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CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's theme of presenting and analyzing experiences of advocates and clinicians working with and listening to sexual assault survivors. In this chapter, I provide a first-person account of my own experience interviewing sexual assault survivors about their experiences of help-seeking following assault. I also discuss the ways I reacted to this experience and coped with it and the positive and negative aspects of interviewing survivors. I highlight ethical issues in interviewing survivors and giving back to survivors in the context of such research. This account is intended to provide an example of how listening to survivors and hearing their stories can affect researchers in this area of work. By describing the process of coping with this experience and seeking support to process the interviews I hope to provide ideas about how to take care of oneself and cope with hearing about sexual assaults. This information may also be informative to clinicians, other professionals, and informal social network members who hear survivors' stories and wish to provide support to female victims.

I decided to write about my experience interviewing survivors in part to help myself cope with the stressful nature of this task but also to respond to

Campbell's (2002) challenge to sexual assault researchers to become more emotionally engaged in their research. She argued that we should become emotionally engaged in all stages of rape research. This includes our design and evaluation of research, interviewing victims, caring for oneself and one's research team, and dissemination of results. Part of her call involves demystifying the process of researching sensitive topics by writing about the nature of doing that work. In that spirit, I think that reflecting on my personal experience of conducting qualitative interviews after coming from a background of conducting quantitative survey research may be helpful to others navigating this transition. This task is important because our reactions as researchers can impact the reactions we give to survivors in the research context, including in interviews, the ways we construct our surveys, the debriefing/support material we provide, how we answer participants' questions, and what we say in our recruitment materials. Our reactions can also impact how we interpret the data (e.g., do we focus on individual-level analyses as a way of making ourselves feel safer?). When survivors participate in our research we are asking them to disclose their experiences. We need to recognize that the research experience itself is a social reaction to those disclosures and that, although we are not doing therapy or advocacy, we have a big responsibility to be not only ethical but also supportive in the design and conduct of our work and in our interactions and responses to survivors.

I began work in the area of sexual assault by using archival and quantitative survey-based research methods. In an earlier article (Ullman, 2005), I described my experience of moving from my training in quantitative, logical positivist survey research methods in psychology to conducting qualitative semistructured interviews. I began with interviews of advocates and clinicians about their experiences working with sexual assault survivors (see chap. 5, this volume) prior to interviewing survivors. Thus, I already had experience conducting interviews related to this topic (see Introduction, this volume, for a description of the Mental Health Provider Interview Study).

In this chapter, I begin by discussing an empowerment model that guided my work interviewing the survivors. Next, I describe my experience of conducting the Women's Life Experiences Interview Project, which involved interviewing female sexual assault survivors about their experiences talking with others about their assaults, including both informal and formal social support providers (see Introduction, this volume, for a detailed description of the study design). I then discuss some ethical considerations involved with the research, primarily the need to protect myself and my graduate student researchers from vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress. Finally, I reflect on my experience overall in the hope that this will be helpful for other researchers.

