Participating, Observing, Publishing: Lessons from the Field

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We have chosen to advocate for the decriminalization of all aspects of consensual adult sex work…based on evidence and the real-life experience of sex workers themselves that criminalization makes them less safe.

—Catherine Murphy, Policy Advisor at Amnesty International (2015)

In any news outlets, there are stories related to sex work—that is, the exchange of sexual services for cash or other trade—such as Amnesty International's recent support for decriminalizing sex work and the US federal authorities' recent raid of rentboy.com, a site for gay male escorts. These stories and many others raise questions about gender, sexuality, power, politics, policy, and government that are of interest to political scientists. Studying sex work also provides important methodological lessons for political scientists about the value of conducting and publishing participant-observation research. To illustrate these lessons, I draw from two of my own sex-work–related research projects: (1) a study of sex-workers'-rights activists in the San Francisco Bay Area and their creation and maintenance of two nonprofits, the St. James Infirmary (SJI) and the California Prostitutes Education Project (CAL-PEP), which offer health and social services to sex workers by sex workers; and (2) a study of "john schools"—that is, programs in which men arrested for prostitution offenses pay a fine and attend a day of classes in lieu of prosecution—in San Francisco, Brooklyn, and Phoenix.

After a brief discussion of these projects and their related research questions, I explain how participant-observation research answered my questions and challenged assumptions about sex workers, political activism, and public policy. In doing so, I illustrate a broader argument that engaging with sex workers in the research process—as opposed to studying them from afar—can counteract the hegemonic characterization of their community as having little personal and political agency, which raises questions about the policies that govern them. I then describe insights gained about publishing my research that some may consider "unrelated" to the discipline of political science.

PROJECT 1: STUDYING SEX-WORKER–RUN NONPROFITS

In the United States, some forms of sex work are legal (e.g., dancing and pornography), but prostitution is almost entirely criminalized. According to national statistics, this criminalization has institutionalized a particular gendered order, in which women—particularly women of color—are arrested for prostitution offenses far more often than men (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2011) and sex workers in any sector of the industry are stigmatized. In response to this marginalization, sex workers have long organized to demand that prostitution be recognized as legitimate work and to destigmatize all persons in the sex trades (Chateauvert 2013).

Sex workers face numerous barriers to organization: stigma and the fear of judgment and/or arrest make it difficult for many to speak publicly about their work, and they have had little success in changing prostitution laws in the nation. Yet, despite these odds, they have managed to organize locally, advance their claims, and meet their community's needs through organizations such as CAL-PEP and SJI. Although prostitution remains criminalized in California, both organizations are incorporated as 501(c)3 nonprofits and receive the majority of their funding from government agencies (i.e., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the San Francisco Health Department). These organizations have thereby raised a broader question related to political organizing: How do they maintain their more radical political commitments (in this case, to sex workers' rights) while receiving government funding and incorporating as nonprofits?

PROJECT 2: STUDYING "JOHN SCHOOLS"

In researching the "activist" side of sex-work politics, I also studied various policy "innovations" related to sex work in the United States—namely, "john schools," in which men arrested for prostitution offenses are given, in lieu of prosecution, the option to pay a fine and attend a day of classes to learn about the consequences of their actions. These programs emerged in the late 1990s as part of broader efforts to reverse the long-standing practice of arresting women more often than men for prostitution offenses and to address growing concerns that men were forcing women and girls into sex work against their will (i.e., trafficking). Feminist advocates, criminal-justice scholars, and policy makers sought to promote gender equality by targeting men who pay for sex and they conceived of john schools as one way to accomplish this (Campbell and Storr 2001; Lewis 2010). In these "schools," men hear from district attorneys (DAs), police officers, sex therapists, community activists, and former sex workers—among others—about the consequences of their actions.

My research focused on three john-school programs, including the nation's flagship john school, the First Offender Prostitution Program (First Offender), which was established in 1995 in San Francisco; and two other programs that replicate First Offender in the largest urban centers: Project Respect

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in Brooklyn and the Offender Program for Persons Soliciting in Phoenix. I used these cases to understand whether—and, if so, how—government-policy innovations that are meant to promote gender equality, in fact, may further institutionalize traditional gendered ideologies and patterns of power.

