

# APPROACHING THE HARD TO REACH POPULATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF DATA COLLECTION AMONG UNWED MOTHERS IN MALAYSIA

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**ABSTRACT---***The article focuses on the challenges of data collection among hard to reach population in Malaysia; unwed mother. The data was gathered during the narrative interviews of 17 unwed teenage mothers, aged between 12 to 18 years during their placement in shelter homes. The results showed that the researchers were having difficulties to build up rapport with the research participants especially at the initial stage of data collection. Participation of the researchers in the participants' activities was considered crucial in making the researchers as an 'insider' to the research participants. Creating initial rapport, restriction to choose participants, multiple sessions of interviews, low education level, talkative participants and attention seeking participants are among the challenges during the data collection. In addition, supportive and conducive environment for conducting the interview also important to make the data collection successful. In Malaysia the presence of marginalized groups is often neglected and therefore it is important to build a trustworthy relationship between the researchers and participants. Considering that, it enables the researchers to depicting the issues of marginalized groups and represent their voices in the studies.*

**Keywords---** *Marginalized groups; research issues; challenges of data collection; hard to reach population; unwed mother*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an effort to highlights the challenges of collecting data during the research that involved with marginalized group; unwed mothers Malaysia during their placement in a shelter home. In accurate data collection can impact the result of a study and lead to invalid results/ finding. The data collection process is considered as a core of any type of study. The main purpose of collecting data is to answer the research questions. Without the

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process, a research can be questioned. In social sciences, the data collection process normally involved gathering the data from the participants or participant that participating in the research.

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Owing that, as no official statistics available for the unwed mothers in Malaysia, the number of cases are predicted mostly based on number of proxies. It is also due to the Malaysian norm considering unwed mothers as a taboo topic (Saim et al., 2013). Hence most of the unwed mothers only visible in a shelter home or when they are in need of hospital treatment. The statistics for unwed mothers is merely depending on the number of registration of the illegitimate children in Malaysia. It is estimated that about 10% of all children born in Malaysia are considered illegitimate. The unwed mothers typically viewed with delinquent behaviors that are associated with practicing free sex and delinquent. A study from Shahrudin et al., (2018) showed that peers influences is among the risk factors of teenagers to participate in sexual behaviour. It is also common among unwed mothers for having dysfunctional family (Sarnon et al., 2018) or having lack of parent-child attachment relationship (Shahrudin et al., 2017; Alavi et al., 2012).

In addition, the unwed mother status also seen as sinful and shameful according to the norm and culture. Due to that reason, unwed mothers normally will keep their status as well her child for almost from everyone except their close significant others. Although most of the pregnancies happened because of love between the unwed mothers and their partners (Subhi et al., 2012) or defined as a romantic relationship; an experience of being loved and in love (Ghadur & Kadir, 2017). However the placement in a shelter home is considered main alternative of the family to hide their pregnancy due to shame (Sarnon et al., 2012). It is almost impossible to find an unwed mother to admit her status in the public. Hence, in Malaysia this group is considered as among hard to reach populations.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a full qualitative research methodology in documenting the lives of Malaysian unwed mothers who were living in the shelter homes during their pregnancy. 'Qualitative research embraces the view that as far as people's perceptions are concerned, there is no one single truth' (Hartley & Muhi, 2003: 103). This goes in line with the feminist research approaches that emphasise the pragmatic orientations, different national contexts and dynamic developments in women's experiences (Olesen, 2005). The main agenda in a qualitative approach is to use the approach as a method for collecting the data and analysing data based on the participants' world view (Muecke, 1997).

In realisation of this the narrative research approach was used to undertake the qualitative research within these studies for marginalized groups. 'Narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals, through the collection of life stories usually by interviews. It provides a detailed picture of an individual's life' (Hartley & Muhi, 2003: 105). Narrative research can take different forms and this study employed the narratives as life stories (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Creswell, 2007). This approach was chosen because the act of telling a story was fairly simple for the research participants. They were asked to tell their own stories in

any way that made sense to them. 'By telling, people recall what has happened, put experience into consequence, find possible explanations for it, and play with the chain of events that shapes individual and social life' (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000: 58). The intention to conduct the narrative interview was due to the understanding it is considered particularly appropriate when the experience of individuals is described as problematic, marginalized, unresolved or associated with the stigma (Earthy & Cronin, 2008; Hyvärinen, 2009).

The research approach was useful for gathering rich information about the lives of Malaysian unwed mothers. The lack of proper documentation and research on the lives of disabled people and unwed mothers in developing countries such as Malaysia has meant this research approach provides a valuable insight to the understanding of their situations in developing countries. Nevertheless the narrative approach is quite challenging as it requires extensive information collection regarding the participants and at the same time depends on a clear understanding of the participants' life contexts (Creswell, 2007). According to Scârneeci-Domnişoru (2013) there are cases where the narrative interview fails for example when the participants just refused to talk no matter how would the interviewer try. The narrative inquiry also requires active collaboration with the participants that is essential to this study. Such dynamic interaction as that which took place within the narrative research could empower the participants in generating their life stories and constructing the lived experience of Malaysian unwed mothers as a whole. Therefore, this research approach allows for a dynamic understanding of the participants' lives as well as to be closer to the

### *Participants*

This article is based on the interviews of 17 unwed mothers, aged between 12 to 18 years gathered through narrative interviews during their placement in shelter homes. Most of participants were selected by using purposive sampling, however some of the participants were selected by the administration of the shelter homes.

