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Sinacore, Ada L.

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# Methodological Considerations when Conducting Research with Vulnerable Populations

Ada L. Sinacore  
Ibukunoluwa Adekoya\*  
Asra Milani\*  
Jann Tomaro\*

with  
Shaofan Bu  
Justin Buchanan  
Samir Durrani  
Stefanie Gescher

Social Justice and Diversity Research Lab  
McGill University

*\*These authors contributed equally to this work.*

## Abstract

Critical analysis of current research methods is aimed at shedding light on the concerns and challenges confronting vulnerable populations. The following conference proceeding will address how research methods embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies can inadvertently have a negative effect on the populations they are meant to understand and support. Theories of intersectionality and social justice are used throughout to inform how researchers may be attuned to the ways in which their studies may be beneficial or harmful to vulnerable populations. Firstly, the ways in which research can serve to further marginalize already vulnerable populations is addressed. Next, ramifications of recruitment and compensation with vulnerable populations are discussed. Finally, the role of technology in research and the ways in which employing technology can lead to either inclusion or exclusion in research practices is considered.

## Keywords

Research methodology, vulnerable populations, marginalization, recruitment, compensation, technology

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The lack of research and recognition of vulnerable populations' lived realities can lead to an organization's inability to provide services that reach individuals marginalized by economic, political, social, or cultural circumstances (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007). In order to understand the circumstances that create multiple vulnerabilities, researchers need to closely assess the interconnected qualities of people's lives given their social and cultural contexts. There are systematic ways to do this research, however there are many challenges and pitfalls along the way,

as well as the ongoing requirements of researchers to be self-critical, reflexive, flexible, disciplined, and patient (Court, Abbas, Riecken, Seymour, & Le Tran, 2018). In order to consider ways to conceptualize research with vulnerable or marginalized populations, it is important to incorporate tenets of social justice, such as; reflexivity (Sinacore & Enns, 2005), partnership, participation, protection, and power (Wilson and Neville, 2009).

Sinacore and Enns (2005) proposed an Integrated Social Justice Pedagogy, with *reflexivity* as a main component. They suggest that reflexivity involves continually reflecting on and addressing one's personal biases, assumptions, and attitudes. With regard to research, as previous mentioned it essential to not only reflect on one's personal bias but how these biases will influence the research questions, methods, and analysis.

Next, *partnership* involves establishing and maintaining relationships based on trust and respect with members of the population of interest. These relationships can be developed through engaging with the population in genuine ways, such as creating space for dialogue and negotiation throughout the entire research process. Thus, researchers need to be informed about the population's worldview, epistemologies, protocols, as well as, historical and contemporary realities (Wilson & Neville, 2009). As well, *participation* refers to involving key members of the population of interest in all stages of the research, including decision-making and planning (Wilson & Neville, 2009).

Further, *protection* describes conducting research in ways that do not exploit vulnerable populations, and do not reinforce existing negative stereotypes. Rather, research should be conducted in ways that provide explanations that benefit the population being studied. Research processes should be congruent with the key beliefs, epistemologies, traditions and protocols of the population. However, it is important to acknowledge that the title *protection* may be problematic, as it could be perceived as patronizing. Nevertheless, researchers are strongly encouraged to examine and address the ways in which their research could pose risks to the populations with which they work and put systems in place to minimize that risk (Wilson & Neville, 2009). As well, sharing *power* with research participants is essential to ensure that the data collected accurately reflects the voices and experiences of the populations of interest (Wilson & Neville, 2009). However, even when researchers attend to reflexivity, partnership, participation, protection and power, it is crucial that they are cognizant of fundamental challenges inherent in conducting research with vulnerable populations.

### **Challenge One: Overrepresentation**

When a particular population is disproportionately overrepresented or identified as having a specific problem, consequences of such overrepresentation can result in generalized labeling effects and reinforced biases. One example is the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system. However, this overrepresentation can be explained by analyzing structural inequalities such as, historical abuses, institutional racism, colonialism, socioeconomic marginalization, and the impact of specific practices of criminal justice agencies (e.g. racial profiling) (Corrado, Kuehn, & Margaritescu, 2014; LaPrairie, 2003). A second example is the overrepresentation of culturally diverse students in inclusive education. That is, educational inequities may result in certain student populations having less access to information, resources,

and opportunities, consequently missing the requisite knowledge and experiences that leads to academic success (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). These examples highlight the importance of understanding the contexts and structures which advantage or disadvantage certain populations such that the researcher adequately consider how these variables influence their research questions, epistemology, methodology and data analysis.

### **Challenge Two: Language**

The words used to define populations may ascribe value and meaning to these populations that can have longstanding consequential impact. For instance, biased, and stigmatized language can result in labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Particularly with vulnerable populations, the representative research labels that have been used to identify these populations have often not recognized the hardships these populations face. For example, labels such as “hard to reach”, “hidden”, and “difficult to access” make the researcher’s experience salient rather than the participants. This language suggests that certain populations are less cooperative and depicts these populations as less than optimal research subjects. These labels ignore the pervasive danger that vulnerable populations often face, particularly in regard to research. Employing language that marks populations as difficult is a disservice to these populations and perpetuates marginalization. Furthermore, this kind of language likely maintains the distrust in research that keeps marginalized populations from participating in studies.

### **Challenge Three: Clear Beneficence**

Beneficence is how the research benefits the participants and society as a whole through minimizing the risks associated with research. Engaging in research may result in participants experiencing anxiety, distress, exploitation, and misrepresentation (Department of Health, 2014). Certain individuals may feel alienated and disempowered when they participate in research without being informed about the researcher’s intentions and how their participation and the dissemination of research findings will benefit them and the populations they represent (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

Furthermore, with the intention of supporting diverse populations, many researchers tend to focus only on the negatives and ignore the positives that exist within marginalized populations (Yoshioka & Choi, 2005). Employing a strength-based epistemological position will ensure that researchers are not employing deficit-based models when engaging with populations who face numerous challenges. Researchers need to consider how their epistemological and methodological choices enhance or inhibit the resourcefulness and strengths that individuals and their communities possess, despite extraordinary circumstances. As such, cultural values or norms, are considered as potential resources for change (Yoshioka & Choi, 2005).

### **Challenge Four: “Othering” Culture**

Historically, in the context of multicultural research the term culture was used to imply race or ethnicity that was other than White or of European heritage. As a result, the term was used when the focus was the culture of “others” (Montoya & Agustin, 2013). However, it is important to note that everyone is a cultural being, and therefore cultural-neutrality is not possible. Thus, it is

essential to use an inclusive definition of culture based in intersectionality and diverse identities such as, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, social class, sexual orientation, and disability (Pope & Arthur, 2009).

In addition, researchers need to be cognizant of how focusing on cultural factors raises certain challenges. Researchers may need to ask critical questions to assess the whether or not they are integrating culture in a competent and appropriate manner. For example, when is a behaviour called “cultural” and when is it not? Why is the researcher distinguishing behaviours in this way? What are the consequences and benefits of recognizing and naming culture? Volpp (2000) argues that when a person from an ethno-cultural minority group engages in a behavior seen to be problematic, there is a higher tendency for researchers to name said behaviour as cultural, which may result in generalizing the behavior to a particular cultural group. The assumption that a group of people are solely governed by cultural factors can be both dehumanizing and depoliticizing through neglecting the analysis of how structural forces shape reality (Volpp, 2000). Furthermore, situating the problem in cultural factors may result in researchers proposing policies and/or theoretical conclusions aimed at rescuing culturally-diverse groups from their cultures. As a result, these recommendations may serve to stigmatize and silence culturally-diverse groups as well as exaggerate the differences between “us” and “them,” thereby “othering” the population (Montoya & Agustin, 2013).

Alternatively, researchers using intersectionality as an approach consider the complexity of multiple identities. Intersectionality focuses on multiple and converging identities, drawn from race, age, social class, sexual orientation, abilities, religion, spirituality, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, physical characteristics, culture, history, geographical location, and language, while still being uniquely whole (Lockhart & Mitchel, 2010). An individual’s identity can only be understood through exploring the unique place that emerges at the intersection of these multiple identities. Yet, these multiple identities must be understood as dynamic inequalities in changing relationships with each other, rather than a static list of structural locations (Collins, 2010). The inclusion of intersectional epistemological positions requires researchers to focus on the interplay between various inequality-creating categories and the resulting negative effects, while respecting and addressing diverse experiences (Montoya & Agustin, 2013).