WHY PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION?

I could have answered my research questions solely through more traditional qualitative political science methods, including interviewing and surveying staff members and government officials and reviewing organizational websites and newspaper coverage. However, to study CAL-PEP, SJI, and john schools, I chose to engage variously in participant-observation research. Although I used many of the traditional methods, I knew that I could not fully understand how these nonprofits maintain commitments to sex workers' rights or how john schools "teach" men about sex work and gender without actually being there and being involved. This belief was rooted in my engagement with feminist epistemologies that understand knowledge as socially situated and that call on researchers to place people who are at the margins at the center of any research endeavor (hooks 1999). With this in mind, it was insufficient for me to study sex workers and the policies that impact them from afar. By reviewing previous studies of political activism by other similarly marginalized communities, including drug users and persons with HIV/AIDS (Chambré 2006; Keefe, Lane, and Swarts 2006), I knew that interacting directly with sex workers would provide a more nuanced picture of their activities and lived experiences.

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Before discussing how participant observation provided the necessary data for my studies, it is important to note one of the primary challenges that this method may pose to scholars: gaining access to research sites. Researchers cannot expect to simply appear at the door of a nonprofit organization or government program (among other cases) to participate and observe. Access often requires developing relationships, which is especially important for nonprofits that serve sex workers—a community with a long history of being "studied" with little say in the research (Vanwesenbeck 2001). As a result, sex workers have demanded that researchers work in their communities in ways that include them in all stages of the project (Bowen and O'Doherty 2014).

Within this context, I arranged meetings with CAL-PEP and SJI leaders who, in return for access to their sites, wanted to know what I could do for their organizations. With their limited time and budget to serve a community with complex needs, it was clear that if I would take their time, participant observation would be the method I would use to learn about *and* contribute to these organizations. Therefore, I volunteered at SJI's clinic nights—distributing food, organizing the clothing bank, washing dishes, and stocking condom baskets. I also completed an archiving project and helped write a National Minority AIDS Coalition grant to acquire a new computer. At CAL-PEP, I volunteered as a grant writer, assisting with Pfizer Foundation and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant applications. The observational component involved visiting SJI clinic nights and participating in street outreach with CAL-PEP staff in various Oakland neighborhoods.

Similarly, accessing government programs also may challenge researchers. Visiting john schools required permission from the local DA or prosecutor's office, and whereas the Brooklyn and San Francisco programs often host outside observers from the media and other city governments, the gatekeepers for the Phoenix program—with far fewer outside observers—needed more convincing. As a result, to gain access to these sites, I often sent multiple requests to various administrators; I had to be flexible about when I could visit because those programs ran only when enough men had been arrested to fill the classes.

At these sites, I also exchanged access for concessions on data collection. In Phoenix and San Francisco, I was not permitted to record the sessions or take notes in class (between sessions, I scribbled down everything I could remember while in the bathroom); this was not the case in Brooklyn. However, the Phoenix and San Francisco programs were more forthcoming with Power Point slides, program information and documents, and interviews with staff, whereas the Brooklyn program allowed me to interview few staff people, rebuffed all requests for Power Point slides, and claimed that it did not collect any program statistics. Unlike at CAL-PEP and SJI, I was not asked to provide anything in exchange for visiting the classes; however, some of the john-school administrators asked to read any papers I wrote, which I provided on publication.

Certainly, these challenges may cast participant-observation research as unduly difficult but, in my cases, it was essential. Collecting data through participant observation yielded rich, detailed material about the practices of these communities and programs, which, when presented as "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973), challenged many popular and scholarly assumptions about the agency of marginalized individuals, political activism, and public-policy "innovations."

