**Research Project: Proposal & Annotated Bibliography**

***Occupational Violence: Subjectivity, Self-protection, and Online Sex Work in the US***

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## Research Proposal

> "If you're like me, and sometimes take show requests on Skype or other platforms, it is absolutely vital to get a VPN for your PC to protect yourself from those that would go an extra mile to track your IP address." – Cammie (2019)
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> "I contacted the police, who told me to contact the FBI since it was a cyber issue, which I then did […] never heard back from them."
>
> – Hannah Palmer (2022)

Existing medical anthropological research on sex work has largely conflated the occupation with street-based prostitution despite long-standing knowledge that there are at least twenty-five different ways of doing sex work (Jones 2015; Harcourt and Donovan 2005). Specifically, medical anthropologists have thus far focused on identifying and analyzing the occupational health hazards associated with prostitution and the risk-management strategies employed by street-based prostitutes both in the Global South and in the Global North (Katsulis et al. 2010; Lorway 2009; Roche et al. 2005; Yu 2013). Two trends emerge from these studies: 1) the ability of prostitutes to still exercise agency to protect their health under structural constraints, and 2) the formation of sex worker subjectivities as a result of the complex interactions between agency and constraint. For example, although scholars have argued that female prostitutes lack agency under the violent conditions in which they work (Maher 1997; Phoenix 1999), Roche et al. (2005) have shown that storytelling is one strategy that allows street-based female prostitutes in New York City to prevent exposure to violent customers and to sexually transmitted infections (164). Moreover, Katsulis et al. (2010) have revealed that prostitutes in Tijuana, Mexico prevent the potential negative health effects of their occupation (e.g., PTSD, drug abuse, and depression) by actively employing a number of strategies such as working with a third party (348). Further, some medical anthropologists have altogether challenged the notion that prostitution is simply an undesirable way for the marginalized to escape poverty by showing that subjectivities emerging from sex work can in certain contexts allow prostitutes to gain enhanced political mobility (see Lorway et al. 2009). In contrast, Yu (2013) has shown that the formation of subjectivities in this manner has put female prostitutes in China at risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections in their efforts to fight prostitution stigma. Overall, however, there exists little to no medical anthropological work exploring similar questions of violence, agency, and subjectivity associated with other forms of sex work.

With the rise of digital technologies such as the internet, a new group of sex workers, sometimes referred to as "technology-mediated indirect sex workers" (TMIs), primarily consisting of webcam models and online pornographers has emerged (Campbell et al. 2019). Although some have argued that online platforms have made sex work a lot safer than street-based prostitution, there is evidence that online sex workers continue to face violence both online and offline (Jones 2015, 564), and that TMIs themselves demand their experiences with occupational violence to be made a public health priority (Campbell et al. 1542). Moreover, TMIs' occupational safety concerns are reflected not only in scholarship but also in first-hand narratives surrounding their experiences of violence and prevention strategies. For example, Cammie (2019), who is a webcam model herself, emphasizes the need for every webcam model to create a "camsona" who has "a different name, age, birthdate, and even mailing address" as protection against violence from their viewers. Cammie further advices fellow webcammers to hide their IP addresses with a VPN when videochatting with customers to avoid offline stalking. Most importantly, Cammie's advice proves important in light of the violence and paranoia experienced by Hannah Palmer, an American OnlyFans model who was stalked in her own home and completely ignored by the FBI when she reached out for legal protection (Diaz 2022).

Taking the words of Cammie (2019) and Palmer (Diaz 2022) as well as the highlighted trends in existing medical anthropological research on sex work as points of departure, I propose the following research question: in the US context, what kinds of occupational safety strategies do TMIs employ in order to protect their mental and physical health, and how do these strategies influence worker subjectivities? First, I suggest that Cammie's (2019) "camsona" as a TMI risk management strategy can be explored by medical anthropologists using Yu's (2013) concept of *conflicting subjectivities* (see annotated bibliography). Further, Palmer's (Diaz 2022) failed attempt at gaining the attention of the FBI to protect herself from her stalker can be explored in the context of Scheper-Hughes' (1996) concept of *everyday violence*, which theorizes how violence against the othered members of society is naturalized by everyday acts of harassment and neglect (see Katsulis et al. 2010 in annotated bibliography). To answer the question, TMIs grappling with harassment and their perpetrators, as well as police officials who ignore the violence against TMIs must be ethnographically studied to understand how these medical anthropological theories can be helpful (or not) in understanding TMI subjectivities and self-protection strategies.

