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# Gaining Access to Socially Stigmatized Samples

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## Gaining Access to Socially Stigmatized Samples

### Abstract

Gaining access to stigmatized populations using qualitative sampling requires the application of carefully planned strategies to avoid inadvertent slights to research participants. While there is a growing body of literature on qualitative sampling strategies, there is less discussion on how to manage the sensitivities of stigmatized research participants, such as African American females with incarcerated mates. This paper provides insight into how successful recruitment strategies, aligned with best practices described as checkpoints, enabled this researcher to gain access to a sample of 20 African American women who experienced grief and loss, and social withdrawal as a result of their mate's incarceration. Women in the study revealed their need to mask their emotions and hide their circumstances, mainly because of the social stigma associated with incarceration. Successful strategies were used to recruit the sample, including: implementing a transparent process, offering flexible interview logistics, acknowledging and managing microaggressions; refraining from claiming insider status, and maintaining access to the sample through ethical mindfulness.

### Keywords

African American Women, Incarceration, Inmate Wives, Recruitment Strategies, Qualitative Sampling

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## Gaining Access to Socially Stigmatized Samples

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*Gaining access to stigmatized populations using qualitative sampling requires the application of carefully planned strategies to avoid inadvertent slights to research participants. While there is a growing body of literature on qualitative sampling strategies, there is less discussion on how to manage the sensitivities of stigmatized research participants, such as African American females with incarcerated mates. This paper provides insight into how successful recruitment strategies, aligned with best practices described as checkpoints, enabled this researcher to gain access to a sample of 20 African American women who experienced grief and loss, and social withdrawal as a result of their mate's incarceration. Women in the study revealed their need to mask their emotions and hide their circumstances, mainly because of the social stigma associated with incarceration. Successful strategies were used to recruit the sample, including: implementing a transparent process, offering flexible interview logistics, acknowledging and managing microaggressions; refraining from claiming insider status, and maintaining access to the sample through ethical mindfulness. Keywords: African American Women, Incarceration, Inmate Wives, Recruitment Strategies, Qualitative Sampling*

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African American women with an incarcerated mate have been identified as a hard-to-reach population because of the possible social stigma, shame, and social withdrawal associated with their mate's status (Hart-Johnson, 2014). Recruitment of marginalized and stigmatized populations continues to challenge researchers. Barriers to recruitment can include ethnic minorities' hesitancy to participate in research because of their ambivalence to share personal information with outsiders (Sydor, 2013; University of Virginia, 2012-2017). In essence, participants recruited for this study are prone to embarrassment about their social status and even may have mistrust toward investigators. While there is a growing body of literature on qualitative recruitment and sampling strategies (e.g., Ashing-Giwa & Rosales, 2013; Odierna & Schmidt, 2009; Sydor, 2013), there is less discussion on how to manage the sensitivities of stigmatized research participants, specifically, African American females with incarcerated mates. The inclusion of the voices of African American women in research about the collateral impacts of a mate's incarceration is critical to the advancement of knowledge in this domain. Moreover, this underreported group stands to have less exposure to preventative treatments and interventions if they are not properly represented in the literature (Symonds, Lord, & Mitchell, 2012). Acquiring in-depth information during qualitative data collection is largely dependent upon participants' willingness to relate their personal stories with full disclosure to the researcher (Birks & Mills, 2011). While this research area is important to raise awareness, and drive effective social change, the research base is consistent in confirming that women of color may be reluctant to engage in studies, disclose their relationship status to researchers, and, further, hesitant to trust these outsiders with intimate details concerning their lives (Freimuth, Quinn, Thomas, Cole, Zook, & Duncan, 2001).

According to Remedios and Snyder (2015), this subgroup of the African American population is not only at risk of stigma based on race, these women face multiple possibilities of being treated as an excluded group because of issues concerning their gender, image, and class. Forms of social exclusion may influence women of color to put up protective barriers and maintain guarded self-disclosure about family matters and personal relationships to

researchers (Wallace & Bartlett, 2012). Therefore, understanding best practices that can be applied to encourage research participation is paramount. However, even if researchers are able to recruit from this population, it may be questionable whether the data collection reveals the most robust disclosure because of the threat of social acceptance or social desirability bias [e.g. the act of providing inaccurate answers to researchers in effort to present oneself in the best possible light] (Birks & Mills, 2011; Yancey, 2006). Therefore, based on my experiences, I recommend that investigators establish a climate of trust whereby social acceptance bias is reduced through building a rapport with participants, thereby creating a safe space for the respondent to share information in a manner where the power differential is neutralized.