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL AGENCY AMONG MEMBERS OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

When observed from a distance, it is easy to assume that sex workers have little agency, political or otherwise. After all, the popular media is replete with news stories and movies of sex workers who fall victim to rapacious pimps, violent clients,

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and traffickers. Research has documented that sex workers, particularly those working on the streets, may experience violence and conduct sex work in response to poverty, addiction, and homelessness (Monroe 2005). Given what political scientists know about political agency and participation—that white, older, upper-income, educated males are the most likely to feel politically efficacious and therefore engage in political life (Galston 2007)—sex workers seem to be the least likely group to engage in political action.

Indeed, if researchers reviewed only CAL-PEP and SJI annual reports, for example, they would find that the majority of CAL-PEP clients are African Americans representing various street-based populations, including sex workers, the homeless, parolees, and drug users; the majority of SJI constituents are persons of color, who live "at 200% below the poverty level, are marginally housed, are dealing with mental health issues, and lack insurance or an income safety net of any kind" (St. James Infirmary 2010, 2). From these data, we may conclude that sex workers at these organizations are not likely to engage in politics.

In addition to challenging the stereotypes about sex workers' individual agency, my participant-observation research provided evidence that challenged conventional wisdom and scholarship regarding the political capacities of marginalized people. As I documented elsewhere (Majic 2014b), despite incredible odds, sex workers engage in a wide array of political activities from voting to marching in political rallies. Because these data came from 40 interviews with sex workers in the San Francisco Bay Area, not all sex workers in the United States are represented. However, the findings encourage political scientists to reconsider marginalized peoples' political capacities and their methods for studying political participation. My participation in sex-worker–run organizations enabled me to access a community that is "hard to reach" through more traditionally distant political science research methods (e.g., surveys). Without participating in the community studied, I would not have been able to witness its political capacities—which often are often hidden or obscured in research studies conducted from afar.

In addition to challenging the stereotypes about sex workers' individual agency, my participant-observation research provided evidence that challenged conventional wisdom and scholarship regarding the political capacities of marginalized people.

In contrast, participating in and observing these organizations provided a more complex picture of sex workers' agency than the demographic statistics or existing research would imply. Inside CAL-PEP and SJI, I quickly learned that although many of the sex workers faced adversity, few fit the "victim" narrative promoted by journalists, popular documentaries, and films. Because these organizations are peer-run, the sex workers who gather there train and provide services to their peers, and they develop a sense of community in ways that may not be possible elsewhere. By spending time in this setting, I routinely observed lively conversations illustrating the course of sex workers' daily life, including one night in the clinic's waiting room, where the women were discussing how to care for a poinsettia plant. I routinely observed sex workers speaking openly about sex work. As I documented in my book (Majic 2014c), one night in the SJI community room, a group of cis and trans women sex workers were discussing which of their clients gave them the best gifts.

Similarly (and ironically), attending the john schools also provided information that challenged popular images of sex workers as disempowered victims. In Brooklyn, for example, a former sex worker who spoke to the men strode confidently to the front of the room. When a man in the class whistled and cat-called her, she responded jokingly, "Excuse me? Is there something you want to share?" She then shared how her experiences of abuse and poverty motivated her to trade sex. Yet, although her story conveyed her own experience of disempowerment, this was not her entire experience. As she said to the men, "I knew how to hustle, survive. I had persistence" and, later, "I still got it! I could still work."

ACTIVISM AND CO-OPTATION

In addition to providing data that challenge assumptions about sex workers' personal and political agency, participant observation provided evidence that challenges much scholarship regarding political activism. My research with CAL-PEP and SJI considered how these organizations maintain their radical commitments to sex workers' rights even as they incorporated as nonprofits and received funding from various government agencies. This dilemma has challenged activists who have organized around civil rights and women's health, among others issues. Certainly, studies have found that whereas some activists and their organizations can continue this political advocacy with and/or on behalf of marginalized groups, many (justifiably) prioritize maintaining funding streams, membership bases, and/or client services (see, e.g., Morgen 2002; Strolovitch 2007).

