Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

hosted by the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University on behalf of the APSA Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research
https://www.qualtd.net/

Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=28&t=122

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Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Tue Sep 06, 2016 4:51 am**
by **millilake**
1. In your experience, list any factors make a research population potentially vulnerable or marginalized? (eg population engages in a criminalized activity)
a. List any measures have you taken in your research to account for this potential vulnerability/marginalization.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Thu Oct 20, 2016 3:31 pm**
by **Guest**
[quote="millilake"]1. In your experience, list any factors make a research population potentially vulnerable or marginalized? (eg population engages in a criminalized activity)
a. List any measures have you taken in your research to account for this potential vulnerability/marginalization.[/quote]

I study religious organizations. My interviewees are often employees of these organizations. I not only ask them questions about their organizations' formal policies, but about general conceptualizations about and approaches to sensitive subjects like religious diversity, proselytizing, and secular vs. religious norms. These representatives are, in many cases, aware of international norms that frown on the integration of religion and peacebuilding/humanitarianism/development. As such, my interviewees have to be careful about what they say. Their jobs' could be at stake if their superior finds out they said something that is not part of the organizational narrative; thus portraying the organization in a way that is not favorable in the international community. I strive to protect my interviewees by avoiding mentioning any details that could lead to the identification of the subject by a reader. - Tanya B. Schwarz, University of Notre Dame

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Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Mon Oct 31, 2016 3:23 pm**
by **CrJackson**

> *millilake wrote:*1. In your experience, list any factors make a research population potentially vulnerable or marginalized? (eg population engages in a criminalized activity)
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1. Factors that make a research population potentially vulnerable or marginalized are, for me, ones of power and authority. Would the participants feel pressured due to their affiliation with a particular organization or workplace? Would the participants feel pressured to participate because of friendships or networks? Or, alternatively, could participants loose their positions/jobs/status by participating? Obviously, people who are incarcerated or participating in alternatives to incarceration programs are vulnerable to the power dynamics of the CJ system. I'd argue this extends to other systems that have a lot of control over our lives, like medical care and educational institutions.

I often hear stereotypes of vulnerability: e.g., you can't interview street-based sex workers unless you plan on offering (almost demanding) social service intervention or you can't interview pregnant sex workers because they're in a "delicate" state and asking them about their lives might stress their pregnancy to the point of illness. Vulnerability comes from the power structures that exist, more so than our imaginary of victimization.

I'd say just about every community is marginalized in multiple ways, unless you are "studying up" the 1% who are not marginalized at all, carrying lots of socially mediated privileges. Marginalization can come from demographics, from job type (e.g., we respect chefs but not food cart vendors), from ability, educational status, etc.

Measures that I take into account around vulnerability and marginalization include working with the communities being studied, or simply studying my own communities. Grounding myself in what I know. And general practices, like confidentiality, not asking for signifying markers, removing all signifying markers in transcriptions/notes, etc.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 6:11 pm**
by **SMajic**
Thank you!

> *Guest wrote:*
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Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Tue Nov 01, 2016 6:14 pm**
by **SMajic**
This is very helpful, Crystal! Can you elaborate more on from where you hear stereotypes of vulnerability (Eg from other researchers) and how you challenge them in the research process?

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Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Tue Nov 15, 2016 11:36 am**
by **MichelleJurkovich**

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Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Fri Nov 18, 2016 11:02 pm**
by **Guest**

I study immigrant activists and although I never ask, often times in the course of my interviews they mention that they are undocumented. In order to help hide their identities--especially when I'm writing about immigrants in small towns where they may be easily identifiable--I don't use their real names or geographic locations, and I usually change their occupations.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Sun Nov 27, 2016 2:40 pm**
by **abasu**
In my research on Hindu nationalist violence against minority groups in India, I am deeply aware of the risks vulnerable communities take in speaking with me and in my responsibility to protect their identities. When conducting ethnographic research, I change the names of my informants as well as the name of the town in which I conducted research. Even if people I interview do not request anonymity, I feel I owe it to them as they might not be aware of the potential harm that is associated with making their views and actions known. I rely on thick description and providing extensive information about the historical and political context to establish my authority. Readers are free to develop alternative interpretations of the events I describe. I do not believe that publishing field notes would be either ethical or informative.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Fri Dec 09, 2016 12:32 am**
by **Guest**
While I have not worked directly with research subjects, I have assisted two scholars in conducting a literature review on youth who engage in commercial sex trades in the United States. I will discuss four sources of vulnerability among these youth in regards to research.