Researchers hold a position of power. To neutralize the power differential, Rubin & Rubin (2012) recommend treating the interviewee as a *conversation partner and subject experts*. The informed consent process can facilitate this critical relationship and partnership where the interviewees learn about the importance of the study. Further, they may realize the important role as a co-creator of the research paradigm for the study (Charmaz, 2006). Rubin & Rubin (2012) further posited that individuals who are suffering issues of grief, misfortune, or unique status, want to share their stories as a form of release through their discussion. In my study, two participants indicated that providing input to the study was a means of sharing their whole story without being cut-off or having someone change the subject (Hart-Johnson, 2014). Creating a comfortable environment for participants may also guard against elements of social acceptance bias. When respondents learn that their disclosures are protected through ethical controls such as using pseudonyms and confidentiality controls, they may feel comfortable disclosing honest and truthful answers, thus reducing or eliminating social acceptance (Wilcox, 2011). In general, I found that participants in my study wanted to share their experiences at length and in detail.

This article offers reflections on my doctoral research as a means to share and expound upon the recruitment challenges which I faced while planning for and executing the study methodology (Hart-Johnson, 2014). A broader, detailed account of this research is published under Hart-Johnson (2014). The current reflections and “lessons learned” may be of value to both seasoned and novice researchers when considering recruitment of minority populations. In this paper, I share the background of the social problem and my primary research concerns (Hart-Johnson, 2014). I provide insight on my research design and sampling strategies and summarize with a number of lessons learned, or what I refer to as “checkpoints.”

## Literature Review

### **Background: The African American Woman with an Incarcerated Mate**

The disproportionate rate of incarceration among African American men in the United States has contributed to a growing body of literature on how their imprisonment affects women and members of their families (Grieb et al., 2014; Yocum & Nash, 2011). The often sudden and involuntary physical separation between offenders and their families, due to arrest and subsequent incarceration, may have a profound and lasting impact on affected loved ones, especially the wife or significant other (Chui, 2009). Undoubtedly, this type of separation has affected and possibly shamed the women who partner with offenders (Yocum & Nath, 2011). Therefore, it becomes challenging to identify and find this population of women in research because hiding their status may be the norm.

This stratum of women is of research concern because they are at risk for physical, psychological, symbolic, and socially related issues resulting from a mate’s incarceration (Hart-Johnson, 2014). African American females who partner with an incarcerated mate often remain a part of the inmate’s support network, committed in these relationships for possibly

the duration of their mate's incarceration (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). This may mean that the affected women experience unreported stressors and a reduced quality of life that remains present during the continuum of a mate's absence, and even after he returns to society (see *Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief, and Coping theoretical model*, Hart-Johnson, 2014). Evidence also suggests that African American women with an incarcerated mate may experience both shame and social withdrawal (Hart-Johnson, 2014) and, therefore, may be tempted to disguise their relationship. Faugier and Sargeant (1997) suggested that the more likely a group is to conceal their status, the greater may be the difficulties encountered with sampling. Therefore, understanding the nature of stigma among this sample of women and how their status impacts recruitment bears a discussion on hard-to-reach populations.

Other researchers have drawn similar lines of assumptions about the difficulties of recruitment among this group of women. For instance, Brooks, Paschal, Sly and Hsaio (2009) posited that the hesitancy of African American women to engage in research may include issues of unclear informed consent; stigma associated with the topic of inquiry, or a lack of understanding about the study's confidentiality.