## **III. RESULT**

The results were based on the experiences of the researchers while doing the research with unwed mothers. The researchers were having difficulties to build up rapport with the research participants especially at the initial stage of data collection. Participation of the researchers in the participants' activities was considered crucial in making the researchers as an 'insider' to the research participants. Creating initial rapport, restriction to choose participants, multiple sessions of interviews, low education level, talkative participants and attention seeking participants are among the challenges during the data collection. In addition, supportive and conducive environment for conducting the interview also important to make the data collection successful.

### *Creating initial rapport*

The rapport between the researcher and participants lies at the core of data collection process. The rapport between researcher and participants lies at the core of data collection process. In the situation where the researcher

failed to build a rapport with participants, it might jeopardized the accuracy of the data collection. Building up rapport with the marginalized participants might be among the challenges that the researchers need to face while gathering the data. Building up rapport with the marginalized respondent is harder as they normally being stigmatized by the society. For example the unwed mothers used to be stigmatized practicing free sex. Therefore it is common for the unwed mothers to have difficulties to build up the relationship as a shield to their status.

In creating initial rapport, the researcher had built the relationship with participants by having conversation discussing various issues that might not directly related the research topic such as what kind of sport that they preferred, what was the subject they love most during their school time etc. In such a way, the participants became more comfortable to talk their issue during the research interview.

Another alternative applied to creating initial rapport with the unwed mothers, the researcher used to join them during their tea break. However, the researcher just be there to join their conversation to strengthen the relationship but not to eat anything serve in the shelter home. During the tea break the researcher might observe the relationship among the residences or with the staff. Other than that the researcher also participated in other activities such as evening exercise.

The researcher also used informal ways to approach the participants during conversations or in the interviews. The researcher called herself as kakak literally means older sister. The participants were called by their nicknames or adik; literally means younger sister/brother (in this situation it means younger sister). The language used also more informal for example 'Macamana hari ni?' instead of 'Apa khabar?' for 'How are you?' It was used to be friendlier rather than being formal.

### ***Restriction to choose participants***

Some of the shelter homes decided who can be the participants. The restriction is taken due to the rules and regulation applied in the shelter home. One positive side is that the selected respondent might be the resourceful participant that can explain well about her experiences. On the other hand, the selected respondent might be the one that 'secretive' and not being sincere to tell about her experiences in the shelter home.

### ***Multiple sessions of interviews***

Some participants took longer time than other participants to share their experiences. In some cases the participants may required one or two sessions after the initial session to open up. As participants also experienced being stigmatized before the interviews, it is crucial to give them time for their openness. It is noted that the participants who had more sessions of interviews were more open up and responsive compared to those who had one or two sessions of interviews. For example a respondent who had about six sessions of interviews shared about her relationship with the staff in the shelter home.

### ***Low education level***

Several of the participants of marginalized group have had a history of running from home and truancy from school. Due to that they were having difficulties to read or understand the standard language. The participants were preferred to communicate by using non-standard language which has less grammatical, more simplified and more to slanga. For example one of the participant wanted to explain that she was involve with marijuana, she used the term 'Bomb Alek' means 'Bob Marley'. Need to admit that it is hard for the researcher to lowered the language to minimize the gap with the participants.

### ***Talkative participants***

As the relationship getting better and the trust increased between participants- researcher, the respondent tend to spend more time with the researcher. Some of them were looks like starting to depend on the researcher and ramble on while giving their answers. It is not an easy task to control the situation and refocus the respondent especially in the middle of conversation that involve emotionally. The researcher was spent longer time than normal interview, calm the participants and explained that the duration was too long. The action was taken with the consideration that the researcher was willing to listen to their story and not only because of research purpose.

### ***Attention seeking participants***

At times, the researcher encountered with attention seeker participants. Reasons may vary including their young age, their stressful situation and they see the researcher as someone that they could trust and share their feelings. As the situation was happened continuously during the study, the researcher tried to meet them but with limited time; about ten to fifteen minutes. Later, the researcher reduced the time was gradually in order to avoid them to feel unwanted.

### ***Supportive and conducive environment***

As shelter homes normally depending on private fund hence they have limited budget in regards of facilities. Due to that they also have limited budget to provide extra room that could be use for individual activities such as individual interview. To overcome such situation the researcher was be more flexible in order to have more privacy for participants. Some interviews were taken in the staff meeting room, garden of the respective shelter homes or in the researcher's car. All actions were taken to ensure participants privacy and comfort.

The interviews were taken in the environment that believed can ensure comfort for the participants such as in the silent environment, privacy, and no one else nearby that could hear the conversation except the participants being notified prior the interviews. The environment of the place of interview may influence the next point after this.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

This paper describe the constraint faced by the researchers involved with the marginalized groups; unwed mothers and disable women. It is vitally important for qualitative researchers to engage with the participants themselves when conducting research with marganilized groups (Abram, 2010). The unwed mothers typically viewed with delinquent behaviors that are associated with practicing free sex and substance abuse. Whilst culturally disabled women are identified as 'different', 'weak', 'dependent' and 'pitiful' in society. Some of them experienced stigma that hinder them to share their experiences. Hence in Malaysia setting, establishing the trust of participants is therefore essential. Various approaches has been discuss in this paper to build up trust of participants. Therefore, it enables the researchers to depicting the issues of marginalized groups and represent their voices in the studies.

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