Researching Vulnerable Groups: Definitions, Controversies, Dilemmas, and the Researcher's Personal Entanglement

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.1.02

Keywords:
Vulnerability; Vulnerable Group; Vulnerable Population; Vulnerable Person; Ethical Dilemma; Methodological Dilemma; Qualitative Research; Researcher; In-Group Perspective; Me-Search

Abstract: The article aims to describe vulnerable groups in the context of qualitative research in social science with special attention to ethical and methodological dilemmas. This is a theoretical study, which does not aspire to offer solutions or guidelines, but rather show elements worth taking notice of and analyzing when research is planned and carried out. We argue that in the social sciences, vulnerability is relational and crucial. However, social science researchers perceive the category of vulnerability as ambiguous and nuanced. This article shows that ascribing research participants univocally to a vulnerable group may lead not only to them being stereotyped and deprived of individuality but also to a situation where the research act itself disempowers them. We also argue that apart from issues often raised concerning the protection of participants from vulnerable groups, the researcher and their protection are also pivotal, particularly when the researcher, due to their involvement, abandons the out-group perspective or when they belong to the vulnerable group.

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> People who write are always writing about their lives, even when they disguise this through the omniscient voice of science or scholarship [Laurel Richardson 2001:34]

The concept of "vulnerability" is widely recognized in research ethics and is used to signify those who need extra protections over and above the usual protections offered to research participants (Rogers and Lange 2013:2141). Although ethical considerations of vulnerable groups/populations stem from research performed in medical science (Macklin 2003; Jecker 2004; Levine et al. 2004), the problem also concerns social science (Iphofen and Tolich 2018). With many ethical values in mind, the discussion on social research ethics focuses on minimizing harm, protecting privacy, and respecting participants' autonomy (Hammersley 2018). In social sciences, researchers are bound by regulations on ethical aspects of their research, for example, in Poland, by the Code of Ethics of a Sociologist (*Kodeks Etyki Socjologa* 2012). However, several qualitative methods emphasize specific implications and the complexity of ethical dilemmas concerning the method or the studied group (Iphofen and Tolich 2018), as well as methodological difficulties when research is carried out among vulnerable groups (Van Brown 2020).

In our opinion, the starting point for any considerations of ethical and methodological issues concerning vulnerable groups should be to introduce and clarify the definition of 'vulnerable groups,' as well as to analyze any controversies that result there-

from. Moreover, apart from often raised issues regarding the protection of participants from vulnerable groups, the researcher and their protection are also pivotal, particularly, when the researcher, on account of being involved, abandons the out-group perspective or when they belong to the vulnerable group. The researcher is usually seen as a person who is not to 'spoil the research' but to retreat and show reality objectively. Such are the social expectations that underpin this view that a researcher who writes from the first-person perspective refers to or analyzes their experience, or describes their research reflections about 'themselves' out of narcissistic motives—thus, their analyses contradict science.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned observations, the paper begins by reviewing various definitions that present the specific character of vulnerable groups, difficulties in defining them, and differences in how the term is perceived by medical and social sciences. The authors go on to describe controversies in the selection of particular social groups to be considered as vulnerable and reservations related to the term, such as the relativity of the notion, the risk of stereotyping and victimization, the motivation of participants from vulnerable groups to take part in research, and also the risks and benefits thereof. Subsequent parts of the article deal with issues specifically related to qualitative research among vulnerable groups. The first is the perspective of the researcher along with a traditional division into in- and out-group perspective, but also the position 'between,' which shifts the out-group researcher closer to the in-group perspective through their cognitive and emotional involvement. Then, the first-person perspective is analyzed when research is carried out from the in-group position. The authors also present the relationship between autoethnography and a standpoint called "mesearch." Finally, ethical and methodological dilemmas are discussed that concern qualitative research among vulnerable groups, in particular, the perspective and relationship of the researcher and the group being studied, as well as the protection of the researcher who belongs to the vulnerable group they are studying.

Definitions, Difficulties, and Intricacies of the Term 'Vulnerability' in Medical and Social Sciences

In the context of ethical research on vulnerable groups' members, it is vital to know how researchers understand vulnerability. According to Jo Aldridge (2014:113), "for the researcher involved in designing and conducting research with vulnerable individuals and groups, dilemmas arise from the outset that first necessitate particular and careful consideration of notions of 'vulnerability,' both definitionally and conceptually."

Clinical studies show that certain groups of people are considered to be more likely than others to be mistreated or taken advantage of when participating in research studies (Levine et al. 2004:44). These groups/populations are defined as 'vulnerable,' and consequently, special guidelines were drawn to protect individuals from such groups while conducting research (Brazier and Lobjoit 1991). Along with increasing attention given to ethical aspects of research, more regard is paid to vulnerable groups, as well as to incidences of their abuse in the past (Levine et al. 2004). The Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (2002 as cited in Levine et al. 2004:45) mentions the category of 'vulnerable persons' being "those who are relatively (or absolutely) incapable of protecting their own interests. More formally, they may have insufficient

power, intelligence, education, resources, strength, or other needed attributes to protect their own interests." Also, Zion, Gillan, and Loff (2002 as cited in Levine et al. 2004:45) point out that some individuals who lack basic rights and liberties are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and thus, are susceptible to being abused during research.