### **Complications of Recruiting Hard-to-Reach Populations**

The women recruited for this research study were considered hard-to-reach because of their likelihood of feeling stigmatized as a result of having an incarcerated partner. The participants were also of a minority status, already subjected to other forms of prejudices related to race and ethnicity (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). In general, hard-to-reach populations can be defined as: groups who are stigmatized, difficult to find for research; socially disadvantaged in some way, and who are a challenge for the researcher to access (Lambert & Wiebel, 1990). Some authors describe hard-to-reach samples to include subgroups of a population, including drug users, the homeless, prostitutes, and other transient and marginalized populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). In contrast, others have extended this group to include children (Kennan & Canavan, 2012), social elites, the middle-to-upper class, and affluent groups (Crosby, Salazar, DiClemente, & Lang, 2010). Each of these groups can be defined as hard-to-reach because they are otherwise distant populations (Sydor, 2013). However, it should be noted that different approaches may be required when trying to recruit from each population; there may be variations in difficulties associated with accessing these groups as well. For instance, it is plausible that women with a partner in prison may believe that their participation in the research may somehow affect their incarcerated partner in an adverse way. Therefore, conditions of privacy, confidentiality, and transparency are critical components of the informed consent process that must be conveyed to participants to help them understand the nature of the research as well as any known risks (Health and Human Services, 1993).

### **Research Concerns**

The primary goal of this research was to understand how African American women are affected by psychological, physical, and symbolic conditions due to their chosen relationship with an incarcerated mate (Hart-Johnson, 2014). I also wanted to know if grief was present and how these women coped with the separation and loss, and resultant grief. Therefore, as a research question, I asked: "What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?" (Hart-Johnson, 2014, p. 24) and the sub-question was: "How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical,

social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?" (Hart-Johnson, 2014, p. 24). My research goal was to build a theoretical framework because I found no current theory to explain this context-specific social problem. This goal and the research questions naturally aligned with Charmaz's (2006) philosophy of using grounded theory, which posits that if there is no theory to account for the phenomenon, this method is a good choice for theory construction.

### **Qualitative Grounded Theory Research**

Grounded theory method describes how context-specific theory is discovered, constructed, and derived from data, and verified using concurrent analysis and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theory development entails constructing a set of well-developed and structured categories that emerge from data analysis derived from respondent statements and seeks to explain a social problem or phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, to construct my theoretical model, patterns and themes were identified in the data, complete with antecedents and relationships between identified constructs. As a result, the research problem became a well-documented social process through the depiction of the theoretical framework and its associated narrative. Collectively, this constructed knowledge explains how this sample of African American women with an incarcerated mate were affected.

While there are variations of grounded theory (i.e., Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I used the constructivist orientation, which is set apart by its characteristics of having the researcher and participants considered as co-creators of theory (Charmaz, 2006). This collective focus occurs when the pair are engaged in the interview process whereby questions are answered and clarified by the participant and data analysis and follow-up are carried out by the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This illumination through data analysis involves examining memos and fieldnotes, conducting first- and second-order coding; sorting, developing conceptual categories (and properties), performing theoretical sampling and using constant comparison of data; when applicable, they were elevated by these categories and promoted to theoretical constructs (*for a complete overview of grounded theory, see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2003, 2006*).

The nature of grounded theory research differs from other qualitative counterparts. For example, this method helps the investigator gain a deeper understanding beyond descriptions or through learning the essences of a participant's lived experiences, such as with phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). In essence, grounded theory research entails the researcher constructing processes and relationships that explain rather than describe phenomenon. Each qualitative method addresses different research questions and even goals (Maxwell, 2013). In the case my research, I found grounded theory research consistent with Charmaz's (2006) description of this application being fitting as a robust yet flexible protocol used for theory development. This framework provided me with a means to build in quality controls and utilize ethical safeguards as structured, clear, and repeatable processes. Charmaz (2006) also advised that grounded theorists should examine their research context and refrain from imposing predetermined notions about the data.

Finally, the grounded theory systematic framework aligned with my study's goals to develop context-relevant theory that is capable of: (1) prediction; (2) advancement of knowledge in a subject area; (3) imparting control over certain circumstances (e.g. designing prevention or intervention); (4) illumination of a problem area, and (5) a guide future research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the context of this study, prediction is concerned with identifying repeatable patterns in the data that can be anticipated if similar circumstances are present.

## Method

Ethical approval was granted by Walden University's an Institutional Review Board, where my doctoral studies were completed. This approval was granted prior to the commencement of data collection. For telephone interviews, verbal consent was received. Written consent was obtained from in-person interviews.

