

Editorial

‘In the half shadows’: Research with hard to reach populations

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The central theme of this special issue is research with hard to reach populations. Essentially, research of this type involves engaging with groups in society whose members share the experience of being overlooked, misunderstood or in some cases marginalised. Some under-recognised populations are located within mainstream society but the experiences of their members go unnoticed, suppressed or denied within this mainstream context. Other groups may be subjected to confinement, legal or *de facto*, and removed from visibility by reason of their ‘difference’ which is often configured as deviance, disease or danger. As a consequence of societal non-acknowledgement, marginalisation or confinement, combined with minimal research visibility, these groups remain in what this issue refers to as the ‘half shadows’, by which is meant a position of being known to exist but not being known about. The half shadows analogy portrays the semi-visibility of the subjective experience of these populations.

This form of semi-visibility can manifest itself in different ways but of particular interest in this issue is that which flows from being misunderstood, not asked one’s opinion on issues of significant personal relevance or not listened to when one tries to articulate those opinions. This type of experience is closely connected to the process of ‘othering’, whereby people find themselves unheard, disempowered, or possibly stigmatised simply because of certain personal traits they carry or social positions which they occupy. Bauman’s (1997) *sociology of the stranger* highlights how ‘othering’ effectively distances society from unwelcome or uncomfortable realities. The collection of articles in this issue highlights how research with hard to reach populations can help interrupt or reframe the discourses surrounding what Hughes (2002, p. 575) refers to as the ‘invalidation of alterity’.

The semi-visibility attaching to certain groups can arise from a general lack of awareness by society about their existence or it can arise due to negative attitudes where the views of a ‘known to exist’ group are not believed, go unheeded or are difficult to access. Often a combination of these factors is at play.

The articles in this issue present research projects which have been conducted with semi-visible groups. For example, the study by Brian Melaugh and Hannah Rodrigues

(The voice of the street) discusses a street-based outreach study with drug users; this group is physically visible in society yet their views on services are seldom taken into account, partly because of the difficulty involved in obtaining those views and partly because of the lack of value attached by others to such views.

Fiona Creaven and Marypat O'Malley (*We definitely need more SLTs*) highlight the expressed need for speech and language therapy among the transgender population. Again, this is not a hidden group in the general sense but their need for provision of certain professional services is almost totally unheard in the wider health system. By engaging members of this group in a research process, this study has illuminated an under-recognised but highly important element of the lived experience of the transgender community.

Edward Keegan and Nusha Yonkova's study (*Stop Traffick*) with men who pay for sex raises our awareness regarding aspects of the sex trade which have proven very difficult to research in the past. They manage to shed light on the views of buyers and this in turn reveals a lot about the context within which sex is purchased by men from women. Prostitution is not an unknown phenomenon in society, yet we know little about the views of male buyers even though they are essential actors in the purchasing equation. Through their research, Keegan and Yonkova set out to uncover the views of male purchasers regarding aspects of the 'paid for sex transaction' and their study breaks new ground in terms of capturing the views of an almost-never-heard group in research on this issue. Interestingly, male purchasers are not generally characterised as a 'marginalised' group per se, and indeed Keegan and Yonkova are not suggesting they are, but like the study by Peter Andersson and Carolina Överlien (*If you take it personally you break*), it transpires that research with one set of actors who are rarely heard may help to shed light on another set of actors which can be construed as 'othered' or marginalised. In Keegan and Yonkova's study, the research with male purchasers illuminates not only the views of men who pay for sex but it also sheds light on the experiences of the women they pay in terms of how male purchasers think about them.

Andersson and Överlien's study captures the views of staff in secure residential facilities regarding their experience of the violence and aggression they regularly encounter in their workplace. Their research not only highlights the atmosphere of violence which is a regular feature of that work but they manage to reveal the affect this environment has on the mindset of workers who are employed to work with a certain cohort of young people in society. The views of their research participants reveal much about the day-to-day conditions in secure residential facilities for young people, thereby adding to our insights into the experiences of both workers and young people located in this type of residential context.

The articles in this issue indicate that systems which ostensibly operate to support or help a group may need to use innovative methods to engage with the perspectives of different actors within that system. Julie Lawrence's in-depth study (*Researching unheard voices*) with parents of adults with learning disabilities reveals the benefits of using qualitative research methods to uncover the complex nature of the parenting

role in this context and the depth of emotion attaching to it. This article, like others in this collection, underlines the importance of sensitively engaging with research participants who are not used to their opinions being solicited.

Likewise, Stephen Macdonald, Anne Charnock and Jane Scutt's article (*Mad studies and social work*) illustrates the importance of undertaking research carefully and respectfully on topics which are deeply personal to the research participants (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2008). Drawing on biographical interviews with mental health service users, they offer a window into the lived realities of this population and their work invites a reconceptualization of mental distress and how it can best be addressed by society. Their article illustrates how research findings can be used to help reframe societal attitudes towards contested phenomena such as mental illness.

Contributors to this special issue were asked to not only report on the findings of their research, but also to explain the methodologies and research designs they employed. Lee-Ann Fenge, Wendy Cutts and Jon Seagrave AKA Jonny Fluffypunk (*Understanding homelessness through poetic inquiry: looking into the shadows*) discuss how their research with homeless participants utilised an arts-based methodology to give voice to a transient, hard to reach population who are rarely heard but who clearly have a lot to say. Again, this article displays the level of planning, skill and perseverance required by researchers involved in conducting research with hard to reach populations. Their work also highlights how the process of social research can be valuable and meaningful in many different ways.

Siobán O'Brien Green's article (*I have a story to tell*) eloquently displays the many factors which researchers must take into account when working with vulnerable or marginalised populations. She draws on years of experience working with and researching victims of female genital mutilation and gender-based violence to explain why carefully constructed research practices are essential if research with such groups is to be conducted effectively and ethically.

Similarly, Peninah Kansiime, Claire van der Westhuizen and Ashraf Kagee's article (*Barriers and facilitators to physical and mental health help-seeking among Congolese male refugee survivors of conflict-related sexual violence living in Kampala*) highlights how important it is that researchers fully appreciate the safety needs of some research participants arising from their participation in research studies.

Sieber and Stanley (1988) have previously highlighted the need for researchers to be tuned in to the possible consequences which might flow for some participants (or to a vulnerable group as a whole) simply by participating in a research study.

In Kansiime, van der Westhuizen and Kagee's research study, some participants had never spoken to anyone of deeply distressing experiences and they emphasise how important it is that researchers are awake to any potential impact of their research on research participants and that they put appropriate supports and safeguards in place where necessary.

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When the Call for Abstracts for this issue was released it was anticipated that a small number of researchers might respond. Instead, very quickly it was clear that this was a very active field of research and the volume of abstract submissions went far above what had been expected. I would firstly, like to thank everyone who submitted abstracts because every abstract received was further confirmation for me that the proposed focus of this special issue was justified. Under the weight of numbers, the editorial committee of the journal kindly agreed to allocate extra space to enable a two-part special issue to be published. This issue represents Part 1 of this two-part edition and Part 2 is in preparation for publication later this year. I would like to extend my gratitude to authors who will feature in Part 2 and who are patiently waiting for their articles to be published. I hope that the full collection of articles will be of interest to those already involved in researching hard to reach populations and that it may inspire more researchers in how they conceptualise or plan their future research endeavours.

References

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