

10-5-2015

Situating Vulnerability in Research: Implications for Researcher Transformation and Methodological Innovation

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Recommended APA Citation

Arditti, J. A. (2015). Situating Vulnerability in Research: Implications for Researcher Transformation and Methodological Innovation. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1568-1575. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2325>

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Abstract

In this paper, I broaden definitions pertaining to vulnerable participants and elaborate on issues in conducting research with justice-involved individuals and their families. I explore how special human subjects protections may inadvertently silence participants and further marginalize them, along with the social inequality that characterizes “at risk” research populations. Finally, I discuss how vulnerability can invite researcher transformation and methodological innovation and highlight the value of researcher reflexivity, community based participatory research and mixed methods approaches.

Keywords

Vulnerability, Human Subjects, Mixed Methods Research, Qualitative Research, Criminal Justice

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Acknowledgements

This article is a companion piece in response to Easterling and Johnson’s 2015 paper published in the same volume of *The Qualitative Report*: Easterling, B. A., & Johnson, E. I. (2015). Conducting qualitative research on parental incarceration: Personal reflections on challenges and contributions. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1550-1567. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss10/1> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Pre-Conference; National Council on Family Relations; November 19, 2014; Baltimore, MD.

Situating Vulnerability in Research: Implications for Researcher Transformation and Methodological Innovation

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In this paper, I broaden definitions pertaining to vulnerable participants and elaborate on issues in conducting research with justice-involved individuals and their families. I explore how special human subjects protections may inadvertently silence participants and further marginalize them, along with the social inequality that characterizes “at risk” research populations. Finally, I discuss how vulnerability can invite researcher transformation and methodological innovation and highlight the value of researcher reflexivity, community based participatory research and mixed methods approaches. Keywords: Vulnerability, Human Subjects, Mixed Methods Research, Qualitative Research, Criminal Justice

In their paper in this issue describing the challenges of conducting qualitative research with vulnerable families, Beth Easterling and Elizabeth Johnson (2015) have done us a service by drawing our attention to the complexities of research with justice-involved individuals and their family members. They focus on the strengths of phenomenological research methods, and challenges to gaining access to vulnerable populations. Perhaps the most unique contribution of their paper involves their suggestions regarding how best to bring a flexible and compassionate approach to the research process. I am greatly appreciative of their thoughtful efforts to study the incarcerated and their kin and advance family theory and methodology in this area. I would like to elaborate on two central issues I believe are related to Easterling and Johnson’s paper: 1) the definition of vulnerability and what it implies and 2) how vulnerability impacts the research process. I believe, as demonstrated by Easterling and Johnson in terms of the care they took in conducting phenomenological interviews, working with vulnerable participants makes us better researchers and inspires creative and innovative methodology.

Situating Vulnerability in Research

Easterling and Johnson (2015) define vulnerable populations as groups requiring special accommodations, consideration and protections because of their vulnerable status. I would like to situate vulnerability as a factor that goes beyond the issue of whether an individual holds membership in a “protected class.” How we define vulnerability is critical in developing responsive research practices and ultimately, empowering participants. Here I elaborate on issues pertaining to overprotection, social inequality, and marginalization.

Overprotection can silence vulnerable participants. Vulnerable status implies several things beyond the need for special human subjects protections. First, the equating of vulnerability with the need for special human subjects protection suggests that prisoners, like children, lack capacity and are not in a position to “decide for themselves” (Moser et al., 2004). Hence human subjects protections might help in terms of protecting the imprisoned from coercion and ensuring their rights via informed consent, but also hurt by contributing to the preexisting barriers inherent in studying institutionalized populations. Institutional environments are closed and protected from view— a situation that can obviously equate with less coercion from outsiders but render individuals invisible and subject to coercion

within the very institutions they reside. A spirit of “overprotection” may inadvertently make research so onerous that participation in the research process on the part of prisoners, or similar classes of vulnerable participants, is discouraged.

This spirit of overprotection seems to be particularly obvious within the criminal justice system itself, in that researchers not only have to go through their respective universities for human subjects approval, but are also subject to state or federal institutional review and approval in order to gain access to secondary data or study participants. Review boards internal to the criminal justice system, which ideally are in place to enhance the research process and protect incarcerated persons, can also serve to obstruct the research process and increase the inaccessibility of offenders for outside research and programmatic efforts. Moreover, these same human subjects protections (e.g., informed consent) put in place for outside institutions that seek to conduct research, may not be utilized for research and assessment that is “in house” and conducted within prisons. In this manner, human subjects protections are inconsistently applied, may further serve to marginalize prisoners and their kin, and perpetuate their invisibility and silence. Human subjects provisions should clearly benefit the participant, ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the research process, and also ensure participants have every opportunity to engage in research without coercion not only from both researchers, but from the institutions charged with their care or supervision.

