

Considering the ethics of sex-work research

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The increase of research focusing on sex work and health is not without its ethical concerns. Researchers have sometimes struggled with challenges related to consent, inclusion, privacy and confidentiality, especially working with marginalized populations.

While many have chosen to tread carefully within the framework existing of research [ethics](#), Scott Comber, assistant professor at the Rowe School of Business, has chosen to challenge the status quo.

Prof. Comber (left) was a co-applicant on a recently awarded a \$300,000 operating grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for a project titled, "Research ethics, sex work and health: A qualitative study to improve health and advance ethical research engagement."

"The ethics review process in research works up to a point, and then it starts to fall apart in some cases around what the real practices are when we're working with more marginalized populations," explains Prof. Comber. "We just think it's time to look at the ethical research practices and methods around this type of research. More specifically, we will look at the interrelationships between research ethics research methodology, and health and sex."

The project will add to the research ethics body of knowledge, provide evidence-informed guidelines and increase understanding of what confidentiality, inclusion and consent means within these populations.

A coast-to-coast project

The research team, comprised of Prof. Comber, Adrian Guta from Carleton University, and Victoria Bungay and Colleen Varcoe of UBC, aims to empirically investigate the ethical challenges and contextual factors of doing research in this field. The grant will assist the team in hiring research assistants, funding resources for fieldwork and data collection, and renting research spaces to transfer and share knowledge.

Prof. Comber, former director of the MBA program and a Dal alumnus himself, was brought on the team to look at knowledge transfer, values and ethics within the field of sex work and health. He has an ideal background: 17 years of practice in [health](#) care, a faculty position on the Canadian Medical Association, a Master of Arts in Human Development, a PHD in organizational systems, a research background in leadership and ethics, and current research on physician leadership.

The team plans to begin its work in British Columbia, since the high volume of sex work research conducted in the area gives them better access to populations within the trade. From there, the empirical study will move across Canada to look at the governing policies and guidelines around research ethics in sex work, and the perceptions of those in the sex trade about their experiences.

At the end of the three-year study, the research team will use its findings to inform evidence-based practice around research ethics guidelines that can be used in the future. Prof. Comber believes that while the study is focused on sex work specifically, its conclusions may also be transferable to several fields within research.

"There's all sorts of moving variables, and part of research ethics is to protect as you go," he says. "It's always good for researchers to ask questions around what we've done, what we're currently doing and ways we can improve."

Provided by Dalhousie University

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