Due to difficulties with providing a precise definition of 'vulnerability' in biomedical research, Kipnis distinguishes six types of vulnerability (2001 as cited in Levine et al. 2004:45-46): "(1) cognitive: the ability to understand information and make decisions; (2) juridic: being under the legal authority of someone such as a prison warden; (3) deferential: customary obedience to medical or other authority; (4) medical: having an illness for which there is no treatment; (5) allocational: poverty, educational deprivation; and (6) infrastructure: limits of the research setting to carry out the protocol." Later, he also added a seventh type, that is, "social vulnerability, that is, belonging to a socially undervalued group" (Levine et al. 2004:46). Although this typology is useful, it is questioned by researchers, who say that it might lead to a conclusion that everyone who fits into any of these categories is vulnerable by definition, while everyone capable of unfettered consent is undoubtedly not (Levine et al. 2004:46).

Vulnerability is also defined as related to "human suffering." Vulnerable people may suffer from:

> a) the potential risk often during harm, deprivation, or disadvantage that overwhelms them and that the person does not have the capacity to confront on their own; b) the fact of having already endured such a harm; and c) the potential risk of continuing to endure it if they do not escape the position of vulnerability in which they find themselves…Vulnerability arises as a consequence of a person's inability to overcome a risk or danger by themselves, due to a disadvantage, deprivation, or harm, whether physical, moral, social, economic, political, or family-related..… Vulnerable people display weakness, fragility, and inability to recover from unexpected problems (real or potential). [del Real Alcalá 2017:VII]

Nancy S. Jecker (2004) states that the etymology of the word 'vulnerable' cognates it with a person who can be wounded. Therefore, in a broad sense, all persons could be considered vulnerable because everyone is susceptible to being wounded in some aspects (Jecker 2004:60). In this approach, "vulnerability can be considered as an attribute inherent to human nature: individuals are constantly exposed to potential harm (whether intentional or accidental), to the risks of fluctuating circumstances (due to rearrangements in society or merely because of the changes that come with aging), or to the perspective of being dependent (as a result of innate or acquired disease or disability)" (Ippolito and Iglesias Sánchez 2015a:20).

Other researchers (see: Ippolito and Iglesias Sánchez 2015a:20) suggest that belonging to a vulnerable group cannot be defined like Fineman (2008:8) does, who observes that it is solely a universal aspect of the human condition. In the narrow sense, the term 'vulnerability' is connected with the fact that there are people who are more vulnerable than others (Jacker 2004). According to Rogers and Lange (2013), in general, there are three sources of vulnerability—inherent, situational, and pathogenic.

> Inherent vulnerabilities are shared by all humans. These stem from our embodiment and our affective and social nature. They include vulnerability to injury and death, and to psychological ills like loneliness

> or lack of self-respect. Situational vulnerabilities, by contrast, come into being in specific economic, social, or political contexts that vary from person to person, and may exacerbate or ameliorate inherent vulnerabilities. For example, earning an income alleviates vulnerability to hunger. Pathogenic vulnerabilities are situational vulnerabilities that occur because of adverse social phenomena. They include vulnerabilities caused by injustice, domination, and repression, and also those that occur when actions intended to alleviate vulnerability actually make it worse…All of these vulnerabilities—inherent, situational, and pathogenic—may be occurrent or dispositional. Although vulnerability is defined in terms of a potential to incur a harm or wrong, some harms and wrongs are much more likely than others. Occurrent vulnerabilities refer to very likely outcomes, such as a homeless person's vulnerability to theft or injury. Dispositional vulnerability refers to potential outcomes, such as a pregnant women's vulnerability to complications in labor, which may or may not eventuate. Dispositional vulnerabilities can become occurrent under certain conditions. [Rogers and Lange 2013:2143]

For some, vulnerability is conditioned individually, uniquely, and innately, whereas others are vulnerable due to circumstances, social environment, or as a result of structural factors or influences (Larkin 2009). Still, this differentiation appears to be problematic. For instance, sexual minorities include those who are vulnerable due to factors coming from the social environment, structural factors, or influences because

> they are more likely than the general population to experience human rights violations, both from domestic authorities and individuals. They may be threatened in their bodily and moral integrity by physical and verbal abuse; their freedom to live according to their identity and to publicly express this identity may be limited by law and public morality; their economic situation may be weakened by employment discrimination or discrimination in accessing benefits otherwise allocated to heterosexual couples. [Ducoulombier 2015:202]

On the other hand, individuals with disabilities are seen as vulnerable due to their individual backgrounds and innate features. Still, the social model of disability "focuses on determining the reasons for disabilities not connected with the individual as such, but pointing at the social barriers that limit the individual in the environment where he/she lives… and is a coherent and complementary element of the concept of individual vulnerability attributed to people who are marginalized in a given society" (Domańska 2018:25).