Vulnerability is often a result of social inequality. Second, vulnerability implies that a group might be “at risk,” that is, particularly disadvantaged along a range of socioeconomic indicators along with evidence of social inequality. Social inequality is typically reflected by the overrepresentation of a particular group of people with certain problems, lifestyle, or set of issues such as involvement in the child welfare or criminal justice system (Dunbar & Barth, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010). This disproportionality translates into unequal patterns of goods, wealth, opportunities, rewards and punishments or burdens. Social inequality may connect with injustice (Dorling, 2011), and different social positions (e.g., one’s occupation) or statuses (e.g., race and gender) (Grusky, 2001). Clearly, the vulnerability of the incarcerated goes beyond their need for special human subjects protections. The heart of their vulnerability involves their “intersectionality” in that prisoners, as well as other persons who comprise “vulnerable classes,” are especially likely to hold multiple memberships in various stigmatized groups. The cumulative interplay of various axes of inequality (such as gender, race, and class) creates complex social locations that are more central to social experience than any of the axes of inequality considered singly. The fact that prisoners, and often their children, come from histories of intense risk, and are disproportionately poor individuals of color (Wildeman, 2009) reflects this intersectionality.

Vulnerable groups are marginalized. Third, vulnerable participants, particularly as it pertains to the highly stigmatized nature of criminal justice involvement, are not only typically disadvantaged in multiple ways, but they are *marginalized*. Marginalization is a process that sets justice-involved individuals, and by extension their families, apart from other classes of “vulnerable participants” such as pregnant women and children. It has been said that marginalization is the most “dangerous form of oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 53) for it is the process by which social inequality is constructed and perpetuated (Arnold, 1995). Marginalization occurs when people are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in economic, social, political, cultural and other forms of human activity that are normally available to members of a given community and society. Marginalized persons are thus disenfranchised and denied the opportunity to “fulfill themselves as human beings” (Jenson, 2000, p. 1). Clearly we can see this is the case with prisoners who are physically isolated, stripped of their power and citizenship, and experience disenfranchisement on multiple levels.

Disenfranchisement is evident among other vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, that may not fit the human subjects definition of a protected class, but who are also not fully free. For example immigrants may pay taxes, but be prohibited from voting in elections. Engagement in the research process then becomes a critical pathway by which invisibility is broken. Moreover, the intersectionality that applies to vulnerable classes of participants forms a “matrix of domination,” which can result in “marginalization within marginal groups” whose members are relegated to positions of *acute social invisibility* (Veenstra, 2011). Female prisoners are especially vulnerable given their intersectionality. In addition to being classified as felons and subject to structural disenfranchisement (e.g., loss of voting rights, loss of access to certain types of public resources) and stigma, incarcerated mothers are marginalized because of their motherhood, their drug use, their mental health difficulties, their color, and their poverty (Arditti, 2012). Similarly, it has been argued that bisexual and transgendered people may experience oppression within the queer community because their sexual identities are deemed invalid (van Eeden-Moorefield & Benson, 2015).

In sum, a rich definition of vulnerability exposes the shadow side of protection, acknowledges social inequality, and embodies nuanced processes pertaining to marginalization.

Implications for Researcher Transformation and Methodological Innovation

Vulnerability can be a catalyst for improving and strengthening methodology. It can also transform us as researchers in meaningful ways. The distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methodology become less important within the context of research aimed at vulnerable participants and I see this as a positive development. Easterling and Johnson are correct in terms of the inadequacies of quantitative research derived from secondary data sets to yield insightful information about family processes and resilience in justice-involved families. Perhaps the larger issue involves the need for systematic and rigorous work that transcends the qualitative/quantitative divide and responds to complexity and social inequality. Similar to assumptions pertaining to transformative research paradigms (e.g., Mertens, 2007), there is no need to “oversell” a qualitative approach or “put down” quantitative methods (Arditti, 2011) as both are needed to answer important questions about how parental incarceration impacts offenders, their children, and the family members that they leave behind. I elaborate here on how vulnerability inspires researcher transformation and methodological innovation.