Qualitative research comprises generally small nonprobability samples (Maxwell, 2013). With grounded theory, the researcher is challenged to look beyond the assumed conditions of a population and to explore data through an unbiased lens, rather than through filtered stereotypes (Charmaz, 2006). These filters could limit the knowledge gained by interviewing only one subgroup of a population. For example, Biernacki (1986) sought to understand heroin addiction in his grounded theory study. However, had he focused only on a subset of individuals who not only were hard-to-reach but also were currently heroin addicts, rather than past-heroin users, he would have missed the richness of learning, through the data, how *former addicts* were able to recover naturally from addiction. This underscores the importance of carefully choosing a sampling frame that offers the broadest opportunity to holistically address the research concerns. Hence, a research problem and question should drive the scope and focus of the research sample as did my research and identified sampling frame.

### Sampling Frame Challenges

Determining this study's sampling frame was not simple. I needed to ensure that I recruited a sample that would provide a holistic representation of the affected women as well as learn added depth from their experiences to create a robust theoretical framework.

The first step entailed determining the inclusion criteria for the study. After a review of the literature, I found at least one study that suggested many women who partner with an incarcerated mate originate from urban settings (Wildeman et al., 2012). Another study suggested that women who are married to incarcerated men may be uneducated (Chui, 2009). These criteria alone presented a sampling frame problem. In the jurisdiction where this research was conducted, African American women's profiles were diverse and spanned a wide range of women of varying geographic, socioeconomic and educational status (United States Census Bureau, 2010). To assume that the only African American women affected by a mate's incarceration lived in urban settings and were poorly educated would have been misleading and limit the study's focus.

Additionally, there were other conflicting positions in the literature on whether stigma prevails among women with an incarcerated mate. Massoglia, Remster, and King (2011) found that when a wife and her incarcerated husband have a background of shared experiences, elements of stigma are minimized. Others, including some of the most fully documented works on wives of prisoners, indicated that stigma can be a significant factor (i.e., Braman, 2004, Fishburn, 1991; Morris, 1967). Therefore, I concluded that there was a likelihood that women would have some exposure to stigma and may be hesitant to self-identify with having an incarcerated mate. These factors led me to assume that this sample of women would be considered a hard-to-reach and stigmatized sample.

In order to meet the needs of my research study, I needed to: (1) recruit a sample that enabled me to collect data related to the research question; (2) collect enough data to analyze, interpret, and continue recruitment until I determined theoretical saturation (where no new information or properties were emerging from the data, *see Glaser & Strauss, 1967*), and (3) address emergent questions and (4) generate a hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I decided to seek out a holistic representation of African American women affected by the phenomenon of having an incarcerated mate and to accomplish Glaser & Strauss (1967)

consider comparative analysis of the data. My approach is similar to what Links and Burks (2013) referred to as using an initially stratified sample; this enabled me to seek out a geographic-based sample, focus on participant type, and seek a holistic sample, representative of the women who met the study's criteria.

### **Study Inclusion Criteria**

Women from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area were the focus of this study because the local prison had been closed for more than 10 years and I wanted to understand how geographic distance and possible financial and communication barriers affected their ability to maintain relationships with their mates (Hart-Johnson, 2014).

To qualify for this study, women had to be over 18 years of age, live in the Washington, D.C. area, and be in a current or former relationship with an incarcerated mate who served time in prison for one year or more. In this study, twenty (20) women self-identified as being African American and in current or former relationships with an incarcerated mate (Hart-Johnson, 2014).

## **Results**

### **Substantive Grounded Theory: Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief, and Coping Theory**

The findings from this study suggest that the strategies I used for recruitment of a stigmatized or hard-to-reach sample were effective. The findings illuminated that women in this study were prone to social withdrawal due to having an incarcerated mate and feeling marginalized as a result. In brief, the current study resulted in the creation of a new substantive grounded theory: Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief, and Coping Theory (Hart-Johnson, 2014). These findings suggested that women with an incarcerated mate can experience self-imposed social isolation that is at times used as a protective barrier to guard personal attacks or insults from outsiders but is also used as a means of self-punishment because of guilt and shame (Hart-Johnson, 2014). Social isolation is manifested in many ways, including women's tendency to disguise their relationship status and through withdrawal from their normal social circles. Self-punishment entailed variations of responses as well, such as staying indoors, not participating in holidays, sleeping on the couch rather than a bed (*see* Hart-Johnson, 2014). Specifically, through this theory, I explain how women, separated from their incarcerated mates, can experience loss on multiple levels, including grief, vicarious imprisonment, psychosocial reactions, and their use of ritual to cope. Women also were exposed to a phenomenon I coined as exposure to charismatic and controlling encounters with their mate. These five major theoretical constructs are explained in the primary study (*see* Hart-Johnson, 2014). Finally, and most notably, due to the prevalence of social withdrawal and a need to hide their status, recruiting these women for a research study was remarkable. This participation signified trust in the researcher and a need to support other women who might learn from their stories.