The first source of vulnerability stems from many researchers' assumption that they understand the lives of youth better than youth themselves because older age = greater knowledge. The problem with this assumption is that many youth who rely on sex trades for their survival have often been living independently for considerable periods of time. For example, they have often left home or care, dropped out of school, and entered the labour market to support themselves in the context of intersecting forms of marginalisation, such as homelessness, unemployment, and systemic discrimination. Because of these intersecting disadvantages, youth who trade sex to meet their most basic needs tend to achieve traditional markers of adulthood at an early age. In short, they have not had the luxury of remaining "innocent" and dependent children. Despite this precocious adulthood, researchers often dismiss young people's understandings of their own experiences, especially if they express agency in their narratives about trading sex. While any agency is clearly constrained by multiple disadvantages, researchers are too quick to disregard as false consciousness the voices of youth who assert that trading sex serves their best interests. A failure to genuinely listen to youth means that the needs they self-identify and prioritize are often overlooked.

In my attempt to counter this adultism in my literature review, I tried to privilege qualitative evidence articulated by youth themselves, rather than relying exclusively on researchers' interpretations of that evidence. Instead of assuming that youth lack knowledge, I believe it is more ethical to respect youth as experts in their own lives. I hope that this approach mitigated the fact I have never participated in sex trades myself, and therefore lack lived experience in this domain.

A second source of vulnerability is linked to research conducted by researchers who form alliances with law enforcement agencies and NGOs that seek to "rescue and rehabilitate" youth involved in the sex trade. Institutional review boards may approve of such research due to the premise that youth are protected by institutions within the juvenile justice and NGO systems. However, youth who are confined in these settings are often treated as a captive population by researchers who seek to confirm dominant narratives about victims of "domestic minor sex trafficking". The resulting research is often biased by youth's need to conform to the assumptions that, for example, all juveniles who engage in sex trades are controlled by pimps. If youth challenge these assumptions during the research process, they could potentially be seen as less deserving victims, which raises questions about the ethics of conducting research in these settings.

A third source of vulnerability relates to young people's desire to avoid services designed to assist them. A

significant proportion of youth who engage in sex trades have spent time in the care of the care of the state and in homeless services, but many have run away from foster homes, homeless shelters, and other welfare services in which they have experienced neglect, abuse, and restrictions on their growing autonomy. Because some youth engage in sex trades to avoid dependence on a welfare system that has failed them, it may be unethical for institutional review boards to require researchers to refer all sex trade-involved youth to services in that system. For example, some services are legally obliged to report the whereabouts of juveniles to their parents, but youth may not want to be returned to the care of parents who have abused them.

A fourth source of vulnerability involves sex trade-involved youth who experience exploitation by their parents in their homes. When institutional review boards require parental consent for research with juveniles, such youth may be understandably reluctant to disclose exploitation by their mothers or fathers. This works to conceal parental exploitation, which reinforces a hegemonic perception of exploiters as outsiders that diverts attention from violence against youth in the home.

In conclusion, researchers may have no choice but to comply with the requirements of institutional review boards, but these requirements may unintentionally cause harm to youth in the sex trade, especially if they are expected to return to systems in which they have experienced violence and control by adults. A more ethical solution would be for researchers to refer participants to low-threshold services that respect young people's autonomy and provide viable alternatives to the sex trade, but there is a pressing need for more of these services.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Fri Dec 09, 2016 2:06 pm**
by **malahtun**

people who are in unique social categories--e.g. african american women tenured professors of computer science--are vulnerable.

right now, i am running surveys of university faculty about perceptions of climate, attitudes toward diversity, social networks on campus, etc.

the surveys ask questions about people's rank, field, and social identities. people in categories with small numbers (like the example above) are often reluctant to respond because they dont want to identified, they fear retaliation, etc.

we inform people, on the first page of the survey that: "Survey data will be de-identified, and we will not release or publicize any disaggregated information from this survey, except when the groups are sufficiently large to preserve the anonymity of respondents." we have heard that this works to allay some fears.

the big question is: if we are required to make data available as a condition of publication, how can we insure that future users of the data will respect this principle?

the same holds for qualitative research, as we are also planning to conduct in-person interviews with faculty members.

(will repost to another thread too.)

mala

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Mon Dec 12, 2016 10:12 pm**
by **Guest**
Lahra Smith
Georgetown University

Vulnerability is a really important but complicated concept. In my work in East Africa, I find that the concept cuts both ways. My IRB has tended to treat some people as more vulnerable than I necessary, i.e. acting like I would "expose" interviewees to vulnerabilities about talking about inter-communal conflicts in Ethiopia for instance when in my experience Ethiopians are really good at knowing the limits of what they want to safely share and not and I do not have to set those limits for them. They know far better than I could arbitrate for them what the limits of what is safe to say in front of other Ethiopians is.
On the other hand, I think have found that it is important that I have protections in place that safeguard civil servants in ways much like rural peasants. That means that government works in an authoritarian state like Ethiopia want to complete a verbal consent script not a signed consent script just like regular interviewees so there is no permanent record that they were interviewed. This reflects a kind of political "vulnerability" in an authoritarian regime that I only learned doing fieldwork and being sensitive to it. My IRB protocols and now a DA-RT initiative would have to accommodate for me to do research and publish those findings.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Wed Dec 21, 2016 3:59 pm**
by **DZS**

