

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 9
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 12

Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

Clark-Oates, Angela. "Street Sex Workers' Discourse: Realizing Material Change through Agential Choice." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 108–12, doi:10.25148/clj.9.2.009295.

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Street Sex Workers' Discourse: Realizing Material Change through Agential Choice

Jill McCracken

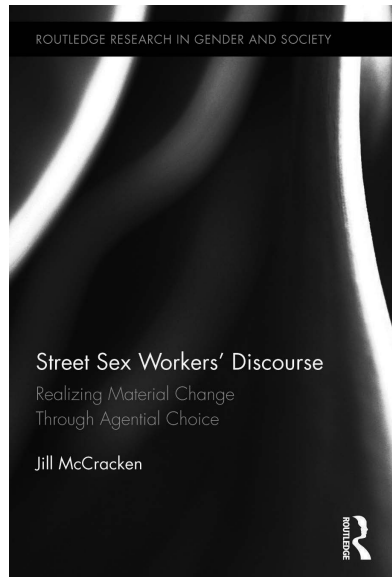
New York: Routledge, 2013. 276 pp.

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In *Street Sex Workers' Discourse: Realizing Material Change Through Agential Choice*, Jill McCracken explores how material conditions encountered by sex workers—realities that “are created and *disrupted* by discourse and rhetoric” (xxviii)—have the potential to both deny *and* construct agential choice. To do this, she used an ethnographic design to embed herself within a community of sex workers as a method for asking questions and spending time “with women who exchange sex for money or drugs and the myriad people who come in contact with them” (191). Consequently, as a researcher and a self-identified advocate for sex workers, McCracken argues for more complex interpretations of the stories, ones that can lead to robust solutions to the systemic and individual traumas experienced by them. Through critical discourse analysis, she disrupts the historical and cultural interpretations of sex workers, showing how these constructed realities have led to ineffective or limited solutions because they have historically been hindered by an over-reliance on the archetypal binary of victim/survivor. This binary obscures not only the kaleidoscopic meaning of these workers' lives, but also limits opportunities for responsible rhetorical agency, or what McCracken calls agential choice.

During the “multi-sited ethnography,” McCracken conducted fieldwork in the Nemez community (a city in the southwest US whose name was redacted) for thirty months. As a participant-observer, she was more than a neutral researcher. McCracken built credibility and trust in this community. She volunteered for a social services organization, and after two years, she became an employee of an agency that worked with those who were “chronically homeless” (192). In these positions, she learned the systems navigated by sex workers, she participated in outreach and education, and she developed relationships with the clients who were seeking services. Consequently, her



identity as researcher was not static as she moved between her positions as volunteer, employee, and researcher, gathering her corpus of data across three sites in the community: articles from three primary newspapers, interviews with public figures, and interviews with street-based sex workers. As a participant-observer in this multi-sited ethnographic study, McCracken lived her research, engaged in the possibility of what Freire calls the “dynamic movement between researching and acting on the results of the research” (30). And this movement between her positions as researcher, volunteer, and employee allowed her to examine “the relationships between and among people and institutions that exist locally, globally, and internationally” (192).

McCracken organizes the book into six chapters, sandwiched by a preface and four appendices. The preface functions as an introduction to the research purpose, site, participants, and approach. She also introduces key concepts and terms that anchor her analysis in chapters two through five. In chapter one, she unpacks the theoretical framework, situating the reader in relation to the term *agential choice*, which is McCracken’s foundational concept in the book. In chapter two and three, she examines the status of victimhood in relationships between the sex workers and the community. She goes on to identify various constructions of victimhood, to identify how these constructions get positioned as problems, and finally to explore how these constructions of victimhood and their corresponding positions limit proposed solutions. Chapter four explores the flaws of one particular solution: the individual responsibility and choice to change. Much like her critiques in chapter two and three of the problem/solution dichotomy, McCracken illustrates the failure and humiliation of a solution steeped in an ideology of individualism and self-reliance, which ignores the historical and cultural practices of traumatizing bodies marked as sex workers. In chapter five, she explores this systemic violence. McCracken writes, “...when systemic issues related to poverty and violence are at the root of many of the choices this individual has made, it is unfair to simply place the total responsibility on her shoulders and expect her to change” (125). In chapter six, she shares the implications of her research, focusing on systemic change, agential choice, and a re-imagining of individual change. In the appendices, McCracken provides access to the research artifacts: detailed descriptions of the participants, the research design and processes of analysis, data tables, and interview materials and protocols.