### **Challenge Five: Recruitment and Compensation**

There is an egregious history of harm within psychological research and clinical practice (e.g., The Stanford Prison Experiment, Conversion Therapy, and Project MKUltra). The Nuremberg Code in 1946 shed light on the potential risks of participating in research, and yet there are still many ways that research does not follow the psychological ethical code of non-maleficence (Haverkamp, 2005). In addition to harm directly from participating in research, there have been serious repercussions for many vulnerable populations through the dissemination of delusive and damaging perspectives that legitimize structural oppression. Haverkamp (2005) indicates many valid reasons that vulnerable populations may be wary of joining research including research being unsafe, participants being misrepresented, research not benefiting the participants, participation not being worth the compensation, and participants experiencing micro and macro aggressions.

An example of these types of transgressions can be seen when examining research with sexual and gender diverse populations, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and gender non-conforming people. These populations have faced deplorable misrepresentation and mistreatment within psychological domains, including pathologization within The Diagnostic Statistical Manual and The International Classification of Diseases and traumatic corrective techniques such as conversion therapy (Drescher, 2010; Liamputtong, 2007). Within clinical categorizations and research outputs, gender and sexual diverse populations have faced stigma, prejudice and discrimination that contribute to broader societal marginalization (Drescher, 2010; Liamputtong, 2007).

### *Recruitment*

Recruitment can be a very difficult stage of research that has significant implications for the research, and the participants. In the majority of research paradigms employed, the researcher seeks participants to investigate the researcher's interest, rather than the alternative, where participants seek researchers to investigate participant interests (Given, 2008). Unfortunately, not many papers include reflections on how and why participants were recruited for a particular study, however, given the structure of recruitment, most researchers must speculate on who to include and the reasons why anyone would participate in their study.

That said, when recruiting any population, researchers will come into contact with the innumerable intersecting identities inhabited by members within a community. It is crucial to consider the myriad of ways that a participant may be vulnerable with regards to their personal experiences as well as the recruitment criterion and the research being conducted (Sprague, 2016). For example, it is common for sexual and gender diverse populations to be aggregated into "The LGBTQ community" (*LGBTQ* refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and the many other non-dominant gender and sexual diverse identities) as a fixed and homogenous identity, whereas these populations comprise many different people coming from various communities with diverse lived experiences. The way that identities, groups, and social locations (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, ability, social economic status, religion, age) come together in an individual may profoundly change the experience of any one of these identities (Sinacore, 2017). Research has the potential to attend to and honor the intersectional identities of participants. However, making assumptions that ignore these realities may serve to bolster stereotypes and misconceptions, as well as to possibly put participants in dangerous or unethical situations.

Further, there are many research paradigms that honor multiple intersecting identities by recognizing and working to reduce social, political and power inequities, and these paradigms are recommended when working with vulnerable populations (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Given, 2008; Haverkamp, 2005; Sprague, 2016). During recruitment, it may build trust to be transparent about the research paradigm chosen for the study, as well as the reasons for selecting the paradigm. Some research paradigms, such as participatory-action research, prioritize the explicit benefit toward participants, rather than focusing on societal research benefits (Haverkamp, 2005; Kidd, 2005).

Population definition is a critical aspect of recruitment that influences results, as well as societal views of populations. The parameters of a population influence where and how researchers recruit. There can be consequences when choosing between criteria that are inclusive and those that limit within-group variability (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington, & Fassinger, 2009).

For example, the notion of a singular “LGBTQ community” combines gender and sexuality in an inclusive way that may acknowledge common experiences such as discrimination and resiliency, but also introduces tremendous variability (Moradi, et al., 2009). There are also ways that population definition may ignore intersecting identities. For example, “LGBTQ” is not an internationally recognized means of identifying the diverse sexual and gender minorities assumed within this label. If researching in Canada, immigrants and refugees may not see themselves in this label and thus may not join the study. Acknowledging population variations can inform recruitment parameters and bring awareness to the far-reaching implications these parameters may have on participants.

Moreover, when working with vulnerable populations, the outreach method employed for recruitment will vastly influence access to the population. Recruitment methods aimed at reaching vulnerable populations often rely on using social networks, such as the researcher’s personal connections, a community leader, or organizations that serve the population. However, these strategies may limit sample diversity as they are passive in nature and rely on a fixed individual for recruitment. As well, these methods may place an undue burden on researchers, community leaders, and organizations (Liamputtong, 2007; McCormack, 2014). Further, sampling techniques may serve to enhance or inhibit the recruitment process. For example, criterion sampling may limit diversity if a narrow criteria is applied. Alternatively, using the snowball technique allows participants to offer potential participants access to the research. This approach can be a means of gaining community trust, but potentially may pressure participants to do additional work (McCormack, 2014).