If researchers examine CAL-PEP and SJI only from afar—through publicly available documents, for example—they may agree with Piven and Cloward's long-standing conclusion that "[o]rganizations endure by abandoning their oppositional politics" (1977, xxi). The incorporation of both as 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations restricts their engagement in the political process, particularly as lobbyists; the majority of their funding is from government agencies; and their service-providing staff members have, variously, state-certified credentials (e.g., phlebotomy). Therefore, even as prostitution remains criminalized in California, the staff and clients of CAL-PEP and SJI spend most of their time administering health and social services rather than protesting outside of city hall or the state legislature. Given this type of evidence, we may

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conclude that they do not maintain their more radical founding commitments.

A more complex picture emerges, however, through participating in and observing CAL-PEP and SJI activities. In fact, as I argued elsewhere (Majic 2011, 2014c), CAL-PEP and SJI demonstrate how so-called social-movement–born nonprofits maintain their political commitments (in this case, to prostitutes' rights) through a process that I term "resistance maintenance." They resist co-optation by treating sex work as labor with legitimate occupational health and safety concerns, by empowering their clients with civic skills, and by conducting and publishing research and analysis to inform the public and policy makers about their constituents' needs (Majic 2014c).

This argument could not have resulted without participating in and observing CAL-PEP and SJI. I witnessed, firsthand, sex workers offering services to other sex workers in clinics and on the street—a radical act in a state where prostitution is criminalized and when many still believe that sex workers are vectors of disease. I also witnessed how these organizations variously challenged popular images of sex workers and promoted prostitutes' rights. For example, when I visited SJI, I saw a banner in the community room that states "Outlaw Poverty Not Prostitutes"—direct support for prostitutes' rights in a state-funded clinic! When I wrote grants at CAL-PEP, I met Grant, who told me about how he went from prison, to working at CAL-PEP, to testifying in Sacramento at the state's AIDS Lobby Day. These are only a few examples of the data that participant observation provides to challenge assumptions about activists, nonprofits, and broader sociopolitical change.

POLICY INNOVATIONS

As with john schools, participant-observation data provided a more in-depth and complicated picture of a policy phenomenon than what likely would have emerged solely from document- and interview-based research. John schools were created as part of an effort to "end demand" for prostitution and, by extension, to promote gender equality. If we consider available research, john schools may appear to be accomplishing their goal: historically, women have been targets of prostitution law enforcement, and now there are classes populated by arrested men! Moreover, recent research shows that these programs have had success in reducing recidivism among men (Monto 2004; Shively et al. 2008), and the Ford Foundation and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government have granted awards to First Offender (Shively et al. 2008).

Yet, this research presents a limited picture of the success of john schools. To understand whether john schools convey gender-equality norms, it was necessary to visit and observe them. The material that I collected revealed the gendered and racialized aspects of their practices. First, as I observed in the classes, most attendees were men of color and the presence of translators indicated that, for many, English was not their first language. Because only the Phoenix program collected and supplied demographic data, I could not have discerned this information without visiting the classes. Therefore, even as john schools rely on arresting men, they did not target all men equally.

Second, by visiting the john-school classes, I could listen to and observe the normative discourse about gender equality and sex workers. From this evidence, I learned that normative dissonance actually characterizes these policies: while john schools may be designed to reflect and enforce particular norms about gender equality and sex work, these norms are complicated and even contradicted when they are communicated to the policy's target population (Majic 2015). This gendered normative dissonance was particularly apparent in how the john-school speakers discussed men and women in the sex-work transaction. In the San Francisco john school, for example, speakers repeatedly emphasized men's agency by noting that they were in the class because they had made a bad choice. As I documented elsewhere (Majic 2014d, 23), a speaker from a community organization said to the men: "[l]ife is full of choices; you made a bad choice; [First Offender] is a good choice, and thank you for choosing this." Similar references to male agency and choice also were apparent in the john-school classes in Brooklyn and Phoenix (Majic 2015).