EMPOWERMENT MODEL

In general, I believe that an *empowerment model* is the appropriate approach to working with survivors. This approach is common among rape victim advocates and feminists working against sexual assault and with survivors (Ullman & Townsend, 2008). There is a delicate balance in conducting interviews between allowing the survivor to define her own experiences, trying to do psychoeducation, and trying to provide emotional support to counter women's experiences of self-blame and secondary victimization. It is important at some point in interviewing survivors to attempt to communicate that we believe women, support them, and, of course, do not blame them for their experiences. It is also essential to attempt to reinforce their strengths and help them to explore their experiences as they talk about them so that we can contribute to their recovery. Although this may sound like it verges on therapy or taking an active stance in interviewing, there is a distinction between the two. In the clinical session, clinicians not only listen to survivors but also apply specific treatment/therapy approaches aimed at ameliorating the psychosocial consequences of sexual victimization. On the other hand, while conducting an interview, researchers, including myself, cannot and should not do therapy. This may be somewhat different in the case of clinical treatment research in which therapeutic and research aims are combined (Disch, 2001; Mason & Clemans, 2008). Of course, providing referral information is important and a responsibility for researchers working with survivors, so participants can seek mental health help if they wish to do so. In rare occurrences, researchers should also be prepared to give immediate crisis referrals and to help survivors get help quickly if they are in a state of emergency. Apart from this, though, we can all work to be supportive and serve as interested, active listeners for survivors trying to better understand themselves and work through their experiences by being heard and responded to in an interview. In fact, this is an important aspect of research, for several reasons. When participants are asked, before they discuss their disclosure experiences why they wished to be interviewed, most survivors interviewed in our study as well as in others' research on sexual assault (Campbell & Adams, 2009) mentioned that they did so for three reasons: (a) as part of their recovery; (b) because they perceived that this would be a safe, supportive space in which to have their personal experiences heard; and (c) to be able to use their experiences to help other women survivors of sexual assault.

I strongly endorse Campbell's (2002) suggestions for research teams who plan to interview survivors of sexual assault. These include preparation for the interviews, plans for talking about the interviews afterward by phone or in person, and sometimes follow-up contacts with survivors if they wished for this (see also Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2009, for recommendations for

training sexual assault interviewers). Specific things we did for survivors to be sure we treated them ethically and were responsive to their needs included responding to survivor requests, such as referrals to services in other cities, a copy of their interview tape, and/or additional reading material.

I had never thought of research as therapeutic or personally transformative, beyond just trying to learn new information, but this research felt that way both for me and for the survivors I interviewed. I often wished I could harness all of the energy of these individual women together to help to fight sexual assault in the larger sociopolitical context, and I felt sad that all these women were suffering the same problem, and often the same struggle, in relative isolation. On the other hand, in contemporary society, at least there was a more supportive climate to talk about sexual assault, whereas many women who had been assaulted years ago told me that they could not say anything then and that that has now changed. Demystifying the social context of rape has become a major part of my agenda, because I believe the rape culture that exists in U.S. society is both what spawns rape and what revictimizes survivors who try to talk about it or take action against their attackers.

THE INTERVIEWING EXPERIENCE

Preparation for Interviews

I sought the advice of colleagues in developing the interview instrument in collaboration with my research team and came up with a semistructured protocol that asked about adult female sexual assault survivors' experiences talking with others, including who they first told, their most helpful and least helpful disclosures, reasons for telling or not telling mental health professionals, and reactions from each person they told about their assaults. Again, with input and advice from colleagues, we prepared a comprehensive packet for the women, consisting of community resources, a reading list, and follow-up contact information, as well as \$30 payment. We followed Campbell's (2002) suggestions for our interview preparations, and she visited with our research group to tell us about her research team's experience of conducting interviews with survivors. Campbell gave us advice about how to introduce the interview such that we connected it back to our mail survey the women had already completed in the previous year, which worked well. This strategy emphasized that we had an ongoing connection with the survivors and probably led them to feel greater trust and likely increased our rapport during interviews. In addition, because we had already obtained a lot of information from survivors about themselves, their assault experiences, and their responses to the assault, we would not need to ask for that information during the inter-

view. The interview would be focused on areas we did not assess in the survey in great detail, such as their reasons for and experiences of disclosing assault, responses from each support source, and their appraisal of these responses.

Campbell (2002) suggested that we initially give women the opportunity to talk more about the assault at the beginning of the interview in case they wanted to talk about it and/or were nervous about talking about it. We would also make it clear that it was fine if they preferred not to do so. Campbell's advice on this matter was excellent, because survivors would vary from not wishing to talk about the assault at all, to vaguely referencing it/talking about it briefly, to describing it in great detail. Right from the start, this approach would give survivors control over whether and how to talk about it. Campbell also suggested we offer them breaks if needed and check to see how they were feeling at various points during the interview, which we would do. She also suggested that we be flexible with our interview protocol to let participants talk about what they wished as they preferred, which we would do and, in fact, is common practice in semistructured interviews. If survivors raised follow-up questions, we would answer them, and if survivors wanted to shape the interview so they could tell their story as they wished, we would accommodate this, although we would also try to fit in all of our questions when possible.

