers and sex work organisations in a manner that leads to action for positive change (Baum et al., 2006).

## With the TaMS research Respect Inc advocated for:

- An MOU outlining the partnership
- Full involvement of peers at all levels of research
  - Initial research team made up of 4 sex workers from Respect Inc + UQ researchers - put together initial survey tools and ethical clearance documents
  - Steering committee = 6 sex workers (3 x transgender, 3 x male) met every few months to consult on research tools and progress and were paid \$200 for a half day
  - Payment for research participants
    - \$100 per interview

## TaMS research (cont):



- Full involvement of peers at all levels:
  - Peer admin support = peer staff member from Respect promoted & scheduled interviews
  - Peer researchers = Transgender and male peer researchers recruited from sex work community, trained by UQ researchers to conduct qualitative interviews and paid \$100 to conduct each interview
  - Focus group conducted with peer educators and other staff from Respect Inc
  - Peer data analyst recruited to do data coding and assist with write up

## Positives of collaborative research for us

- First time Respect has done collaborative research
  - Builds capacity - we now have members of the sex work community (who may not have academic backgrounds) who have experience in various aspects of research projects
  - Reduces strain on organisation - we are usually asked to consult and do a lot of work without payment and if we are not funded to do this work it falls to volunteers
  - Brings new members to organisation
    - Research participants come back for services, to volunteer etc
  - Research tells the story we want to tell