Yet, the john-school speakers did not always portray women who engage in sex work as similarly agentic, emphasizing instead their victimization in prostitution. In Phoenix, a police officer told the men that "prostitution is never a choice" (Majic 2015, 289); the Brooklyn Assistant DA told them, "No young woman wants [prostitution] for herself." Yet, the speakers also emphasized women's potential criminality and, by extension, their agency. As the police officer in Phoenix told the men, "[d]on't believe the girls when they say they want to be there—they are trying to sell you a product. Where do you think the term 'trick' comes from?" This emphasis on trickery was especially pronounced in Brooklyn, where a police officer told the men that "Prostitutes can be raped, but some can lie about it…Your worst-case scenario is a prostitute that lies and convinces us that she was raped" (Majic 2015, 290).

In my john-school research, I looked at these policy phenomena as cases of sex-work–related policy and *policy implementation, norm diffusion, and institutionalism—topics that also interest many political scientists.*

This indicates how data collected through close, participatory observation may undermine claims of policy innovation and success, particularly regarding sex workers and gender equality. Specifically, my john-school observations provided data that challenge the broader ideological purpose and goals of these programs: although they were developed to promote

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gender equality, they often contradict this goal by reinforcing stereotypical notions of women's and men's agency in sex work.

PUBLISHING PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION RESEARCH

Whereas participant-observation research may yield significant data that often challenge popular and scholarly assumptions about various communities and policies, it also is at odds with publishing trends in political science. In the wake of the Perestroika debates, discussions about the challenges of publishing qualitative research of any type have proliferated, and these challenges arguably are compounded when the research also involves topics and questions related to gender and sexuality—two other oft-marginalized subjects in political science. In this light, it might be assumed that a scholar who chooses to conduct participant-observation research related to sex work would perish, not publish, in political science. Yet, as I demonstrate, publishing such research is entirely feasible.

First, to publish research findings collected through participant observation in political science journals, a scholar's work must engage with political science theories and debates. One way to make this link is always to ask, "What is this (research) a case of?"[1] This question made me think of my data about sex workers' activism beyond a series of interesting stories and connect it to other "like" communities (e.g., reproductive rights and LGBTQ activists). However, I was not studying only "like" groups: CAL-PEP and SJI also represent a broader "case of" civic-engagement, social-movement, and nonprofit-sector activity. Because political scientists with a range of research interests explore these topics, I engaged with related theories and used my data to advance how other political scientists may understand the political capacities of activists who form nonprofit organizations. In my johnschool research, I looked at these policy phenomena as cases of sex-work–related policy *and* policy implementation, norm diffusion, and institutionalism—topics that also interest many political scientists.

Of course, defining what the research is "a case of" does not instantaneously guarantee that it will be published. Therefore, a second way to publish data collected from participant-observation research is to submit it to the growing number of highly regarded journals that are open to it. For example, I decided to submit a paper about CAL-PEP and SJI to *Perspectives on Politics* (Majic 2011) because of its history (i.e., it was created, in part—as a response to the Perestroika debates—to be a journal open to qualitative research) and its call for manuscripts that engage a broad range of topics and methodological approaches. This journal was a fitting place to submit work about civic engagement and social movements, even with sex workers as the illustrative case.

Other than APSA-sponsored journals, many specialized journals publish data collected through participant-observation research, reaching a wide range of scholars. For example, my paper about SJI, which used feminist institutionalism as a theoretical frame to explore how nonprofits challenge gender ideologies, was published in *Gender and Society* (Majic 2014a). This interdisciplinary journal reaches scholars who are concerned with gender theory, broadly defined, and it often publishes qualitative research. In another example, *Critical Policy Studies* (*CPS*) published my work about john schools in Phoenix and Brooklyn (Majic 2015). Although *CPS* is not a sex-work or gender journal, it is open to critical policy analysis; because this article engaged with theories of norm diffusion and policy implementation, it would interest readers who are curious about the specific topic area and/or the broader theoretical frames. These few examples indicate that with attention to framing and journal mission, scholars who conduct participant-observation research may share their work and engage with a wide range of other scholars in political science and beyond. ■

NOTE

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