In chapter one, McCracken orients the reader to the theoretical tapestry that undergirds her study. She explains that meaning/truth (and thus material realities) are constructed at the intersection between the improvisation of experience and the fixed discursive representation of that experience. Relying on Judith Butler, McCracken argues *that* these patterns of meaning—difference through repetition—have the potential to shift based on the discourses and identities being used to construct them. She writes,

I explore how the idea, term, identity, and material reality of ‘the prostitute’ is constituted in the discourse surrounding women who exchange sex for money or other gain, and then, as the places for disruption are revealed, explore how materialities can be made differently. (8)

And it is this theoretical point—the potentiality of discourses to shift fixed understandings of terms and experiences—that allows McCracken to explore the possibilities and constraints of *agential choice* for the street-based sex workers, but to do this, McCracken also relies heavily on Marilyn Cooper’s theoretical notions of agency. And while I commend McCracken for attempting to use a framework that emerges from both Butler and Cooper’s theoretical ideas of agency, she does not sustain this theoretical blending throughout the book. Instead, the scope of her research influences McCracken to rely much more on Cooper’s notion of rhetorical agency, particularly Cooper’s emphasis on “embodied individual agency” (qtd. in McCracken), a decision that proves useful in the last chapter of the book. But her brief exploration of the theoretical tension between Butler and Cooper opens up an important space that creates opportunities for further exploration by anyone interested in the rhetorical agent.

Although chapter one is theoretically dense, at the end, McCracken steps out of this theoretical space and writes directly to the readers, nudging them to be open-minded as they enter into this relationship with the text. McCracken encourages the readers to be responsible rhetorical agents who can shake their preconceived notions and stigmas and who can construct interpretive spaces that allow for agential choice. This subtle address of the reader is a meta-moment that hints at the vulnerabilities of being a researcher and a writer. And although this builds intimacy with the reader, McCracken uses this crafting technique very sparingly throughout the book. There are only two other places (in chapter two and chapter six) where she risks exposing these vulnerabilities, but in all three instances, McCracken builds ethos that ultimately persuades the reader to be the kind of listener, “who places trust in the individual, or other, believing she or he is doing her or his best” (12).

In chapter two, McCracken identifies two potential victims: the sex worker and the neighborhood where the sex workers reside. Through the analysis of newspaper articles and the interviews with public figures, she determines that the neighborhood, more than the sex workers, is constructed as being victimized by the drugs, violence, crime, and disease associated with street-based sex work. Inevitably, the construction of neighborhood as victim perpetuates the criminalization of the sex worker, an idea she explores more thoroughly in the third chapter. The logic of this solution is based on the premise that if the sex workers were removed from the neighborhood, the drugs, violence, crime, and disease would disappear. McCracken not only critiques this solution for its faulty logic, but also for its disproportional and detrimental impact on “people of color as well as transgender individuals” (24). She then explores the construction of sex worker as victim. And although McCracken’s analysis across her corpus of data reveals the complex material conditions faced by the sex workers—poverty, abuse, trauma, neglect—the victim status is most often attributed to individual choice instead of these systemic conditions. In ignoring the systemic conditions, the newspapers, public figures, and even the sex workers themselves construct the sex worker as victimized by their own personal choice of substance abuse. She claims that in the corpus of newspaper articles that the cluster drugs/prostitution “occurs 157 times” (38). This

