Utilizing Smartphones to Study Disadvantaged and Hard-to-Reach Groups

Naomi F. Sugie

Mobile technologies, specifically smartphones, offer social scientists a potentially powerful approach to examine the social world. They enable researchers to collect information that was previously unobservable or difficult to measure, expanding the realm of empirical investigation. For research that concerns resource-poor and hard-to-reach groups, smartphones may be particularly advantageous by lessening sample selection and attrition and by improving measurement quality of irregular and unstable experiences. At the same time, smartphones are nascent social science tools, particularly with less advantaged populations that may have different phone usage patterns and privacy concerns. Using findings from a smartphone study of men recently released from prison, this article discusses the strengths and challenges of smartphones as data collection tools among disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups.