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Working with Marginalized and ‘Hidden’ Populations: Researchers’ Anxieties and Strategies for Doing Less Harmful Research

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Abstract

This article addresses some of the anxieties and concerns that up-and-coming or first-time researchers may have about doing research on gender and sexuality with illegalized and marginalized populations. Specifically, the paper addresses anxieties and concerns around gaining access to “hidden” study populations, developing trust, and the risk of misrepresenting or appropriating voices. In addressing these issues, I examine the contributions of feminist methodologies to the study of gender and sexuality and, in particular, the study of “hidden” populations such as sex workers and those engaged in same-sex relations. In doing so, I focus on two broader but interconnected methodological issues around doing “ethical” research. First, I highlight some of the various ways feminists have dealt with the manifestations of power imbalances within the research setting—especially when conducting interviews or undertaking ethnographic work—mainly in regards to gaining access to research populations, as well as seeking “truths” and constructing knowledge while avoiding causing preventable harm. I also identify some methodological points that may be appropriate to consider when researching illegalized and marginalized populations. Second, I scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages that are connected to doing research with illegalized and marginalized populations from an insider/outsider position. In particular, I ask, how does explicitly working from this subject-position shape research on illegalized and marginalized populations within the region?

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