I had learned about crisis intervention and peer counseling from reading and speaking with trauma therapists, but I had hoped I would not need such techniques. I also had referrals available, so that if a woman got too upset to continue, we could access professional help for her as soon as possible. In such interviews, I believe that flexibility is important to give survivors some control over the process of disclosure and the interview itself. This is essential for it to be an empowering, positive experience for survivors. Traditional research interviews can reflect a power dynamic in which the researcher, who has more power, controls the agenda by asking the questions and the interviewee responds. Although some may see more flexibility as less rigorous, with this kind of semistructured interview it seemed important to let survivors have some control and for the interview to be a more collaborative process. Campbell (2002) also suggested that we ask how they felt after the interview and whether they had questions of us. We would follow this advice, which seemed helpful and like a natural way to wrap up interviews on a sensitive subject and give survivors a chance to question us about whatever they wished.

We believe our interview protocol fulfilled several of Campbell's criteria intended to meet the overarching goal of having an ethic of caring infused into the research. She argues that caring is reflected in emotionally engaged research. In interviewing, this involves providing a supportive setting for catharsis, a medium for self-acknowledgment, a sense of purpose, a chance to

develop one's self-awareness, a reflection and discussion of experiences that may be therapeutic, and a voice for the disenfranchised (Campbell, 2002). I believe our interview protocol accomplished some of these goals for several reasons. Many women told us that they did the interviews for one or more of several reasons: as a part of their recovery process, because it was a "safe space" to talk about assault, it was a way for them to help other women, and because they wanted to contribute to research and improved treatment for survivors. Given the lack of a defined community for survivors of rape, research studies can and should be one space in which survivors feel safe to discuss their experiences (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco, & Ahrens, 2004).

Beginning to Interview Participants

To initiate the interviews, I called women on the phone, reminded them about the study, and asked whether they would be interested in being interviewed. If they said yes, I set up the interview. I offered a reminder call to survivors who wanted one before the interview and gave all survivors my number to call if they had any questions or concerns. I answered any questions they had about the research and discussed any concerns they expressed. Most did not have concerns, although some had specific requests and needs about how the interview should be conducted (e.g., seating arrangements). Some would sit close to me and to the tape recorder, whereas others would sit farther away from me and/or the tape recorder. Others had specific needs they told me about on the phone, such as that I dress in clothes washed in bleach because of their allergies or, in one case, to sit on their bed, because there was no other room in the house to sit.

I found from the start that, in general, in terms of distress level, the way women sounded on the phone was often well correlated with the way they presented in person; that is, if they sounded depressed on the phone, they were so in person, whereas if they were upbeat and cheery on the phone they tended to be so in person as well. The women had often thought about what they wanted to tell the interviewer before the interviews. Some referred to this specifically and to this interview being part of their recovery and a safe place to talk about it, which was unavailable elsewhere. To my surprise, we even had women participating in the study who had never told anyone about their assault, often because they feared receiving negative reactions from others. Some said this was not a concern in doing a research study with us because we were not part of their lives or social networks. Some women were nervous about the interview.

The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours in length and were done at a time and place convenient for women, usually the women's homes. I first invited survivors to talk about their assault as much or as little as they

wanted. The women, who had already written about their experiences on the survey, tended to recount their assault experiences fairly quickly and only to provide the context for understanding their disclosures and the reactions they received from others, which was the interview's focus. I did not feel very distressed when they talked about their assault histories, which tended to be somewhat detailed but not a major focus of the interviews. The women appreciated not having to talk about the assaults, although many did do so, either briefly or intermittently throughout the interview but rarely in one long narrative segment.

