Chapter 48
Gender and Sexual Minority Research in the Digital Society

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to deepen the theme of the participation of gender and sexual minorities in social research, with a specific focus on the new possibilities offered by the digital society. After defining the concept of "hidden populations" or "hard -to -reach populations," the contribution focuses on the factors of greatest vulnerability of the LGBT population. Subsequently, the chapter aims to review the literature regarding the barriers to the sampling, recruitment, participation, and involvement of sexual and gender minorities, highlighting some strategies to overcome some of the main barriers, through a plurality of innovative procedures made possible by the so-called digital society.

INTRODUCTION

Although making significant contributions to empirical and theoretical understanding of sexuality in society, qualitative, quantitative and mixed research methods often encounter problems in the stage of subject recruitment and sampling. This is particularly evident in social studies and researches involving subjects belonging to gender and sexual minorities. In fact, those who do not comply with "the heterosexual norm" or who shift away from the traditional gender binary belong to a class of individuals who are still the victims to hate crimes, prejudices and stereotypes (Savin-Williams, 2001; Ludlam et al., 2015; Nunn & Bolt, 2015).

Thus, gay men, lesbian women and bisexual and transgender people often tend not to reveal themselves; in reality, they choose to hide or keep their true sexual identity as a secret, or even intend to escape from social research. This "masked" character makes the LGBT community invisible from a statistical point of view in many countries.

From this critical angle, it is safe to argue that subjects belonging to sexual and gender minorities can be categorized into the sub-group sociologically termed as "hard-to-reach population" or "hidden population".

In the context of quantitative research, failure to obtain accurate research data capable of reflecting the size of the entire sub-population in question may result in several drawbacks, including threats to the external validity of the results and the possibility of generalization (Jonhson, 1990; Rogers, 2004; Meyer & Wilson, 2009).

Similarly, also qualitative research sometimes requires meeting and interaction in person with this hidden population, but its members often escape or refuse.

Social researchers continue to struggle to find and involve gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender participants in their research, even if they have to renounce the use of probabilistic sampling or to restrict the field of their analysis only to the most reachable people.

Traditionally, to deal with this situation, social researchers implement several strategies or sometimes a combination of them. For example, to recruit subjects belonging to "hidden populations" they resort to sampling of convenience, conducting recruitment and interviews in gathering places usually visited by the target population. Whilst this strategy facilitates the involvement of some members in the study, at the same time, it also omits those who are not present at the identified social venues and those who visit different venues in the period during which the research takes place (El-Khorazaty et al., 2007; Festinger et al., 2008; Corbisiero, 2010; Germino et al., 2011).

A second strategy that social researchers often deploy is appeal to professionals who have direct contact with members of target populations for their assistance in the mediation between the researchers and the potential subjects (Booth, 1999; Derose et al., 2000; Hatchett, 2000; Benoit et al., 2005; Keyzer et al., 2005; Alvarez et al., 2006; Hoppitt et al., 2013). In this scenario, they could be NGOs and some counseling services, which, depending on the case, often play a central role in welcoming, supporting and listening to some vulnerable sub-groups of subjects. Consequently, they are able to produce fairly profiled lists of individuals" instead of "consequently, producing fairly profiled lists of individuals.

A last solution sometimes adopted is snowball sampling. In this method, researchers come into contact with some target subjects and, after their involvement in the research, ask their help to identify and invite from their social circle more right potential subjects who share the same characteristics, thus making the number of the subjects taking part to the research grow "like a snowball" (Shedlin et al., 2011).

The rise of the digital society and the increasingly pervasive diffusion of online communication channels is making it possible to partially overcome the existent barriers to the sampling, recruitment, participation, and involvement of sexual and gender minorities in social research.

Thus, this chapter intends to deepen the theme of the LGBT population in social research, with a specific focus on the new possibilities offered by the digital society. After defining the concept of "hidden populations" or "hard- to- reach populations", the contribution reviews some of the most innovative studies in this field, highlighting some strategies to overcome some of the main obstacles to reach this target. As it will be explained more in detail, a growing number of studies have successfully recruited hard –to- reach populations via social media, through a plurality of innovative recruitment procedures.

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