### **Lessons Learned**

In this last section, I draw from the same body of work (Hart-Johnson, 2014), a set of "lessons learned" that guided the recruitment and data collection process for my study. These lessons learned include: using transparency, employing flexibility, avoiding microaggressions, overcoming cultural sensitivity barriers, and maintaining access to the sample for follow-up or member checking. I provide discussion on ethical mindfulness and concluding thoughts.



### **Checkpoint 1: Using Transparency**

When working with stigmatized groups in research, there is a need for enhanced transparency. The process of transparency is especially important when working with ethnic populations affected by adverse and deceptive research. This level of disclosure is both ethical and essential given the historical accounts of African Americans being misled to engage in harmful research (Warren & Gabriele, 2012). Of these studies, the well-known Tuskegee syphilis study is widely reported as an ethical failure, in textbooks (Blumenthal & DiClemente, 2013; Reverby, 2012) as well as by major newspapers (Kaesuk Yoon, 1997; Stein, 2010). For example, during 2011, *The Washington Post* featured a prominent article detailing how federal government researchers purposefully infected African Americans with sexually transmitted disease (Stein, 2010). Knowledge of other disparaging research such as the Holocaust and Guatemala tragedies may also add to this ethnic groups' ambivalence towards research and researchers (Warren & Gabriele, 2012). The foregoing discussion suggests that this history should not be downplayed or considered as insignificant for these participants when planning recruitment design and strategies.

In the current study, I addressed the issue of transparency by fully describing the research study at length, in the informed consent process. The informed consent was 6 pages of single-spaced content that fully outlined the expectations and details of the research. For example, I included length of time, risks, benefits, sample questions, expected emotional reactions, and I emphasized that at any time the participant could end the interview. Reading the contents of this form to each participant took approximately 15 minutes. I also allowed time for questions and answers. While the time to read each informed consent form with lengthy, I believe that this effort demonstrated my commitment to ensure that participants were fully informed of the nature of the research. I informed the interviewees that this process would be the longest period of time I would be speaking other than closing out the interview.

I emphasize here, that my goal was to ensure transparency and to ensure that potential participants understood the context of the study and the level of disclosure they would be expected to share. I also wanted informants to understand the level of emotion they were at risk of experiencing. For instance, I indicated I would be inquiring about separation and loss and that participants may feel sad or recall the stress related to incidents related to their mate's incarceration. This level of exposure may leave the participant vulnerable and emotional in front of a complete stranger. The informed consent is not just a document, it is a teaching mechanism whereby participants learn about research that informs their choice of whether or not to participate leading up to and even during the study (HHS, 1993). It is only fair to disclose this risk. By disclosing this information about the questions and the study at the outset, I believe that it shows researcher integrity which is conducive to building trust at the outset of the researcher-participant relationship (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Checkpoint 2: Employing Flexibility**

Sampling hard-to-reach populations may require researchers to implement flexible yet deliberate recruitment strategies using a variety of recruitment materials. Choudhury Hussain, Parsons, Rahman, Eldridge, and Underwood (2012) used multiple approaches to recruitment material design. For example, these researchers designed handwritten as well as computer-generated recruitment material for a targeted, marginalized/disadvantaged population. Their process accomplished two goals. First, the handwritten format provided a personalized touch while also accounting for respondents who did not have a computer. Second, the computer-generated recruitment material could be deployed on multiple platforms, such as smartphones or laptops; making this information accessible to participants with different access devices.

Aligned with the aforementioned model, I used multiple computer-generated flyers and also created a PowerPoint 2-slide presentation that contained my recorded audio voice-over. The voice over was helpful for those who did not want to read the extensive information about the study and the inclusion criteria. This version was portable which enabled me to share variations of the same advertisement social media and via email and on the internet sites. Those who did not use electronic media could access a hard copy of the flyer, that was posted on community or library bulletin boards. Finally, I found it helpful to post infographics summarizing the study (and hyperlinked to details contained elsewhere) on social media sites as well as using the traditional forms of *letters of invitation* distributed by email or hard copy.