Vulnerability inspires a “Qualitative Consciousness.” As noted by the authors and other scholars working in these settings, working within prison settings requires adaptations on the part of researchers in order to comply with multiple regulations. Such adaptations can include not utilizing videotapes, audiotape or computer assisted technology in data collection, or being precluded from compensating participants due to prison or jail policy. Adaptations necessitated in our research due to human subjects protections and regulations pertaining to certain kinds of settings (such as prisons) are generally equated with *constraints* on the research process because it requires us to deviate from our “usual” or preferred protocols. However, participant vulnerability can encourage positive adaptations in how we design and conduct research. In short, it makes us better researchers. If in fact prisoners and their families are vulnerable, then the very activities and goals of research must reflect that vulnerability. Given the often prohibitive and stigmatized context of prison and jail settings, and families’ experiences with those settings via visitation or other forms of contact, I have in previous articles discussed the need to bring a “qualitative consciousness” to the study of marginalized populations impacted by incarceration. Implicit in such an approach is the need to preserve “the perspective of those of whose human experience is being studied” (Byrne,

2005, p. 226). Features of a qualitative consciousness broadly involve creating a trusting presence in the setting, equalizing power between the researcher and the researched, and exposing the place of values in scholarship (Arditti, Acock, & Day, 2005; Arditti, Joest, Lambert-Shute, & Walker, 2010).

The authors' phenomenologically-informed approach provides us with an excellent example of applying such a consciousness in research. I appreciated Easterling and Johnson's emphasis on researcher reflexivity and the retelling of the story of incarcerated motherhood, their attention to participants' voice, their use of flexible and sensitive interview practices, and their efforts to avoid close-ended "why" questions and focus on *how* participants experience their lives. Their work reflects characteristics of "productive" qualitative scholarship in that it is theoretically innovative, fosters empowerment and transformation, and is disseminated, despite barriers in the scholarly world pertaining to the publication of qualitative research (Arditti, 2011).

But beyond the value of allowing participants to tell their story, a qualitative consciousness invites researchers to reflect politically and possibly view their own lives differently as a result of the research experience. Fonow and Cook (1991) refer to this process as "emancipatory knowledge" because it involves the exposure of disadvantage and oppression—facets of experience characterizing many families impacted by incarceration along with other vulnerable populations as defined in the previous section. Research then, takes on a transformative quality—not only in terms of how it might emancipate or empower the participants, but also in terms of how researchers might evolve as a result of their experience engaging with their participants and the data derived from them.

There is no avoiding the subjective: Vulnerability inspires emotion. Unless someone is working with a secondary data set and quite detached from their data, any type of research that is "hands on" will be an opportunity to experience emotions and situate them in the research. Collecting data of any kind, whether it be observational field notes, quantitative survey data, or narrative interview data, within prison walls will likely bring researchers face to face with their own strong emotions. In a previous paper we contended that researcher emotions such as sadness and anger may be unavoidable in prison settings (Arditti et al., 2010). Quina and associates (2007) claimed that "trauma is inherent in corrections research" (p. 127) for all parties involved: the offender and his or her family, and the researchers studying offenders and their kin. It is likely that researchers who enter prison or jail settings, and by extension other stigmatized institutional environments or contexts of extreme disadvantage, may be disturbed by the setting and experiences they would learn about. These conditions give rise to "outlaw emotions"—conventionally unacceptable and intense feelings that often provide the first indication that something may be wrong (Ferrell, 2005; Jaggar, 1989). Outlaw emotions as they pertain to the research process could be construed as any emotion at all if we are to believe that researcher objectivity is both necessary and achievable.

Regardless of methodological approach, it would be far more realistic and useful to strive for an *awareness* of emotions rather than to be devoid of them completely. Emotions suggest we not only have stumbled upon something that might be wrong, but that we have come in contact with another's suffering, or perhaps, the collective "social suffering" of a vulnerable population. Social suffering implies many people are suffering together...and more importantly the "destiny effect from belonging to a stigmatized group" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 64). Thus vulnerability among those we study makes us (i.e., we "researchers") vulnerable too and rightly so. *Our own vulnerability*, in the form of our emotional response to human suffering, can be a catalyst to make us better researchers. Emotions can serve as an "energy source to fuel a line of inquiry, research, and intervention aimed at justice-involved families" (Arditti et al., 2010, p. 1407) or by extension, other vulnerable classes of research participants.

