

# Foreword

This unique collection of essays explores an important dimension of human trafficking research: ethical issues. The book covers a wide range of issues from different vantage points, with a common theme of highlighting both best practices and challenges in conducting research with human subjects involved, in some way, in trafficking.

Some of the issues discussed in the book are generalizable to research on other vulnerable populations that are involved in illicit, clandestine, and exploitative work. These include the need to elicit respondents' informed consent, guarantee anonymity of subjects, confidentiality of identifiers, minimization of risk and harm to both victims and researchers, and the thorny question of reporting victimization to the authorities.

A topic tackled in some of the essays is the role of institutional review boards in scrutinizing research proposals involving human subjects. Although no one would question the legitimacy of these boards—given their role in preempting research that might endanger subjects or cause them emotional harm—there are times when they appear to operate with little expertise or sociological understanding, impose impractical rules on researchers, or block a study entirely. When it comes to sex work, many of these ethics boards seem to operate with a *presumption* of risks and victimization, or even question researchers' motives for conducting such research. Even unobtrusive covert observations in an erotic bar, open to the public, may be prohibited by a review board unless the researcher first gains permission from the bar owner! In such instances, there seems to be little recognition of the practicalities involved in the research enterprise.

It is well-known that such review boards can and do overstep their mandate, especially when the research involves some dimension of sexuality. The standards are quite different when boards assess research proposals involving nonsexual labor, but one can argue that the same ethical standards should apply regardless of the type of activity being studied.

The available research literature suggests that labor trafficking can be just as traumatic and exploitative as sex trafficking. Trafficked fishermen, for example, can be subjected to malnutrition, long hours of hard work, sleep deprivation, dangerous

fishing methods, and an absence of health care for those who are injured or sick and confined on a boat for weeks. A study of Bangladeshis who had been trafficked outside the country for various kinds of nonsexual labor found that almost all of the women reported that they had been subject to either sexual harassment or sexual assault. Unlike many writings that ignore labor trafficking, this book includes chapters devoted to this and to the ethical issues involved in researching it.

One of the trickiest issues is how a researcher gains access to those who exploit others—the pimps, traffickers, and slave holders. Very little research has been conducted on these individuals, and most of what we “know” about them comes from descriptions by victims, the authorities, or NGOs—rather than the exploiters themselves (an exception is a study based on interviews with a sizeable number of incarcerated traffickers in Cambodia, by Chenda Keo and his colleagues, published in *The Annals* in 2014). The lack of data coming directly from the facilitators and managers has been replaced with portrayals that are a rather monolithic caricature of those who profit from others’ labor, but some recent research (some of which is described in this book) provides a more nuanced picture of such individuals. This research suggests that pimps and traffickers range along a continuum, and have various kinds of relationships with workers. One important question is how “exploitation” is defined and operationalized in research and where to draw the line between exploitation and contractual transactions where the worker benefits from his or her labor.

A related issue has to do with the ethical challenges involved in data collection from active offenders, in this case traffickers involved in ongoing criminal acts, rather than ex-traffickers or those who are accessed in prison. What norms apply when the researcher has direct contact with traffickers, pimps, or those who control slaves? Would an institutional review board insist that the researcher report such individuals to the authorities or would such individuals fall under the blanket confidentiality protection for human subjects? And, apart from the position of a review board on this question, is there a *best practice* that should guide researchers themselves? While ensuring the anonymity of victims would be standard practice, what about those involved in exploiting them?

It is unethical to cherry-pick data that supports a particular paradigm or ideological position, while ignoring contrary data. Unfortunately, some researchers do precisely that—privileging some data over others and drawing generalizations based solely on the information that supports their preconceptions. This seems to occur more often in studies of the sex industry than other labor spheres. One problem is that it is difficult for anyone outside a research team to know whether data has been concealed and whether the published results are a selective tip of the iceberg. On the other hand, it is sometimes possible to detect a partial cover-up—that is, when contrary results are presented but marginalized, explained away, or buried in a footnote. I have detected this slanted type of data presentation in some studies that I have reviewed.

A final ethical issue that deserves attention involves the kinds of methodological procedures used to gather *valid data*—particularly salient when one is studying an illicit enterprise whose participants may have good reasons to conceal the truth or to reveal only part of the picture. The obvious solution is for the researcher to build rapport and trust with respondents prior to studying them, but this is sometimes not possible and even when it is, it does not guarantee total disclosure by all respondents. Victims may be fearful of retaliation from perpetrators if they say too much, and it is not ethical to pressure them to do so. What this means is that researchers will have to accept that there is likely to be some irreducible level of “error,” hopefully minimal, in data gathered from participants in human trafficking and contemporary slavery. But building rapport ahead of time and respecting the agency of the respondents can help reduce the chances that any given study will be prone to significant amounts of missing data or distorted narratives.

29 March 2015

Ronald Weitzer  
George Washington University  
D. Siegel et al.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-21520-4>

Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking  
Siegel, D.; de Wildt, R. (Eds.)  
2016, XV, 277 p. 5 illus., 3 illus. in color., Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-3-319-21520-4