To ensure that a financial or logistical burden of research is not placed on the participants, interview formats should be flexible (Shedlin, Decena, & Martinez, 2011). In alignment with this philosophy, I found it important to offer telephone interviews as well as face-to-face interviews. I also allowed email follow-up for member-checking. These options allowed variations in scheduling times and minimized the logistics that could have caused financial burdens of travel for interviewees. Telephone interviewing also provided an element of privacy and convenience whereby the interviewee could conduct the interview from her chosen location without a travel requirement. Ultimately the participants decided how and when they would participate in the interview. For example, one participant decided that her interview would be conducted via phone from her car while her children were grocery shopping in the supermarket. This flexibility offered this participant both privacy and convenience.

I also found that participants who used telephone interviewing were detailed and focused. It appeared that interviewees preferred not having to meet in a formal place such as a library or formal meeting rooms. Perhaps the comfort of home or their choice of interview location offered them a sense of control over the process.

### **Checkpoint 3: Avoiding Microaggressions**

Within the present social context, African American women are at risk for microaggressions and marginalization, which are considered forms of oppression (Mullings, 2014). Sue (2014) indicated that microaggressions are considered “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to marginalized groups” (p. 10). Examples of microaggressions can be found in graphics, inferences, or connotations that appear to be harmless (Sue, 2014). An example would include asking a person who appears to be Asian if they can read Chinese Mandarin writing on a document. Obviously, not all people who appear to be of Asian descent can speak this language. Another example includes asking the sole African American person in attendance at a meeting (or on a panel, on television, or in a group) to explain or be a spokesperson for all issues pertinent and related to a topic about racism or black people as if you are the “the barometer of racism” for African Americans (Rboylorn, 2014). The embedded assumption is that he or she is representing the views and ideals of all black people.

One of the easiest ways to cause a participant to disengage or to shut down during an interview is to inadvertently slight or insult them (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Microaggressions and insults can take on many shapes and forms. Heggen and Guillemin (2012) suggested that microaggressions or discrediting information can be contained in any form of research material. To an inexperienced researcher, these messages could be embedded inadvertently even in a research flyer. From an ethical standpoint, the language contained in a recruitment flyer may not appear to be insensitive or contain information that is overtly or covertly offensive. However, seemingly benign graphics or language intended for recruitment may be perceived as insensitive and be regarded as subtle slights towards these marginalized persons. Examples include artwork that depicts downtrodden caricatures or language that could be construed as condescending and/or holds dual messages. For example, a flyer with inclusion criteria that

seeks: African American women who (a) are in relationships with incarcerated men, (b) have multiple children, and (c) are from an urban setting. These criteria may be construed as: women who partner with incarcerated mates normally have multiple children and live in projects (the label “urban” is sometimes perceived by African Americans as a code word used by other ethnic groups to describe low-income housing locations).

The aforementioned slights may not be an intent of the researcher. Qualitative constructivist researchers tend to see people and their circumstances through their interpreted lens of experience and knowledge (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The wording that they choose and the language for interviews are based on the researchers’ knowledge and experience.

Hence, researchers make cultural assumptions when designing research recruitment strategies, and at times, they make critical decisions based on these assumptions. However, Rubin and Rubin (2012) indicated that these assumptions should be suspended because they could become problematic and compromise the study design and the study itself.

Therefore, suspending preconceived notions about a cultural group may help the researcher to enter into the relationship with the participant with genuine curiosity and with interest in what is really going on, rather than to be blinded by assumptions (Charmaz, 2006).

The risk of inadvertently slighting study informants is especially concerning when researchers attempt to recruit from this seemingly hard-to-reach group of African American women with incarcerated mates. Women in this sample possibly have been subjected to various forms of stigma throughout their lives. In response, women from the African American cultural group may be hesitant to trust strangers. Inadvertent use of microaggressions may also influence women to postulate that all researchers behave in a similar manner—thus, marring the image of social researcher.