Levine and colleagues (2004) claim that vulnerability is both too wide and too narrow a term. On the one hand, many groups may be currently treated as sensitive, but on the other hand, the category is narrow and excludes some individuals. Thus, the term remains rather elusive and intuitive and depends on the context in which it is used (Larkin 2009:1).

Then, it is worth remembering that some individuals are susceptible to multiple vulnerabilities—not only innately or circumstantially but also potentially by research processes themselves (Aldridge 2014:113). That is why social scientists tend to focus more on whether they contribute to the research subject, becoming more vulnerable as a result of the research. Hollway and Jefferson (2000:313) claim it is crucial to ensure that the level of harm that might be predicted is no greater than that to which the participants have been exposed anyway.

Controversies and Consequences Linked with the Term 'Vulnerable Group'

Relativity and Dynamics

An aspect worth noting is the dynamics of being a member of a vulnerable group. One may belong to a vulnerable group at some time or in some circumstances, but not permanently, for instance, a pregnant woman in a workplace or someone for a few hours after a disaster. Thus, an individual's potential vulnerability in the research context does not depend solely on that person's belonging to a certain group but on the particular features of the research project and the environment in which it is taking place (Levine et al. 2004:47). For example, the notion that women, in general, constitute a vulnerable group is disputable. The situation depends on many factors, including the country, religion, or social class. Thus, it is impossible to univocally count women in general as a vulnerable group/population (Macklin 2003) because their potential vulnerability is not inherent in the mere fact of being female (Fines 2015:95). Similarly, researchers have discussed diversity with regard to, for example, the elderly (e.g., Levine 1982).

What is more, the researcher's perception and perspective on vulnerability—its innate or circumstantial characteristics—may change. Similarly, the research participant's self-perception may alter from other people's perceptions, especially if the participant sees themselves as resilient rather than vulnerable in a particular context (Aldridge 2014:113).

Therefore, because vulnerability is a dynamic concept and in a complex relationship to the notions of minority groups (Ippolito and Iglesias Sánchez 2015b), the term "minority groups" cannot be identified with vulnerable groups. At the same time, Francesca Ippolito and Sara Iglesias Sánchez (2015b) state that minorities, such as ethnic, religious, or sexual, may be seen as vulnerable groups. However, these authors also emphasize that such terms as "vulnerability," "sensitivity," and "marginality" are often hard to distinguish from one another, and they tend to be used interchangeably as synonyms (Luxardo, Colombo, and Iglesias 2011). It is true that research carried out among vulnerable groups deals with sensitive topics that may prove to be more important than the issue of the study group itself. Therefore, such a group can be automatically counted as vulnerable when dealing with a sensitive topic.

The Risk of Stereotyping and Victimization

While discussing controversies and problems of using and defining the term "vulnerable groups," the fear of stereotyping is a vital issue. Individuals who belong to a certain group and thus represent a feature or features that make them likely to belong to a vulnerable group may be deprived of their individuality and be perceived only through the prism of belonging to a specified group (Levine et al. 2004). Ascribing someone to a vulnerable group in clinical research (see: Brazier and Lobjoit 1991) may result in paternalism and stereotyping (Macklin 2003; Rogers and Lange 2013), but also in either excluding or over-representing them in a study (Rogers and Lange 2013).

What is more, the above issues are connected with the problem of victimization. In medical research, people who are mentally ill, poor, addicted, old, HIV/AIDS-positive, and also children are included in the vulnerable group. The term "vulnerable group" or "vulnerable population" is identified

with those who are victims, dependent, deprived, or pathology-related (Fineman 2008). According to Peggy Ducoulombier (2015:202),

> we should remember that their vulnerable status is linked to a long-term process of exclusion by which they were cast out as different. In the latter sense, vulnerability is a divisive rather than an inclusive notion. However, if one may regret the undertones of stigmatization that the 'vulnerable label' may carry, this notion, even understood in a non-universal sense, allows the recognition of the social and institutional discrimination suffered by particular groups and, as a result, may be used to impose on states specific and stricter obligations of protection.

Nevertheless, Fineman (2008:9) undertakes to deprive 'vulnerability' of negative connotations and suggests noticing its potential in referring to a universal and inevitable aspect of the human condition that must occupy the center stage of social and state responsibility. In this approach, 'vulnerability' is perceived as a conceptual tool with the potential to ensure a more robust guarantee of equality. Fineman (2008:15-16) also emphasizes that

> [w]ithin the various systems for conferring assets, individuals are often positioned differently from one another, so that some are more privileged, while others are relatively disadvantaged. Important to the consideration of privilege is the fact that these systems interact in ways that further affect these inequalities. Privileges and disadvantages accumulate across systems and can combine to create effects that are more devastating or more beneficial than the weight of each separate part. Sometimes privileges conferred within certain systems can mediate or even cancel out disadvantages conferred in others.