## Annotated Bibliography

**Cammie. 2019. "Keeping It Secret: Advice for Cam Girls." https://camgirls.blog/keeping-it-secret-advice-for-cam-girls/.**

In this short blogpost, Cammie (2019), who is a webcam model herself, offers other workers in her occupation experience-based advice on how to protect themselves against violence by customers and privacy breaches by the websites that they work for. Her main advice involves the creation of a "camsona," who is essentially a character embodying the webcam model's online presence. Specifically, the only thing that a webcam model has in common with her camsona is her personality; everything about her real self, from her birthday to her home address, is different from those of her camsona. In other words, the creation of the camsona involves the splitting of the webcam model's subjectivity into two counterparts. In the previous section, I have suggested that Yu's (2013) *conflicting subjectivities* can theorize the relationship of a webcam model with her camsona. Specifically, just as prostitutes in China protect themselves from social harm by crafting for themselves the subjectivity of a modern woman and thus fighting prostitution stigma (351), Cammie (2019) suggests that webcam models can reduce the risk of occupational violence by crafting a camsona. In both cases, the sex worker embodies a *conflicting subjectivity* in the sense that various aspects of themselves oppose their strategically created sense of self. Cammie's blogpost is relevant to my research question as it provides evidence that the occupational violence experienced by TMIs can give rise to new worker subjectivities.

**Diaz, Adriana. 2022. "I'm an OnlyFans Model – A Stalker Secretly Filmed Me in My Own Home." https://nypost.com/2022/12/19/im-an-only-fans-model-a-stalker-secretly-filmed-me-in-my-own-home/.**

In this news article, Diaz (2022) documents her interview with an OnlyFans model named Hannah Palmer, who was stalked and filmed in her own home by her neighbors. The part of this article the most relevant to my research proposal is the lack of attention given to Palmer by the FBI after she reported many instances of verbal harassment and stalking by the people aware of her online presence. As a result, Palmer has taken matters into her own hands by changing her fan mail address, installing a security system in her home, and using a second cellphone for work. Drawing inspiration from Katsulis et al. (2010), I suggest that Palmer's experience with occupational violence can be theorized by Scheper-Hughes' (1996) *everyday*

*violence.* Specifically, Katsulis et al. suggest that in Tijuana, Mexico, violence against prostitutes has been deemed appropriate and thus natural due to their deviant position in society's moral order (358). As a result, everyday violence against sex workers, specifically against women, is rendered invisible by the cultural and moral context in which it happens (358). Hence, Palmer's failed attempts at obtaining legal protection from her perpetrators can potentially be studied as an instance of naturalized everyday violence. However, as mentioned in the previous section, an ethnography of state officials such as the FBI is necessary to confirm or refute this prediction.

**Katsulis, Yasmina, Vera Lopez, Alesha Durfee, and Alyssa Robillard. 2010. "Female Sex Workers and the Social Context of Workplace Violence in Tijuana, Mexico: Female Sex Workers and Workplace Violence in Tijuana, Mexico."** ***Medical Anthropology Quarterly*** **24 (3): 344–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1387.2010.01108.x.**

With the knowledge that gender-based workplace violence has negative physical and mental health effects on female sex workers, Katsulis et al. (2010) investigate how female sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico manage occupational risks to their health under legal health regulations. The authors identify many management strategies adopted by the sex workers, such as warning one another about violent customers (349) and choosing safer work locations (348). Moreover, Katsulis et al. emphasize that the ability of a sex worker to use these tactics is determined by the specific structural constraints they face, such as their legal status (348). The research methodology consists of ethnography and interviews with 190 female sex workers conducted over eighteen months between the years 1999 and 2001 in Tijuana, Mexico (344). Most importantly, the methodology of my research proposal was inspired by the theoretical framework employed in this article. Specifically, to contextualize the occupational violence experienced by the sex workers in Tijuana, Katsulis et al. invoke Scheper-Hughes' (1996) *everyday violence*, Farmer's (2003) *structural violence*, and Bourdieu's (2000) *symbolic violence* approaches (358). In this context, *everyday violence* involves the naturalization of violence against sex workers with reference to their deviation from society's moral order (358). *Symbolic violence* describes the internalization of violence by the sex workers, who come to view themselves as deserving of their suffering (358). Lastly, *structural violence* refers to the circumstances, such as poverty and gender inequality, that compel women to become sex workers (358).