Researchers can also reach communities by spending time participating with community members before beginning the study. As relationships and trust develop, researchers may be able to introduce their research and recruit participants (McCormack, 2014). An additional challenge to think through during recruitment is saturation, which is a methodological principal used in qualitative research to decide whether or not further data collection is necessary (Saunders, et al., 2018). To calculate saturation, both the population definition and intersecting identities must be taken into consideration. For example, if a study includes all sexual and gender minorities – in order to capture innumerable identities, how many participants will a researcher need to reach saturation? Finally, during recruitment phases, it is important to think through how the researcher presents the implicit power dynamics and the influence these dynamics will have on the participants and research (Haverkamp, 2005).

When working with vulnerable populations, building trust is essential, and transparency about the research project is an avenue to trust. Participants have the right to be informed of the scope of the research, epistemology, methodology, procedures of recruitment, compensation, data analysis, decision-making processes, ethics, research dissemination, data confidentiality, consent, funding of the project, as well as the risks and benefits participants may face (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013; van Wijk, 2014). There are ramifications to how information is provided: websites can display basic details, but researchers may feel vulnerable disclosing the entirety of their research online. Trust is also built through relationships. Recruitment is a process of initiating relationships that are fostered throughout the research. However, researchers may find themselves in multiple roles as they also become trusted community members. Participants have the right to know the ways in which a researcher suspects their relationship to participants may change through the research process (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013; van Wijk, 2014).

## *Compensation*

There are four essential questions behind compensation: What incentives do participants have to participate? Is the compensation beneficial to the participants? Might the compensation induce harm? How can compensation be offered without coercion? Compensation decisions are rarely included in publications yet have serious implications for participants. Financial compensation is one of the more commonly used types, whether through direct remuneration, or financial representation, such as gift cards. However, those who are economically disadvantaged may not be able to afford *not* to participate in the study and thus, compensation may be experienced as coercive (Tishler & Bartholomae, 2002).

An additional concern is when volunteers attempt to participate in research in order to gain compensation, even when they do not meet criteria (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005). As such, it has been recommended to offer low compensation when working with economically disadvantaged populations (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005; Tishler & Bartholomae, 2002). However, this suggestion perpetuates the economic inequities faced by low-income populations and puts in place unfair compensation guidelines for the populations in the greatest need of financial gain (Tishler & Bartholomae, 2002). Transparency surrounding compensation decisions can work against the unjust power differentials that are inherent in the researcher-participant relationship (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013; van Wijk, 2014). Participants should know why they are being compensated, how much they will be paid and when. They should also be made aware of the interaction between payment and participation. There is a paucity of research detailing the relationship between participant volunteerism and financial compensation, raising an unknowable ethical concern for the vulnerable participants who may make difficult choices to join or decline a study (Tishler & Bartholomae, 2002).

Financial compensation is not the only method to recompense participants. Other compensation types may reduce concerns of fraud and inducement (van Wijk, 2014). Some researchers have found that participants are not financially motivated to enroll in studies. Rather, they are interested in sharing their story for validation, as well as a form of activism (van Wijk, 2014). Ease of access to the study can also be a method of compensation. Day care, snacks, transportation, and hours outside of work schedules are examples of ways to demonstrate respect for the lives of participants and the effort required to participate (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). When working with organizations, researchers can volunteer to compensate for the time and effort allotted to the research study (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). An empowering approach to compensation is to provide community access to research results (Kidd, 2005).

## **Challenge Six: Using Technology in Research**

Given the significant increase in innovative technology it is important to consider the implications of using these technologies in research. Thus, as researchers embrace these advancements, it is necessary to think critically about the influences of technology on research with human participants, particularly vulnerable populations.

In order to assess the use of technology in research, it is important to understand the prevailing phenomenon termed The Digital Divide. The Digital Divide refers to differential access to the



internet and digital devices among populations, depending on intersectional positionality (Chang et al., 2004). For example, as a result of lower socio-economic status, certain individuals may have significantly reduced access to digital devices and the internet. As such, researchers need to consider differential access to technology. If researchers heavily rely on recruitment through technology, they may exclude and marginalize participants and may attain a sample that is non-representative. Therefore, researchers need to consider how to use technology in ways that does not exclude or marginalize the potential participants with whom they are working.