Motivation to Participate in Research

In medical research, much attention is paid to the conscious consent of participants who partake in research, especially those from sensitive groups, and difficulties that are likely to occur (Brazier and Lobjoit 1991; Rogers and Lange 2013). Although the issue of conscious consent is especially taken into account in biomedical research, social science also does so. Conscious consent to partake in research is meant to safeguard participants' interests and protect them from the researcher, who might use unacceptable methods. There are procedures in medical science, and research participants sign a document. However, social science uses a kind of contract that informs participants of the aim, method, and duration of the research, as well as the potential risks and benefits for the participants. Due to the distinctive character of this discipline, it is often difficult to specify all aspects of the research and/or benefits the participant might gain from partaking in it (van den Hoonaard 2018). The aspect of "giving them a voice" can be seen as a benefit for representatives of a given group (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Still, not every participant may consider it as significant to them. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that participants gain nothing, but it is a highly individual issue. Nonetheless, a stereotypical assumption that by belonging to a vulnerable group, one sees oneself as deprived of the sense of agency (which is the very reason for having no such sense and aversion to participating in research) may be false. Researchers often emphasize that within various disciplines there are situations when participants are willing to share their experiences and enjoy the research (van den Hoonaard 2018). In short, the researcher's conviction that individuals taking part in a study because they belong to a vulnerable group are isolated or lonely makes them disempowered (Russell 1999).

The Researcher's Perspective

The objective character of the out-group perspective is often raised when discussing the role of the researcher. At the same time, out-group investigators may be seen as "colonizers" imposing their interpretation of experiences that are unavailable to them. An example of a strategy developed to protect vulnerable groups from such practices would be the guidelines developed by Jacob Hale (1997), who made a list of 15 recommendations for non-transgender researchers investigating a subject. He emphasized respect toward the interlocutors and a simultaneous critical analysis. Hale stressed that while transgender people cannot be treated as experts in their experience, researchers must not behave as "colonizers" who know better and tell a better story. This reveals the problem of recognizing the respondents' subjectivity in the research process and the role of the researcher's perspective.

Additionally, in social science, vulnerability is tightly linked with the sense of security. Individuals who belong to groups that suffer from discrimination or prejudice may be afraid of being identified and might not trust the researcher. Moreover, research within a vulnerable group may be hindered by the group's inaccessibility. Thus, the question of studying 'one's own' group appears, as well as the in- and out-group perspective that entails certain dependencies and dilemmas.

The position of the researcher versus the study population is a very important factor during research on vulnerable groups, including affiliation to the group, abandoning the in-group perspective, the lack of affiliation, and the out-group position. In social science, discussions on the in- and out-group perspective are not a novelty, as there appear to be as many arguments for as against each position, often with it being possible to raise the same issues in support as against both perspectives (Serrant-Green 2002:38 as cited in Dwyer and Buckle 2009:57).

A Space In-Between

Sonya Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle (2009) offer an interesting view that challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status, showing that such a dichotomy is an oversimplification of possible relationships between the researcher and the study group. Also, these authors stress that there is a third option—the space between. This perspective is developed as a result of great involvement (cognitive and emotional) with the social group being studied. Consequently, even if the researcher is not its member, they entirely abandon the distanced, outsider's perspective of a disinterested person: "We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:61). This positioning draws attention to the special status of qualitative research,

> [t]he process of qualitative research is very different from that of quantitative research. As qualitative researchers, we are not separate from the study, with limited contact with our participants. Instead, we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it. The stories of participants are immediate and real to us; individual voices are not lost in a pool of numbers. We carry these individuals with us as we work with the transcripts. The words, representing experiences, are clear and lasting. We cannot retreat to a distant "researcher" role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so, too, the analysis

> affects our personhood. Within this circle of impact is the space between. The intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders to the experience under study and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders. We now occupy the space between, with the costs and benefits this status affords. [Dwyer and Buckle 2009:61]

Protecting the Group, Protecting the Researcher

When research is carried out among vulnerable groups from the in-group position or even in a situation when the cognitive and personal involvement of the researcher places them in the space between, an important ethical issue appears—one not frequently dealt with—of costs and benefits. Although the ethical responsibility to protect participants from vulnerable groups is obvious, researchers are paid far less attention when they take up the in-group position, especially the first-person perspective. Thus, when talking about the protection of vulnerable groups' members, the researcher must also be protected, as they identify with the group in question and share their experience as a member of that group.