Vulnerability inspires innovation in family research: Promising approaches. Easterling and Johnson's rich description of their phenomenological research demonstrates how vulnerable populations inspire thoughtful and creative approaches to studying families. Their willingness to adapt their open-ended interview questions and follow the lead of their participants reflects an iterative process rooted in the authors' desire to truly understand their participants and give them voice. However, simply because a method is qualitative does not mean there is not room for further innovation and sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable groups. Here I highlight two other approaches that are highly applicable to research with vulnerable participants: Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and mixed methods research.

Advocates of CBPR see this approach as taking the next step: from doing research "on" participants, to doing research "with" participants. From this perspective, research on vulnerable populations should seek not only to understand, but to *empower* (Olshansky, 2008). CBPR is seen as the most appropriate type of research for addressing the needs of vulnerable populations because it involves participants as co-researchers who are directly and actively involved in the research process and developing solutions to community difficulties. CBPR also fosters trust—often a critical issue in studying populations impacted by poverty or those who mistrust government and institutional entities (e.g., Native American populations; Holkup, Tripp-Reimer, Salois, & Weinert, 2004; Latino immigrant populations: Baumann, Rodríguez, & Parra-Cordona, 2011). An explicit goal of CBPR is to help those who are vulnerable eliminate oppressive situations and conditions contributing to their marginalization. CBPR's focus on existing strengths and the promotion of social equality is helpful both to the researched and researchers. However, CBPR is not without its challenges. For example, CBPR requires a great deal of time, resources, and raises ethical concerns pertaining to confidentiality, the sharing of data, and randomization (Holkup et al., 2004, Mertens, 2007). Like any methodology, CBPR has its limits—particularly among imprisoned populations who may be severely constrained in terms of how much change they can make in their family relationships and environments.

The utilization of mixed methods research is also an innovative response to conducting research with vulnerable populations because it necessitates the inclusion of some type of qualitative research methodology. Applying a qualitative consciousness to the research we conduct can transcend methodological boundaries, and also join them together by emphasizing a more integrative approach to the study of family problems and difficulties that impact vulnerable populations. Lopez and colleagues (2013) discuss the unique challenges of HIV/AIDS research and conducting studies of injection drug users (IDUs) because of the legal sanctions and cultural stigmas surrounding IDU. These challenges, along with the historic mistrust of researchers and outsiders by many urban poor populations has prompted epidemiology and related disciplines to innovate in order to improve "the documentation of inner-city drug users who are often labeled as hidden or hard-to-reach" (Lopez, Bourgois, Wenger, Lorvick, Martinez, & Kral, 2013, p. 101). Such innovation involves incorporating a much stronger and flexible qualitative component in mixed method research projects that seizes strategic opportunities to document unexpected and contradictory findings along with interdisciplinary collaboration. (Lopez et al., 2013).

More clearly bringing in the "mixed" of mixed methods can manifest in an array of ways such as engaging in ethnographic study that is later used to generate and test hypotheses, developing creative data triangulation strategies, or introducing a novel variable into a study that is first generated by quantitative methods and then explored in depth via qualitative interviewing and observational study (Lopez et al., 2013). In short, mixed

methods are seen as preferred when working with vulnerable populations because they potentially address power issues by allowing for a qualitative dialogue throughout the research process. Mixed methods are believed to encourage an “avenue of trust” between ourselves and those we study, contribute to our understanding of social inequality, and provide a framework and approach for working toward social justice and the enhancement of human rights (Mertens, 2007).

In conclusion, broad definitions of vulnerability highlight social inequality and injustice as it impacts those we study as well as draw our attention to our own vulnerability as researchers. Human subjects protocols and research methodology must be responsive to the intersectionality that characterizes the most vulnerable members of society and the strong emotional responses research with vulnerable populations may evoke among researchers. Vulnerability inspires transformations in the research process brought about by researcher reflexivity, methodological approaches that seek to build trust and address power differentials in family and society, and through the development and use of research strategies that transcend traditional boundaries and yield new understandings about family difficulties and human suffering.

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Acknowledgement

This article is a companion piece in response to Easterling and Johnson’s 2015 paper published in the same volume of *The Qualitative Report*:

Easterling, B. A., & Johnson, E. I. (2015). Conducting qualitative research on parental incarceration: Personal reflections on challenges and contributions. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1550-1567. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss10/1>

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Pre-Conference; National Council on Family Relations; November 19, 2014; Baltimore, MD.

Article Citation

Arditti, J. A. (2015). Situating vulnerability in research: Implications for researcher transformation and methodological innovation. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1568-1575.