### *Technology in Recruitment*

As previously indicated when recruiting participants from vulnerable populations, research has shown that fostering trust is of the utmost importance. Moreover, face-to-face interaction has been demonstrated to be the best method for establishing relationships that are based on trust and respect (Wilson & Neville, 2009). However, certain situations make face-to-face interactions less feasible (e.g., research with people experiencing physical or mental illnesses that significantly limit mobility). Therefore, in such situations, technological tools present obvious advantages in establishing relationships. These tools can also be used to complement face-to-face methods to help build trust and alliance with key members of the vulnerable population. In addition to traditional tools such as phone calls, emails, and listservs, more recent technological tools include social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Plus and Instagram as well as, independent and institution-hosted websites; mobile phone applications; and recruitment-matching companies (Chang et al., 2004; McKinnon, 2018).

Given the history of oppressive methods used in some psychological research, researchers need to reflect upon the potential pitfalls of using technological tools before they implement them. Important considerations are as follows. Researchers need to be thoughtful about the mediums of publicizing their research and the content of their research invitations. Researchers will need to show transparency by providing enough information about themselves, their intentions behind the research, the intended benefits and the potential risks. As much as possible, researchers also need to ensure that their content, such as wording and images, do not further propagate negatives stereotypes in public media about that population. Furthermore, depending on their purpose, media may hold various levels of credibility to viewers. For example, a post about a research advertisement on Facebook may appear less legitimate to a potential participant than the same information on a research website. To exemplify integrating technology into research with vulnerable populations, in a study employing a narrative approach to understanding the stories of artists with congenital and acquired disabilities, the researcher (in order to establish trust and credibility with this population) contacted key members in the community and attended community events, such as art exhibitions. Afterwards, the researcher used technological tools, such as email, to stay in contact with community members who decided to participate in the study (Titus & Sinacore, 2017).

### *Technology in Data Collection*

Rapid technological innovation has provided tools for collecting data in qualitative research. Available tools include Voice over Internet Protocols with video features (e.g., Facebook, Skype, Google Hangouts, and WeChat), Telemedicine applications (e.g., Doxy.me), instant messaging

interviews (e.g., Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, etc.), chat-room focus groups, online focus groups, live polling, photo-sharing programs, and email interviews (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014).

Nevertheless, in using these internet-based tools for qualitative research, many ethical considerations arise. According to Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014), a very common dilemma among qualitative researchers is differentiating between the private and public spaces on the internet. As technological tools are managed by external companies, and participants experience differing levels of privacy and security, it has become increasingly challenging to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary withdrawal from research studies (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). In order to make informed decisions about appropriate tools, researchers need to study the privacy and ownership policies of the tool of interest and reflect on the potential risks to participants. Researchers should also seek external consultation from ethics boards and key members of the vulnerable population. Additionally, they should receive training to prepare for unintended consequences of technology use in research, such as breach of participants' confidentiality online.

Some researchers have used Skype for Business and in-person individual interviews to collect data (Titus & Sinacore, 2017). These methods enabled the researcher to establish rapport with participants and to engage in the non-verbal communication necessary for qualitative research. Furthermore, others have used the telemedicine application called Doxy.me and in-person individual interviews to collect data in order to reach participants living in other provinces via video chat, while interviewing nearby participants face-to-face (Adekoya & Sinacore, 2018).

### *Technologies in Data Analysis*

In qualitative research, transcribing interviews and analyzing transcripts are time consuming and labour-intensive activities. Research software can now aid in transcription, coding, and developing visual concept maps. Some of the recent data analysis software include ATLAS.ti, NVivo, HyperRESEARCH, DEdoose, WinMax, and QSR NUD\*IST (Brown, 2002; Moylan, Derr, & Lindhorst, 2015).

As Baptiste (cited in Brown, 2002) stated, various qualitative data analysis softwares are embedded with their designer's epistemology, which may promote particular ways of construing and performing data analyses, while excluding others. According to Baptiste (cited in Brown, 2002), since computers make counting more efficient, researchers may be enticed to base their indicator of meaningfulness or significance of data points solely on the "frequency of occurrence" (p. 8). Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to be informed about the epistemological, axiological, ontological and methodological positions through which the software processes data.