> With regard to vulnerability, Tolich argues that we should treat all people mentioned in the text as vulnerable or at risk of harm in some way, including the auto-ethnographer themselves. By taking this approach, an auto-ethnography will be focused on the aim of the narrative, as well as its likely impacts on a diverse group of participants. Tolich notes that "no story should harm others" (2010:1608), and where harm might be possible, researchers can take steps to reduce this. This will include the researcher themselves, who should view their auto-ethnographies as an 'inked tattoo': once a narrative is out there, you can't retrieve it, so Tolich cautions auto-ethnographers to be very careful. The other issue linked to vulnerability is the issue of confidentiality, not so much external confidentiality, as good qualitative researchers will often build in quite clear confidentiality guarantees for participants in research, but internal confidentiality, which Tolich outlines as the risk of exposing confidences amongst the participants themselves. Even if a nom de plume is used, there could be significant harm caused amongst family members, because they recognize themselves and their comments. [Gibbs 2018:152]

Once the research procedure has taken notice of the researcher and their vulnerability, costs, and benefits, the relationship between the "I" of the researcher and the research subject takes a new perspective. In the analyzed in-group perspective, where the individual "I" of the researcher becomes involved in the research process, the term "re-search" overlaps with the term "me-search," a non-academic term that "links the terms 're-search/practice' and 'me'" (Edward 2018a:83) and suggests that the in-group perspective is limited while studying the first-person experience of the researcher.

Me-Search or Mesearch. A Term Both Present and Absent in Social Science Research

The term "mesearch" is relatively new in the discussion on social science research. When looking at its etymology, it should be noted that "Me-search… means pursuing a scientific question when the answer to that question is idiosyncratically relevant for the individual researcher (as opposed to when the answer is relevant per se)" (Altenmüller, Lange, and Gollwitzer 2021).

Mesearch as "Selfie"

The term "mesearch" entered or even became widespread through popular science media, where it was presented as anti-science or scientific anti-objectiveness. The term, which is often hyphenated, is described as narcissistic, biased, non-scientific, and related to the social media culture and the reality overloaded with *selfies*. Mesearch, which is presented and popularized in popular science papers, is treated sarcastically or humorously. In short, it should be avoided. Media warn potential audiences to be suspicious of research that is not research because it is designed from the perspective of a narcissistic researcher who writes about themselves. They assume that the researcher has no theoretical background or research reflection, and they point to the "threats" coming from the researcher who writes from the first-person perspective. Also, the term is assumed to question the research methods adopted.

Then, the term "me-search" used in popular science and described in various media is frequently avoided by researchers who oppose the above-mentioned connotations and do not wish to be seen as those dealing with non-academic activities. They are also unwilling to struggle or prove the grounds of their scientific stance. Thus, the majority of researchers do not use the term, and scientific databases do not provide many records of texts where the term "mesearch" or "me-search" is used (Nash and Bradley 2011; Raw 2016; Wiklund 2016; Edward 2018b; Rios and Roth 2020; Altenmüller et al. 2021; Brown and Patterson 2021; Devendorf 2022).

However, if such mesearch does occur, the authors explain the scientific reasons behind or discuss the grounds for their stance, risks, and benefits, as well as how the research is or should be carried out. What is more, the term "mesearch" is never used without any explanation or reference to methodological doubts. It appears that what prompts the greatest opposition is the use of the first-person perspective, which is commonly thought to be the opposite of the objectivity synonymous with scientificity.

In the context of studies on vulnerable groups, mesearch is usually understood as a narcissistic presentation of one's perspective when talking about a group and an unjustified generalization of one's experience, considerations, and conclusions over the experience of the group. Thus, the researcher presents themselves like a self-advertisement and looks for fame and applause. This is how society sees it from the perspective of their contemporary culture and phenomena that take place in social media.

Mesearch as the Synonym of Autoethnography

Mesearch/me-search is also sometimes treated by researchers as the synonym of autoethnography. Autoethnographic research has a solid position in social science. In the context of studies on vulnerable groups, a researcher who belongs to the vulnerable group they are analyzing performs autoethnographic research. One of the practical aims of autoethnography is to bring about social change by empowering marginalized groups (Bielecka-Prus 2014).

> Adams, Holman-Jones, and Ellis (2015) have noted a plethora of aims for autoethnography, including the need to place personal experience in research and writing; illustrating personal mean-making; demonstrating reflexivity; offering resistance narratives; and seeking responses from audiences. There are many reasons why people choose the autoethnographic method. Commonly, it is because writers notice from

> their own experiences that there is a gap in the published literature so they use their autoethnography to write that in. [Gibbs 2018:149]

During autoethnographic studies, research is based on personal experience and transcribes the personal to the cultural (see: Richardson 2001; Lofland et Al. 2006; Bielecka-Prus 2014; Kacperczyk 2014a). An autoethnographer is primarily interested in studying the cultural and contextual influences on their self-reflection (Nash and Bradley 2011:16). Autoethnography is "understood as auto-narration based on the introspection process, an act in which the narrator reflects on their own life experience, simultaneously referring it to the social context in which they have occurred" (Kacperczyk 2014b:37 [trans. UK, AMK, and MB]). As a result, very personalized tests are designed.

Truth be told, the question of who the researcher is cannot be ignored entirely because research participants should know that. According to Krzysztof Konecki (2021:26 [trans. UK, AMK, and MB]), "My self-definition is indispensable for them to place me in their own world and adjust—I wish to stress—adjust their answers to my questions. It is so not only because the research concerns a living person who I interact with but also the documents I analyze, and they adjust to my questions, too; they are 'players,' even though they are lifeless partners of the interaction in my game, which I call 'data analysis.'" Therefore, if the reflection on the researchers themselves is vital in the case of outgroup research, it is even more so when it concerns autoethnography.