evidence, triangulated with the interview data from the street-based sex workers and the public figures, reveals a strong correlation between drug use and prostitution, but McCracken interprets this finding through a critical lens, explaining how this cluster actually reveals the power of ideology and its embeddedness in our language: “Ideology is powerful, and an ideology of personal responsibility is emphasized in the language surrounding street-based sex work” (54). While McCracken’s conclusion echoes the theoretical framework she constructs in chapter one and allows her to articulate this important finding, the readers would benefit from a more explicit connection as they navigate the ambiguous space between what the data reveals and what McCracken “sees” through the theoretical frame.

In chapters four and five, McCracken explores the limited opportunities of choice that sex workers are offered in relation to their marginalized position within the community. She critiques the hyper-individualism perpetuated in the victim/survivor dichotomy, illustrating how it perpetuates systemic violence. More importantly, McCracken thoroughly examines the relationship between language, power, and ideology, advocating for language that values instead of demeans the sex worker, that disrupts the status of victimhood instead of perpetuates it, and that acknowledges systemic issues related to sex work instead of obscuring them. In these chapters, McCracken shows her penchant for residing in the messy space between individual agency and systemic determinism, and in doing so, asks valuable questions about how policies and laws further stigmatize and criminalize vulnerable and marginalized populations, like sex workers, by dehumanizing their bodies and ignoring their voices.

Finally, in chapter six, McCracken crafts the dénouement. She argues for “developing an ideology and practice of power-with” in relation to sex workers, a practice that has the potential to create and respect *agential choice*. The term *agential choice* coined by McCracken is integral to the solutions she proposes to “begin modifying the discourse and ideologies surrounding the exchange for money and drugs” (161). At the end of this chapter, the author provides practical application for this theoretical concept. While I do find this new term useful in thinking about how the reader, the police officer, the volunteer, or any other community service worker or community member can open more opportunities for sex workers to have agential choice, I am concerned by the limitation of discussing agency (particularly in relation to marginalized groups) as being dependent on the willingness of another to shift her actions, discourses, or ideologies through recognition of/by others. McCracken admits throughout the book that power influences who speaks, recognizes, and listens. The strength of her analysis, with its focus on language and ideologies, lies in her commitment to consistently acknowledge that power always, already exists between speaker and listener, and for her participants, there have been very few moments where they have been the speaker, positioned as a legitimate agent who can be trusted to make their own best choices (151). Yet, when McCracken discusses agential choice in the last chapter, she moves the focus from the sex workers to those community members with whom the sex worker is likely to interact. As a reader, I was surprised that she was unable to show how shifts in the sex workers’ own discourses and ideologies might also contribute to

more opportunities for agential choice. Instead, her practical applications are more of an outline for those who make policies and laws, work at rehabilitation and social service clinics, enforce the criminalization of this trade, and stigmatize the women, all of whom reside on the periphery of the lives of street-based sex workers. Although it is evident that this was an intentional decision that emerged from “what was contained and revealed in the interviews and corresponding analysis of specific material conditions” (166), I think McCracken’s choices in this chapter imply an important question for other researchers interested in the rhetorical agent: How do researchers explore studies about ideologies, power, agency, and identities of stigmatized groups and provide practical implications for communities without privileging those who are already empowered by normative, cultural practices? This is not a flaw in McCracken’s work. Instead, it is an acknowledgement of the vulnerabilities of being a researcher and writer who is concerned with understanding how individuals can change within systemic (almost obscure) constraints, an acknowledgement that McCracken does not shy away from in other chapters in the book. McCracken’s research transcends the field of rhetoric, providing insight for sociologist, anthropologists, social workers, and criminologists. Moreover, by outlining agential ways of knowing and interacting with street-based sex workers, McCracken has ensured that her research has important theoretical and practical implications for community literacy studies. Like all relevant research, McCracken has opened up a space for further inquiry.

Works Cited

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