Finally, another consideration regarding data analysis software is data immersion. One of the key processes of qualitative data analysis is the immersion into the data which, in turn, leads to the creation of rich accounts and descriptions. As such, this raises a question as to whether technologies take away from the opportunity of researchers to be more intimate with the data as instead of viewing transcripts as comprehensive documents, software may prematurely breakdown the data into smaller units. Thus, the researcher needs to be cognizant of the relationship

between the parts and the whole such that using technology does not inadvertently create a micro-picture versus rich description.

### *Technology in Research Dissemination*

In addition to collecting and analyzing data, technologies now offer new avenues for writing and disseminating research results. Various tools are discussed by Moylan, Derr and Lindhorst (2015). For example, Scrivener, a writing software, accommodates non-linear writing which is common in qualitative research. Additionally, programs such as PowerPoint, Keynote, and Prezi allows for creative and effective ways of reporting on research findings. Multimedia (e.g., photos, videos), blogs, and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Research Gate) are now used creatively to disseminate findings to audiences other than the readers of traditional academic journals (Moylan, Derr, & Lindhorst, 2015).

An important consideration for adopting these technologies for the dissemination of results is the concept, “the medium is the message,” coined by McLuhan (1967). This concept emphasises that the ‘*how*’ of a message presented is just as important as the ‘*what*’ of that message (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967). For example, a photo exhibition featuring issues related to poverty among a certain people group presented in a university hallway has different implications when compared to an academic journal article on the same issue. Ultimately, it is important for researchers to reflect on how to disseminate research findings in ways that can benefit the populations being studied.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

There is an ethical necessity to consider the ways in which research may harm those who choose to participate. Particularly with vulnerable populations, ongoing efforts to safeguard participants is required at every stage of research. Researchers are encouraged to incorporate understandings of sociopolitical histories and structural power dynamics that impact the varying identities of all parties engaged in research. Furthermore, researchers are asked to reconsider how known research conventions may cause harm in ways that have gone unnoticed or ignored, and to adjust and correct these conventions to the best of their ability. The ethical commitment to non-maleficence should be a priority for researchers, above productivity. For example, recruitment and compensation have ethical implications, directly impacting participants, as well as indirectly contributing to societal norms. Deep and ongoing reflection on method selection can reduce harmful outcomes (Haverkamp, 2005). The vulnerability of participants, as well as researchers, should be considered, with attention to the wider, sociopolitical implications related to the varying intersecting identities of researchers and participants. Efforts to think through any benefits or harm that may result from participation is required for ethical research. It is the hope that calls to action for more intentional consciousness of the benefits and consequences of research production will lead to improved practices that better serve our communities.

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## Author Biography

Ada L. Sinacore, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University and the Director of the Social Justice and Diversity Research Lab. Dr. Sinacore is an CPA Fellow and won the Distinguish Member Award from the Counselling Section.

Ibukunoluwa Adekoya is a Ph.D. student in Counselling Psychology at McGill University and a member of Prof. Ada L. Sinacore's Social Justice and Diversity Research lab. Her current research interests include parenting practices among African immigrants in Canada and the use of technology in research with vulnerable populations.

Shaofan Bu is a Ph.D. student studying Counselling Psychology at McGill university. He is part of the Social Justice and Diversity Research Lab headed by Prof. Ada.L. Sinacore. His current research focuses on the impact of pornography on young men's intimate relationships.

Justin Buchanan is a third-year doctoral candidate in counselling psychology at McGill University and a member of Prof. Ada L. Sinacore's Social Justice and Diversity Research Lab. His research addresses the experiences and needs of male survivors of adulthood sexual violence, with an emphasis on the role of intersectionality.

Samir Durrani has a master's degree in Counselling Psychology from McGill university. His research interests include resilience and well-being in LGBTQ communities.

Stefanie Gescher is a Registered Provisional Psychologist in the province of Alberta. She holds an MA in Counselling Psychology from McGill University, and a Bachelor of International Business from Carleton University.

Asra Milani is a Ph.D. student in the Counselling Psychology Program at McGill University and a member of Prof. Ada L. Sinacore's Social Justice and Diversity Research lab. Asra's research interests include understanding and conceptualizing intimate partner violence from social justice and multicultural frameworks.

Jann Tomaro is a doctoral student in counselling psychology at McGill University and a member of Prof. Ada L. Sinacore's Social Justice and Diversity Research lab. Her research focuses on underrepresented populations, with particular interest in improving mental health care provision for underserved communities.

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