Unintentional biases could devalue or negate the effectiveness of the interview process. For example, Mendosa-Denton (2008) advised that prior to the research study, field research should be conducted to learn the vernacular of the cultural group. My recommendation is to learn the language only *for interpretation of the data*, not to emulate the ethnic group during the interview. To do so, may both offend the cultural group and may be perceived as condescending behavior and further marginalize the participants. Examples of this language would be to refer to the woman’s loved one as “your intimate partner,” “baby’s daddy,” or “your lover.”

#### **Checkpoint 4: Refrain from Claiming Insider Status**

Respondents are intuitive. A wise choice for researchers is to refrain from emulating or assuming insider status, even if one is from the same cultural group (Heggen & Guillemin, 2012). Assuming insider status includes emulating the respondent’s vernacular or lexicons. This is a mistake and can be condescending to try to claim to understand the participant’s role and cultural group by using their gestures or in-group behaviors (Heggen & Guillemin, 2012). This act can be insulting to respondents. Heggen and Guillemin (2002) indicated that researchers need to remember that regardless of their status, respondents hold the power and they can shut down to show who is in charge.

Researchers are advised to clarify roles and expectations of the respondent at the outset of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) rather than to assume insider status. The spirit of discovery and mutual respect is conducive to an effective qualitative interview which entails two roles: researcher and the researched (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These roles must be clear at the outset, otherwise, the respondents will make their own assessment, judgment, and role assignment (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). While they may not understand scientific techniques of data collection, they do understand when a researcher is not forthcoming and genuine. Researchers must first be completely clear what role they are playing during the research. For example, during my

research study, although I held the researcher role, I also placed myself in a subordinate position whereby the respondent held the knowledge and information needed to address the research concerns, thereby causing a shift-in the power dynamics. This shift placed the interviewee in a position of power. Role clarity also enabled respondents to understand how important and critical their role was to the study. This role clarification must remain clear through the interview process.

In addition to role clarity, the researcher should create a non-threatening environment which entails building trust and acknowledging cultural barriers. Hussain-gambles et al. (2004) suggested that one way to reduce participant ambivalence towards researchers is to use a more ethnic staff. However, based on my experience, this status does not mean trust-establishment will be inevitable. Kingsley, Phillips, Townsend, and Henderson-Wilson (2013) informed that outsiders can build trust through establishing neutrality and by engaging the members of the cultural group as co-producers of the research. This means that from the beginning of the project, it is important to involve members of the cultural group to inform the design and development of the research. Kingsley et al.'s (2013) process was aligned with my research method and orientation as a constructivist grounded theorist (Charmaz, 2006), as I believe that researcher and interviewee co-construct research.

For example, although I am an African American woman, I did not assume that I was granted immediate access to interview women from this group based on my ethnic background. Women who were in this exclusive group of the study were considered wives of the incarcerated; therefore, I was still considered an outsider. I believe that this guarded status of the women was neutralized by drawing upon their expertise, maintaining clarity in my role, being genuine, transparent, truthful, and demonstrating active listening.

I also designed and vetted the interview guide by field-testing the instrument by using women whom I knew had dated incarcerated men to provide insights on whether the language used was appropriate. Their feedback was instrumental in tailoring the questions so that the language would not be offensive.

### **Checkpoint 5: Maintain Access Through Ethical Mindfulness**

Maintaining access to the sample is largely dependent upon the experiences of the participants encountered during the initial contact, and then, during the interview periods of the study. If participants detect that the interviewer in some manner is unprofessional, not genuine, is zealous to get data no matter what the cost, they may shut-down, or be less likely to respond fully, and less willing to return for follow-up questions or for a future wave for the study.

I also found that relationship maintenance begins at the initial contact: when the participants are read the informed consent, or are provided a copy to read themselves. It is important that participants are informed in advance about the expectations of the study. Generally, if participants understand that they can discuss their experiences without being rushed, I have found that they will talk about themselves for long periods.

Additionally, it is important for the researcher to guard his or her reactions to and impressions of what is being shared. Rubin and Rubin (2012) described this phenomenon as a bias management process that accommodates one's own personality (p. 73). These same authors recommend that this attention to oneself remain in the forefront during interviews, as well. For example, in my research, it became apparent that some of the women were manipulated by their boyfriends or husbands and their response to situations appeared illogical. However, if I had reacted to this disclosure of the males' behavior toward the women, I may have filtered out critical information as a result of blaming the men for the women's issues. Thus, the reoccurring theme and rich understanding of the processes related to the emergent

theoretical construct, “charismatic and controlling mate encounters,” (Hart-Johnson, 2014, p. 284) may not ever have been identified as a predominant construct to the overall grounded theory. This construct revealed how women in the study could be manipulated and further, how the phenomenon of self-imposed isolation is tightly-coupled with manipulation, shame, guilt, and insecurities (Hart-Johnson, 2014).