In autoethnography, the emphasis is on the researcher's reflexivity. In the process of developing knowledge, where their sensitivity plays a role (Kacperczyk 2014a:8), "autoethnography trumps other sociological methods by enlarging our understanding of reflexivity in the research process. No other sociological method has the potential to disclose the multiple reflexivities that are involved in our everyday research projects, which include not just the researcher's reflexivity but also the reflexivities of the researcher's subjects" (Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz 2011:206). For autoethnography, the reflection on the research process is of great importance, as it is strictly connected with the personal, biographical experience of the researcher (Lofland et al. 2006). According to Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner (2011:5),

> [w]hen researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences…Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders.

The authority of the researcher also has to be borne in mind, especially when the researcher appropriates the subject of their research and becomes the "data surgeon" (Konecki 2021:25 [trans. UK, AMK, and MB]). That is why, in qualitative research, the position of the researcher toward the phenomenon being studied is widely discussed. To reveal the situation where the relationship between the researcher and their researched subject is obvious,

the researcher has to adopt the first-person perspective (see: Nash and Bradley 2011; Konecki 2021). Although the first-person perspective is not indispensable in research, it is possible and practicable. Moreover, texts written from the first-person perspective do not exclude other perspectives,

> [a]utobiographers also can make a text artful and evocative by altering authorial points of view. Sometimes autobiographers may use first-person to tell a story, typically when they personally observed or lived through an interaction and participated in an intimate and immediate 'eyewitness account'…Sometimes autobiographers may use second-person to bring readers into a scene, to actively witness, with the author, an experience, to be a part of rather than distanced from an event…Autobiographers also may use second-person to describe moments that are felt too difficult to claim…Sometimes autobiographers may use third-person to establish the context for an interaction, report findings, and present what others do or say. [Ellis et al. 2011:5]

Still, whatever the narration, the researcher is like a prism or a filter who is not in the foreground, even if they use the first-person perspective. So, they should reflect upon research assumptions, their attitude, and the process they undergo themselves. The first-person research perspective is not about the researcher, whose role is to be a tool in the research procedure.

Autoethnography vs. Me-Search

What is easy to notice is the fact that researchers like to use autoethnography more than mesearch. It might be so due to the above-mentioned reservations and the fact that autoethnography is well-rooted in the methodology literature.

Mesearch seems to be a wider term than autoethnography because it refers to the first-person perspective in the context of those who stick to strict methodology and those associated with an egocentric and subjective *selfie*. So, if mesearch is to be scientific autoethnography, it has to obey certain rules. Atkinson and Delamont (2006 as cited in Gibbs 2018:150) "argue that autoethnography can become unreflective personal narratives, and that for autoethnographies to gain credibility, they must be analytic, and be connected to, and critiqued within, broader social contexts." According to Sparkes (2000:21 as cited in Gibbs 2018:148), autoethnography is focused on "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding." Anita Gibbs (2018:149) has reached similar conclusions that autoethnography as a scientific method

> can be distinguished from autobiography or personal narrative, by being more critical or political, and making the linkages of personal to cultural and organizational. Autobiography is selective writing about past or current experience (Roberts 2002), whereas in autoethnography, "your life is the data," in other words life events and experiences are treated as data to be collected, analyzed systematically, and critically reflected upon. Having said that, sometimes the lines are blurred and the terms are used interchangeably.

In her autoethnographic analysis, Gibbs (2018:149) points to the condition that "the ethnographic and critically reflexive study of the self, as well as of others with whom the researcher might have a close personal or familial connection. It is personal ethnography that critically connects the topic to the wider social, political, cultural, and ethical contexts and discourses of the topic." Therefore, autoethnography refers "the personal to the cultural" and—as

the name suggests—combines three elements—"auto (to do with self/personal experience); the ethno (to do with culture/insider insight), and graphy (to do with writing, documenting, or analyzing)" (Gibbs 2018:149).

The Researcher as a Vulnerable Group Member: Dilemmas

Having described the complexity of the abovementioned issues, that is, research among vulnerable groups, the difficulty in defining the term, and the consequences of assigning (or not) research participants and the researcher to such a category, a few key aspects appear that concern ethical and methodological dilemmas worth paying attention to when planning, performing, and considering research.

These dilemmas interweave and raise doubts about the researcher's role, involvement, affiliation with the vulnerable group, the uniqueness of the research, and relationships that exist or will appear. This article does not aspire to offer solutions or guidelines but rather to show elements worth taking notice of and analyzing when research is planned and carried out.

The starting point can be the researcher's declaration about their relationship with the group being studied, both before, during, and after the completion of the research. The list of questions to pose can include the following: Does the researcher belong to the vulnerable group they study? If so, do they declare their affiliation with the group? Why do they reveal (or not) their affiliation? What are the risks and/or benefits of doing so for the researcher and/or the studied group? If the researcher does not belong to the vulnerable group in question, what is the level of their involvement (cognitive and emotional) that exists or will appear in the course of the research? How does the involvement that appeared affect the relationship of the researcher toward the group being studied?

