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Hidden but not Forgotten: The Importance of Including Understudied Populations in Research

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Hidden but not Forgotten:

The Importance of Including Understudied Populations in Research

This volume focuses on the importance of including understudied or underserved populations in empirical research. In this context, we define underserved populations as groups of people who have received less scholarly attention and intervention than other groups. This issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* includes research on older foster care youth, homeless youth, families with foster children, individuals arrested for drug-related offenses, pregnant youth, and college students who identify as LGBT. These groups represent only a fraction of underserved populations that are often excluded from empirical study. Nevertheless, each study contained in this issue helps to demonstrate the importance of collecting information about hidden and underserved populations, even when there are barriers to identifying study participants, building trust, and encouraging active study participation.

For many reasons, there are groups of people whose experiences are systematically excluded from contemporary research in many fields; including education, criminal justice, public health, medicine, and the social sciences, to name but a few. Explanations abound as to why these groups are not represented in empirical research and range from individual to institutional barriers. For instance, it has been suggested that some populations experience less trust for research, researchers and institutions. Another explanation is that the traditional methods of data collection are not conducive to the inclusion of certain groups, who may not have access to the technology or transportation necessary to participate in different studies. While reasons for nonparticipation in research differ between target populations, it remains critical for researchers to recruit underrepresented groups for study despite these challenges. Including underserved

populations in research is important to reaching more ethical, valid, and meaningful research findings (Spears, et al., 2011).

As Ramiro Martinez demonstrates in his invited commentary, one of the benefits of examining specific populations – not in comparison to other groups, but on their own – is that by doing so, you may find nuanced variation within subgroups. Martinez demonstrates the utility of in depth inquiry of criminality (and resistance to criminality) within Latino communities in the United States. As Martinez (2015) notes, simply including ethnicity as a variable within larger studies, and looking at the experiences and patterns among Hispanic and Latino study subjects compared to those of other races and ethnicities, would not result in a comprehensive and culturally sensitive understanding of the reasons for Latino involvement in or desistance from crime. For example, the experiences of first-generation immigrants might be entirely different from those of individuals whose families have resided in the United States for multiple generations. Through his work over two decades, Ramirez has found that there are important culturally specific factors that impact findings, which could easily be lost in research that does not take cultural differences into account.

There are myriad reasons why certain groups of individuals are excluded from mainstream research. Chief among them is that many times, certain populations are difficult to access for inclusion in empirical research. The use of traditional sampling methodologies simply wouldn't work for many hidden populations, particularly those for which the total population size is unknown. To give an example, without knowing how many human trafficking victims there are in the United States, we cannot calculate a sample size for a study on this particular form of victimization that would yield valid, generalizable results. Yet, insight from these studies is still crucial to learning about social problems, therefore creative sampling methodologies are

sometimes essential. Several different sampling strategies were used in the studies in this volume, for instance, in their study of pregnancy and parenting among teenage-aged youth, Smith et al. (2015) utilize a snowball sampling methodology, while researchers Hartinger-Saunders and Trouteaud (2015) utilized purposive online convenience sampling in their study of college students in the process of aging out of foster care. It is important to note that there are increasingly valid sampling strategies for reaching hidden populations, such as respondent-driven sampling (for more information, see Zhang, 2012).

Perceived population size can also impact funding for studies on certain populations. In an era of increasingly modest research budgets in many different fields, it may be hard to justify spending taxpayer dollars to learn about phenomena thought only to impact a small population of people. More rarely, some groups may be underrepresented in empirical research because of extreme social marginalization. With little social and political capital, the experiences of some groups may be even less of a priority to researchers. Yet, these populations tend to be among the most vulnerable, so research on these groups, such as the piece in this issue focusing on the experiences of homeless youth (Santa Maria, et al., 2015), is of great importance.

Each article included in this issue demonstrates varied ways of conceptualizing and studying vulnerability. Though the targeted groups for study differ, each contribution has in common the goal of improving the quality of services for specific populations. For instance, in this volume, Diana Santa Maria and her colleagues (2015) explore the experiences of youth during their transitions to homelessness as a way to better understand both their paths to homelessness and the factors of these youth's resiliency. Such exploratory studies not only shed light on under-researched populations; they also provide insight into enhanced service provision opportunities and potential prevention policies.

Compiling studies on vulnerable populations into volumes such as this one is important for several reasons. First, looking at a variety of studies of underserved populations helps us understand the complexity of the concept of vulnerability. Second, by considering multiple forms of vulnerability side by side, it is evident that the effect of individual vulnerability goes far beyond those individuals, impacting families and communities. This is important because even if we personally do not identify with a vulnerable group, we are still affected by and responsible for the experiences of those people in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and our communities. Additionally, as evidenced by many of the articles in this issue, members representing vulnerable or underserved groups often make contact with multiple agencies and organizations. If partnered with research entities, these agencies may be able to collect information about these individuals that, once compiled, might add to what is known about those groups in the academic literature, and in doing so, would provide evidence of the need for support for future research.

Finally, it is clear from each of the articles in this volume that many of the individuals identified for inclusion in these studies experienced multiple forms of vulnerability, and as several authors noted, were in need of holistic services. It is clear that even though organizations may have only fleeting contact with individuals considered vulnerable, they may want to use that time window to refer those individuals to other community organizations that can also help meet their needs. Central to this actually working are functional partnerships between local agencies that offer complimentary services to community members with different needs, therefore reaching out to other community organizations and learning about the scope and quality of their programming is essential.

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