## Conclusion

Gaining access to a population that may be prone to hide aspects of their lives presents a challenge for the researcher who seeks to gain information during data collection. These women may be included in a variation of socioeconomic strata and included among many groups, but they may not be apparent because they are *hidden in plain sight*. In the context of this paper, this means that these women are within the sample criteria but hide their status, as shame or personal biases interfere with self-selection for recruitment. For example, one woman who offered to provide a referral described how her friend met the criteria. After several minutes of conversation with her, I learned that her husband was incarcerated. I was curious as to why she felt she did not meet the criteria; however, when asked, she laughed and said, she “didn’t know” (Hart-Johnson, 2014, p. 159).

Qualitative sampling of hard-to-reach populations must be handled with care to avoid inadvertent slights to research participants. These slights are referred to as microaggressions and can be embedded in such places as the research flyer design or in the interview questions. Preventive measures should be implemented during the planning phase through the member-checking phase to ensure that all controls or checkpoints are integrated as ethical safeguards. Participants who have been stigmatized or victimized may be ambivalent about participating in research; therefore, it is imperative that tools such as informed consent contain sample questions so that participants are prepared for the possible emotional responses that the questions may generate.

Feelings of shame may be predominant features for women who partner with incarcerated men. Consequently, these women may be tempted to hide their relationships and mask their emotional and psychological reactions to separation and loss (Hart-Johnson, 2014). They may be apprehensive and fearful of sharing details of their relationship because of their distrust of the criminal justice system and anyone who appears to be in any way affiliated. Therefore, recruitment strategies must involve a consideration of how to gain access using ethically sound sampling protocol and using language in recruitment material, such as in letters of invitation, that decreases the risk of respondent intimidation (Rubin & Babbie, 2008) while underscoring trust through informed consent.

Ethical mindfulness is also critical to the success of recruiting from socially stigmatized populations. Guillemin and Gillam (2006) described ethical mindfulness as a process of ethically driven design, attending to the well-being and safety of informants of the study. From the outset, ethical mindfulness was of the utmost importance in my study. This attention and sensitivity included carefully examining each process of design, including the language used on the letters of invitation, as well as on the research flyers. For example, each word used on the research flyer was analyzed using readability software. The research flyer was constructed to call upon the *expertise* of women who were in a relationship with an incarcerated loved one, rather than using possibly intimidating official/formal sounding language that may be off-putting to potential participants.

Ethical mindfulness also included informing participants in advance about the research content so that they could be fully apprised of and emotionally prepared for the research questions that would be asked. To accomplish this goal, sample interview questions were included in the informed consent.

In reflection, in my study, I used informed consent as a vehicle to protect research subjects, and further, as the first step to building a rapport and a trusting relationship. After the first participant was recruited and she was interviewed, her experience was expressed to another respondent who also had a mate incarcerated. What I learned that was successful was that, (a) this was the first time she was able to tell her entire story without being judged or cut off; (b) she said that because I was so attentive and listened to her so carefully, she felt as though she was doing something wonderful for research, and (c) she felt that in some way, the interview felt as though she was in a support group setting and she was able to talk through her experience and focus on herself, rather than everything else, including the inmate.

In general, hard-to-reach populations include populations such as the homeless, sex workers, and drug users (Crosby, Salazar, DiClemente, & Lang, 2010). The shame associated with a mate's incarceration may cause these women to hide their circumstances and identification as a prison wife or as a significant other of an incarcerated man, due to the shame and the associated labeling (Hart-Johnson, 2014). These women may suffer from financial loss, marital stress, and familial discord (Harman, Smith, & Egan, 2007). While there is a need for greater research on this topic, to foster greater insight into the experiences of these women, attention must be paid to the inadvertent victimization through inadequate consideration of power differentials, personal biases, and subtle but heartfelt microaggressions.

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