Once the researcher's position versus the vulnerable group has been defined, the motifs of the research should be looked at and verified. Again, there are questions to be asked: Why is this vulnerable group the subject of the research? What are the motives for taking up the topic, both conscious and unconscious? To what degree have they been instilled by personal factors? Do they change in the course of the research?

Another aspect is access to the chosen group. As mentioned above, some groups are easier to reach, and they tend to be overexposed, whereas others are hard to get through or even impossible, unless one is the group's member or creates a relationship of trust that involves personal involvement. Therefore, how has the researcher reached the individuals being studied persons, or how do they intend to reach them? Again, the question of the researcher's position toward the group returns—now in the context of access. Or did the researcher have to recruit research participants from the out-group position? How may the method of reaching the group affect the researcher-participant relationship and the whole research situation? Is the group frequently studied and 'exploited' due to research? If so, are the participants tired of partaking in repeated research? If not, is the situation new to the participants?

The method of reaching participants may influence the research situation. Regardless of how the group has been reached, the paramount issue is their conscious consent to take part in research. So, how can a researcher obtain it? What information may

the participant need from the researcher to see the whole situation? Does the researcher realize what consequences (risks and benefits) participants may incur as a result of taking part in the research? What is the participant's motivation to partake in the research? What are their expectations? What do they need from the researcher? How does the way the presenter introduces encourage participants to join the research (authority, member of the vulnerable group, others)? What is the researcher's stance toward the participants and how does it change in the course of the research?

Additionally, it is vital to reflect upon the sense of obligation before, after, and in the course of the research. It may be related to the participants' sense of obligation as they agree to take part in the research or who are ready to give information due to their specific relationship with the researcher. Likewise, this sense may also concern the researcher who feels obliged toward the participants to protect the given vulnerable group and influence the groups' positive perception by society. Therefore, one may wonder if the sense of obligation toward the participants affects research results, interpretation, and presentation thereof. Then, the question is whether the researcher is aware of it.

Similarly, the researcher-participant relationship may play a role. It may occur during the research and have an impact on the participants and the researcher. Again, how does this relationship affect the research results? Does the researcher represent the research group's interests consciously or unconsciously? Does it not transpire that the group's image is 'looked after' by research participants or the researcher is under the group's pressure? Finally, if the researcher belongs to the group being researched, does the sense of obligation make them represent the group's interests even more so?

What is especially important is the multi-level protection of all research participants. It includes prevention from direct threats resulting from the study situation, for example, maintaining the participants' anonymity, as well as safeguarding them from emotional consequences stemming from their participation in the research. Thus, it is vital to protect the privacy of the participants and minimize their lack of comfort.

Correspondingly, the researcher is also to be protected. They should ask themselves if they are sufficiently secure and if the level of their privacy is acceptable to them. Next, when the researcher belongs to the vulnerable group being researched, they require special protection, for instance, concerning the emotions they experience and their feeling of identity with the participants.

Nonetheless, many dilemmas connected to research on vulnerable groups are independent of the researcher's relationship with the group. Some may turn out to be specific to a given situation when the researcher is highly involved or affiliated with the vulnerable group. The point is that these issues concern the researcher, their protection, and the consequences that the research situation or the results' publication may have.

However, many other problems may occur. One of them is the issue of revealing to the participants and later—due to the publication of the research results—to a wider audience the fact of being a member of the given vulnerable group. On the one hand, this problem concerns the protection of one's "I" and privacy, but on the other, it relates to the openness of

research participants. Last but not least, there is the impact of the researcher-participant relationship on the methodology and research results.

In a situation when the researcher reveals their identity as a member of the vulnerable group being researched, the group may happen to have certain expectations. For instance, the group may expect the researcher to be their spokesperson, a representative of particular participants, or someone who would make society perceive the group in some way.

What remains is the matter of the conscious or unconscious generalization of one's experiences upon the group's experiences, as well as the interpretation of the data collected from one's standpoint. This is particularly important when the research is carried out from the first-person perspective when mesearch becomes the methodological *selfie*, instead of a mindful and thorough autoethnography.

Conclusions

In biomedical research, the category of vulnerability is mainly associated with the issue of conscious consent, inequality of power, and the potential possibility of being harmed.

