Insights from a Review of the Literature on Immigrant Populations

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Purpose and method

- Having faced issues in the field, decided to get an overview of others' experiences via a systematic literature review.
- Started broadly with studies on vulnerable populations, narrowed down to immigrant and indirectly related to those. Included studies, which had substantial discussion of ethical and practical issues, as well as studies directly focused on the topic.
- Identified 63 relevant articles, reviewed at this point 47.
- Time range: 1987 – 2019.
- Most studies published after 2000.

    - This could be related the recent intensification of global mobility and immigration

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General characteristics of the literature

- Type of journals – most articles were published in qualitative method/research ethics journals, followed by journals in immigration and refugee studies. Other fields included – women studies, health studies, family and childhood studies, sociology, geography, and gerontology.

    - *Migrant populations seem to present specific methodological and ethical challenges based on the number of studies (10) in the field of migration/refugee studies.*

    - *There seems to be recognition of immigrant/refugee populations as vulnerable and attention to the issue from methodological standpoint in social sciences in general.*

    - *There seems to be a need for a paper, which may provide a focused discussion of challenges and strategies of conducting research with various types of vulnerable migrant and refugee populations, which could serve as a general reference for students and researchers. While there are such papers on specific groups (undocumented, forced, women, youth), there are only a couple of articles discussing migrant and refugee population in general.*

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General characteristics of the literature (cont.)

- Most studies were conducted in the US and the UK. Several studies were conducted in Canada, and individuals studies – in Europe, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand.

    - *The geographic distribution is consistent with the map of the main migration destinations. However, there is a lack of understanding of challenges of conducting research in various institutional and cultural settings.*

- Most reviewed studies were qualitative in nature.

    - *Which can be linked to the challenges in access and issues with maintenance of confidentiality when researching immigrant/refugee populations, and the fact that these challenges are more likely to arise in qualitative research.*

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Vulnerable immigrant and refugee populations discussed in the literature

Directly Related Vul Pops	Indirectly Related Vul Pops
Vulnerable Immigrant Populations - Families - Couples - Children - Individual Adults - Migrant Women	Minority population ‑ Female Minorities ‑ Minority Families ‑ Minority Children
Refugees/Forced Migrants - Families - Children - Individual Adults - Refugee Women	Trauma Survivors - Abused Women
	Substance Abusers - Drug Addicted Mothers

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Common challenges discussed in the studies

Controlled access

- Vulnerable populations are difficult to get access to;
- Best access is via community support/ethnic organizations;
- Access to clients/members of such organizations is often controlled by gatekeepers;
- Gatekeepers are there to protect the interests of the clients and need to be convinced of the research's purpose to facilitate the study.

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Common challenges discussed in the studies (cont.)

Validity of responses in studies of groups

- In studies of groups (focus groups, families, couples, classes of children, etc.) there is always inherent power dynamics, whereby a small group of participants tend to dominate group situations;
- Due to vulnerability of participants, those silenced are even less likely to participate and express their true thoughts and feelings than less vulnerable participants.
- This creates bias in results and complicates interpretation.

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Common challenges discussed in the studies (cont.)

- **Researcher positionality/identity**
- Power dynamics may be an issue in the relationships between the researcher and the subjects, too.
- The personality, age, ethnicity, culture, gender, financial wealth, and other characteristics of the researcher has a strong impact on the accessibility and responsiveness of vulnerable populations, as well as on the quality and trustworthiness of the collected data.

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Common challenges discussed in the studies (cont.)

- **Reporting bias**
- It can be difficult when reporting a study's finding to present it in an accurate and unbiased light.
- The requirement of "Do No Harm" can become incredibly perplexing in the case of reporting.

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Common strategies discussed in the literature

- **Participatory Action Research**
- Participants actively participates in research; researcher may be a participant.
- Seems to be the most popular way of mitigating the challenges of engaging with vulnerable populations.
- A way to enable researcher to access vulnerable populations by removing the gatekeeper from the equation.

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Common strategies discussed in the literature (cont.)

- **Insider Based Approach**
- Researcher is of the same ethnicity, gender, age, or background of their research subjects;
- Allows for the researcher to quickly earn trust, and utilize insider knowledge from their own personal experiences;
- Good strategy to use when the researcher is concerned about the accuracy surrounding certain cultural, historical, and social contexts of vulnerable populations' accounts;
- However, prone to insider bias, which may lead to. blind spots in data collection and analysis

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Common strategies discussed in the literature (cont.)

- **Outsider Based Approach**
- Researcher is of a distinctly different ethnicity, gender, age or background to their research subjects;
- Allows to get a better picture of the grand scheme of things since they are not desensitized to certain facts like their insider counterparts might be;
- However, requires more time to build up trust and develop understanding.

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