

Ethical and Methodological Dilemmas in Qualitative Research Conducted among Vulnerable Groups—Guest Editors' Introduction

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This volume focuses on the ethical and methodological dilemmas associated with conducting qualitative research with groups that can be categorized as vulnerable. It is the specificity of the groups in question that unites and underpins the idea of the volume. As such, the presented articles refer to descriptions of specific studies conducted with the use of qualitative research methods among members of selected vulnerable groups. Apart from the necessary presentation of the research topics, the authors focus on the dilemmas that arise at different stages of the research process—from planning through implementation to publication of the results. These dilemmas are closely related to the chosen qualitative research methods. Hence, the featured research examples primarily serve as a background for identifying and discussing ethical dilemmas and closely related methodological problems.

“The concept of ‘vulnerability’ is used in research ethics to signify that those identified as vulnerable need extra protections over and above the usual protections offered to participants in research” (Rogers and Lange 2013:2141). The ethical considerations regarding vulnerable groups apply not only to research conducted within the medical and health

sciences but to the social sciences as well. Although there are many ethical values, the discussion of social research ethics focuses on minimizing harm, protecting privacy, and respecting autonomy. There are codified guidelines for researchers that point to ethical behavior within social research, an example being the Polish Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics, discussed in the first article of the volume. However, several qualitative methods reveal specific—for the method or studied group—entanglements and more complex ethical dilemmas, as well as related methodological problems.

In this volume, we understand the concept of vulnerable groups quite broadly, including minority groups, as well as any underprivileged populations.

Vulnerable people are defined...as those who, due to reason of age, gender, physical or mental state, or due to social, economic, ethnic and/or cultural circumstances, find it especially difficult to fully exercise their rights before the justice system...The following may constitute causes of vulnerability: age, disability, belonging to indigenous communities or minorities, victimization, migration and internal displacement, poverty, gender, and deprivation of liberty. [*Brasilia Regulations Regarding Access to Justice for Vulnerable People* 2008:5]

The texts presented within the volume address selected vulnerable groups—parents of non-normative children, the transgender community, and palliative patients.

The introductory article reflects on research with various minority groups. The authors—Urszula Kluczyńska, Anna Maria Kłonkowska, and Małgorzata Bieńkowska—identify and analyze the most prevalent ethical and methodological dilemmas related to conducting in-depth interviews within the studied vulnerable groups.

The second article, by Maria Flis and Karol Piotrowski, relates to the Polish Sociological Association's Code of Ethics. However, the broad context of the Code of Ethics serves as a starting point for the authors' reflections on the use of metaphors in research on minority groups. The article presents the Code of Ethics and refers to its contents, at the same time pointing out the deficiencies and shortcomings in the context of the groups analyzed.

The next two articles concern research carried out among groups distinguished by gender identity. The purpose of Katarzyna Gajek's text is to reconstruct the biographical work undertaken by parents of non-normative people on otherness. Joanna Chojnicka addresses the dilemmas of using qualitative research methods to analyze social media posts within the transgender community.

The closing text of the volume, written by Weronika Kamińska, focuses on ethical and methodological

dilemmas that have emerged in the process of conducting research among palliative patients. The author presents and discusses situations related to her experience with in-depth interviews conducted with hospice patients.

The volume addresses both the challenges and dilemmas of designing and conducting qualitative research within the aforementioned groups, such as reaching out to representatives of the studied populations, the research procedure, the relationship of the researcher and the study subjects, issues related to the in-group and out-group perspectives, and the social and personal responsibilities of a researcher studying vulnerable groups. These, and further related issues, are discussed in detail in the context of specific qualitative research data and methods. Therefore, the articles provide an insight into the dilemmas related to various groups of research participants and constitute a collection of guidelines for other researchers. However, our aim is not to provide unambiguous answers applicable to any research on vulnerable groups, although such might emerge. The purpose of the volume is to depict and analyze certain issues and to reflect on and search for the most beneficial solutions possible. The reflexivity of researchers who focus on vulnerable groups is an essential element in their workshop. We do not perceive questions with no clear answers as a lack of competence—we see the potential for dealing with a given difficulty, considering doubts, searching for the best way to act, and developing as researchers.

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