> Regulations and policy documents regarding the ethical conduct of research have focused on vulnerability in terms of limitations of the capacity to provide informed consent. Other interpretations of vulnerability have emphasized unequal power relationships between politically and economically disadvantaged groups and investigators or sponsors. So many groups are now considered to be vulnerable in the context of research, particularly international research, that the concept has lost force. In addition, classifying groups as vulnerable not only stereotypes them, but also may not reliably protect many individuals from harm. Certain individuals require ongoing protections of the kind already established in law and regulation, but attention must also be focused on characteristics of the research protocol and environment that present ethical challenges. [Levine et al. 2004:44]

However, in social science, the term "vulnerability" is relational (van den Hoonaard 2018). Power inequality between the medical researcher and the participant is not as strict as in social science (see: Sleat 2013). According to Will C. van den Hoonaard (2018:305), social science "should abandon the doctrine of vulnerability." He also questions the validity of the category of vulnerability and claims that every individual should be deemed vulnerable. In medical science, a quite arbitrary list was drawn of groups treated as vulnerable (see: Sieber 1992). Western ethics committees have made them "untouchable" because researchers have to obtain their special consent to undertake the research. In consequence, some groups may be excluded from research (van den Hoonaard 2018). Medical researchers concentrate on the issue of conscious consent, vulnerability to harm or abuse, whereas social science researchers pay attention to the question of whether they do not make the subject of the research more vulnerable in the course of, or as a result of, the research (Iphofen 2009).

Social science researchers perceive the category of vulnerability as a less stable concept, which is seen as ambiguous and nuanced. Ascribing research participants univocally to a vulnerable group may lead not only to them being stereotyped and deprived of individuality but also to a situation where the research act itself disempowers them (Lee and Renzetti 1990:512).

Nevertheless, the fact that research participants realize they belong to a vulnerable group may let the researcher notice the situation's complexity and reflect on their prejudices and assumptions. In this way, the researcher becomes better prepared to protect the vulnerable, to inform themselves of their prejudices and of the susceptibilities of others to harm (Jacker 2004:61).

It is generally assumed that research should be objective. However, in the case of qualitative research, this is by definition something remote, and research on vulnerable groups seems to be a manifestation of this. As Nash and Bradley (2011:82) comment:

> [q]ualitative (ethnographic) and quantitative research methodologies, along with their unique languages, are shaped by a view of the world that is objective (out there to be studied), naturalistic, measurable, testable, and in-reviewable. Narrative (phenomenological, SPN) research methodologies, along with their unique languages, are shaped by a view of the world that is subjective (in here to be expressed), constructivist (at least partly constructed by the observer), and interpretive.

Still, the researcher is always 'someone,' and even if they adopt the stance of a 'naive researcher,' they have certain assumptions. Even though the researcher meticulously follows research procedures, regardless of the research type, they always bring into play their personality, opinions, stereotypes, fears, experience, and, in short, themselves. A researcher is a person who is not able to entirely "suspend themselves" (Konecki 2021 [trans. UK, AMK, and MB]). However, they should be aware of that fact. It is not only about being biased toward certain conclusions, noticing, or overlooking some data. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (2001) notice that the researcher is always a person of some gender, race, or nationality and that this affects their perception of reality and position toward the group being researched. The complexity of the researcher's identity and the variety of their experience rules out a simple division into in- or out-group relationships with the research participants. As this article shows, this is particularly important for qualitative research. Therefore, when describing research dilemmas in the case of vulnerable groups, both the participants and the researcher should be taken into consideration, particularly when the researcher belongs to that group themselves.

A researcher participates and experiences the study situation just like the participants they observe or talk to. Simultaneously, they project reality, consciously or unconsciously, according to their perception and experience, no matter if they work from the in- or out-group perspective. Many a time, the researcher's cognitive and emotional involvement, which develops in the course of the research, places them in the space between. To sum up, "the researcher is always a me-searcher, someone whose personal worldviews change over time, and when they do, they result in different takes on what constitutes valid, worthwhile research. Thus, *me-search* and *research* are allies, not enemies" (Nash and Bradley 2011:XIV).

Research on vulnerable groups broadens researchers' ethical awareness, but one can assume that any research—including that on groups not perceived as vulnerable—poses ethical challenges and can indicate new areas prompting researchers to deepen their ethical skills.

Knowledge of ethics does not necessarily prepare researchers for situations they cannot foresee.

Above all, the researcher should be attentive to what is happening in the research process and open to confronting their beliefs with their subjects' perceptions of the world.

Working with vulnerable groups highlights another important issue. It often involves working with the emotions of the subjects, as well as the emotions of the researchers. As researchers, we are taught to focus on the subjects' narratives and the emotions that accompany them. However, we are not prepared for our emotions, which may be significant as well. This was pointed out by Rhonda Shaw and colleagues in an article discussing their research experiences with vulnerable groups (2020:290-293). Undoubtedly, research with vulnerable groups also engages researchers emotionally and thus can be extremely exhausting and difficult for the researchers.

This raises the question of whether researchers working with vulnerable groups should have additional support in the form of supervision. So far, such institutional support is not practiced in social sciences, even though research among vulnerable groups highlights the significance of the researchers' emotional engagement in the course of research. However, this is a broad topic for a separate article.

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Citation

Kluczyńska, Urszula, Anna Maria Kłonkowska, and Małgorzata Bieńkowska. 2024. "Researching Vulnerable Groups: Definitions, Controversies, Dilemmas, and the Researcher's Personal Entanglement." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(1):10-28. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.1.02