I really appreciate the many thoughtful posts in this discussion. I want to second and build in particular on Mala's caution about how easy it can be to expose the identities of people who are one of very few in a particular group, and to add that this can be a hazard not only in qualitative and small-N research but in work that uses large-N and quantitative methods as well. It would take very few pieces of information to identify the organizations that have participated in the studies of social and economic justice advocacy groups I've conducted, for example. It is a very short leap from there to identifying the individual officers and staff members who so generously participated in those studies. This is true for the in-depth interviews, and it is also true of the surveys, even though those have hundreds of respondents. And although the officers and staff at these organizations may not themselves constitute a "marginalized population," exposing their identities would certainly make them vulnerable and would compromise the work they do to advocate for and represent members of marginalized groups.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Wed Dec 21, 2016 7:51 pm**
by **Guest**

It is interesting to think in the context of this discussion what to do in situations of non-marginalized but vulnerable interview subjects. I have interviewed employees at international organizations who are not in any meaningful way marginalized, but they are potentially vulnerable -- mostly in terms of problems at work but also in terms of things like embarrassment -- to certain things that might be revealed in my research. I typically provide anonymity as a consequence.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Thu Dec 22, 2016 1:12 pm**
by **ZoeMarks**
Thanks to everyone who's shared their comments above. I just wanted to add a few quick thoughts to the discussion:
- Research participants sometimes (perhaps often, depending on the subfield) move into and out of vulnerability or marginality. This has come up in previous threads as a particularly sticky problem for transparency - e.g., what looks like risk-free disclosure today may be life-threatening next year.
- To deal with this, I think it's helpful to ask myself about violence: "How does/could my work exacerbate, or enable, physical or structural violence?"...and then, of course, "What can I do to mitigate or protect against that?" This applies to all stages of the research process, not just publication of findings.
- Researchers and research assistants can also be vulnerable and marginalised in their institutions/communities of origin (thanks, Mala, for turning our attention within the academy, above); and/or when we get to the field or research space. The duty of care incumbent upon us when working with research assistants is a particularly salient concern, as vectors of privilege and of marginality or vulnerability can be both compounded and harder to read if the 'lead' researcher isn't a local/insider.
- Relatedly, I think it's important to note that researcher vulnerability - and the risks we're willing and able to take vis-a-vis transparency and disclosure - varies dramatically depending on our age, race, nationality, gender in many settings, *and* whether we intend to continue research in a particular community or space.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Wed Dec 28, 2016 4:00 pm**
by **LisaV**
I also think the discussion in this thread has been excellent. I want to re-iterate an issue that was mentioned in the comments that I have come across in my previous research on disability politics including interviews with disability rights activists.
This concerns the idea that vulnerability is (at least to some extent) socially constructed and influenced (if not determined) by power dynamics. The ethics board at one institution I worked at automatically categorized people with disabilities as "vulnerable". Yet the people I interviewed were running NGOs, organizing protests, lobbying government, taking legal cases etc. In the institutions I have worked at in the UK projects based on interviews with "elites" generally don't require ethics approval. There is an obvious tension then when studying "elites with disabilities". My concern is that by automatically categorizing a population as vulnerable we may in fact be perpetuating an injustice against them both in terms of broad brushstroke stereotypes about one's capacity to participate in research and in terms of the additional barriers put into place in studying the issues that are important to these "vulnerable" populations. This is not suggest that there aren't populations that shouldn't be protected - of course there are - but I think our approach should be more nuanced and recognise the contingency of vulnerability.
In order to deal with vulnerability in terms of the population I was interviewing I found that standard informed consent forms were a non-starter (and in fact risked perpetuating marginality by excluding some participants (for example those with intellectual disabilities) who were perfectly capable of giving consent but just not in the form of a written statement). Instead I provided information on options for confidentiality and anonymity before research interviews took place. Discussions on confidentiality and anonymity were conducted on ad hoc bases in order to better take into account and accommodate individual needs which varied widely. This included, for example, continual processes of seeking consent at various stages of the research process, not just at the beginning of an interview.

Re: Question 1: Marginalization and vulnerability

Posted: **Sat Dec 31, 2016 9:27 pm**

by **Guest**
[quote="MichelleJurkovich"][quote="millilake"]1. In your experience, list any factors make a research population potentially vulnerable or marginalized? (eg population engages in a criminalized activity)
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I am glad you brought up this topic concerning the vulnerability of employees in different kinds of organizations. Employees in professional settings rarely appear 'vulnerable'. In fact, it is part of the job to look in control and invulnerable. Nonetheless they are. The internal culture of each institution may differ with some encouraging sharing information and others taking more of a legalistic posture where every word is a potential liability. Assessing the overall cultural setting of an organization sets some limits as to what is open and not open to discussion. This would look like a workplace ethnography.
Lillian Farhat
Independent scholar

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