**Lorway, Robert, Sushena Reza-Paul, and Akram Pasha. 2009. "On Becoming a Male Sex Worker in Mysore."** ***Medical Anthropology*** **Quarterly 23 (2): 142–.**

Lorway et al. (2009) challenge dominant public health perceptions of male sex work in India as simply a consequence of poverty and as a factor of HIV/AIDS vulnerability. Specifically, they argue that the complex interactions between public health discourse, individual sexual desire, and the social context in which male prostitutes work give rise to sexual subjectivities that provide male sex workers with not only economic relief but also enhanced political mobility (143). Further, the notion that sex work is always a consequence of poverty is disproven by ethnographic figures such as a male respondent who reveals that he became a prostitute at a young age out of pure erotic desire (142). The research methodology is a four-and-a-half-month-long ethnography conducted in India's Karnataka state in 2009 (147). The study participants were male sex workers who were subjected to a HIV-intervention project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (147). This article relates to my research proposal as it illustrates the forming of new subjectivities through the complex interactions between sex work, health, and powerful actors such as clinicians working for the HIV-intervention project.

**Roche, Brenda, Alan Neaigus, and Maureen Miller. 2005. "Street Smarts and Urban Myths: Women, Sex Work, and the Role of Storytelling in Risk Reduction and Rationalization."** ***Medical Anthropology Quarterly*** **19 (2): 149–70. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.2005.19.2.149.**

Roche et al. (2005) argue that storytelling is a risk-reduction strategy used by drug-using street-based sex workers in New York City to manage and prevent their exposure to sexually transmitted infections and to violent encounters with customers. Further, the authors claim that the method of storytelling can be incorporated into public health efforts to reduce the occupational health hazards associated with street-based sex work. The authors identify two distinct formats of storytelling as "street smarts" (150), which are stories of first-hand experiences of survival, and as "urban myths" (150), which are legendary stories collectively generated and spread by the street-based sex work community. The research methodology is a mix of "life history" (153) and semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation conducted between March and November 2000 in New York City (153). The group of research participants consists of twenty-eight drug-using street-based female sex workers over the age of eighteen (153). This article relates to my research proposal as it illustrates how, though they work

under the structural constraints of poverty and patriarchy, female sex workers in Mexico can still employ strategies of self-protection and thus exercise agency under dominant structural forces. Similarly, my research question draws inspiration from Cammie (2019) and Palmer (2022) who, faced with legal structures inadequate for their protection as TMIs, can still exercise a level of agency by taking work safety measures such as VPN usage and home security system installation.

**Yu, Yeon Jung. 2013. "Subjectivity, Hygiene, and STI Prevention: A Normalization Paradox in the Cleanliness Practices of Female Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China."** ***Medical Anthropology Quarterly*** **27 (3): 348–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12050.**

Yu (2013) argues that in their efforts to mitigate the stigma associated with sex work, Chinese female sex workers adopt practices that endanger their physical health. Yu refers to the process in which women negotiate their health in exchange for societal acceptance as "conflicted subjectivity" (351). For example, a sex worker named Jasmin refuses to admit having an STI to avoid being stigmatized as "a threat to society" (349) and thus puts her physical health at risk by rejecting treatment. The research methodology is ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a period of twenty-six months between the years 2006 and 2009 in Haikou's various neighborhoods. This article relates to my research as it illustrates that sex workers' management of occupational hazards (both physical and emotional) can result in the formation of new subjectivities. In this context, the women's resistance to the subject position of a female sex worker as "illegal, immoral, and unclean subordinates" (348) results in their own ways of being in the world as modern and desirable (355).

**Additional Sources**

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