The women varied in how distressed they were, and interviews with more distressed women were more stressful for me because I worried whether they would be okay. I would ask them during the interview if they were okay periodically and assured them they could stop at any time. I always took notes during the interview on what the women said and did, which survivors seemed to expect, as well as tape-recorded the interviews with their consent. However, I was careful to vary the amount of attention paid to note taking on the basis of how the survivor seemed to be doing. If she was more distressed, I paid more attention to her and less on taking notes. I did not have anyone "break down" or be unable to finish the interview. After the interview, I asked how they were feeling about what we had talked about, to which women all said "Fine" or "Good." I felt that, although it was painful, the women seemed to say that talking about it helped and that it (i.e., talking about the victimization experiences) was worth it to try to cope with it and to help other women (which women have always cited as a motivation to participate in my past surveys, not just these interviews).

Initial Impact of Interviewing

Before beginning the interviews, I had been nervous about talking to survivors and about what my reaction would be to doing the interviews, likely a common concern for anyone not having done this before. I had wondered whether I would be able to handle it, but I felt I had enough experience and emotional resilience to manage this task, whereas in earlier years I preferred not to challenge myself in this way. I believe this change was due to several factors, including my own personal growth and feeling of being ready to engage with survivors more personally in my work; having a manageable level of stress, space, and good support in my personal and professional life to handle doing such interviews; and being more established as a researcher with confidence in my ability to do a good job in interviewing survivors.

As it turned out, I had little problem in doing the interviews and felt quite comfortable with the method because I had just finished interviewing 40 service providers in my other project (Ullman, 2005). This helped me to

feel more relaxed about doing interviews and to be comfortable with the interviewer role; that is, I was not using a new method that I had not used in my previous work and interviewing a potentially difficult population (e.g., women about their victimization experiences) for the first time without prior experience.

Having the interview process and type of interviews be familiar to me before I interviewed survivors seemed important. In fact, in my discussions with Campbell, she specifically told me that interviewing survivors would be much easier after my experience conducting interviews with advocates and counselors. This made me feel confident and more able to focus on the task of interviewing survivors about their experiences. This was a more sensitive interview (e.g., focused on women's own victimization experiences) and population (e.g., victims) than the professionals I had interviewed about their experiences working with survivors. I think it would have been much harder to interview this population without prior interviewing experience with a less stressed population.

I was relieved when I quickly found I could do about one interview a week, which I found to be a comfortable pace. This was not based on any advice I received, just on what felt optimal for me to be able to give my maximum attention and support to each survivor and to myself afterward in processing each interview once completed. I assume this is something that differs among individuals, with researchers likely varying in the pace and number of interviews they feel comfortable doing. I think it is very important to teach our graduate students that we all differ in our preferences and abilities to deal with trauma and that sometimes it is hard to know this without experimenting to see what is optimal.

Of course, I had some reactions of anger and sadness at the women's stories, but I was able to process them in a day or so by talking about them in confidence with my research team. This was a strategy that Campbell strongly suggested and is also recommended by trauma therapists in general. I also wrote about the interviews in case summaries following each interview as well as in my research log. These practices were suggested to me by several of my qualitative research mentors, who provided guidance throughout this process. Some of the entries in my research log were as follows:

- I didn't find the interview stressful really, though somewhat uncomfortable. This interview made me sad and made me wonder if there is anything our society has to offer to help this woman. I realized her life is so complex and has many levels of disadvantage, of which rape is just one part. (After interviewing a survivor going through heroin withdrawal living in poverty)
- I was not stressed because [the survivor] was fine while we talked. I found her experience distressing though and the neg-

ative responses she has gotten from others. I felt anger also at what she had been through. (After interviewing a survivor who received negative reactions from family and authorities)

- I interviewed a young Latina woman who seemed different from me (in her demographics), yet her conflict, self-blame, and inability to call her assaults “rape” reminded me of some of my own past experiences and lack of resolution of them. (After interviewing a survivor with whom I ended up identifying strongly)
- I so enjoy interviewing survivors, but I think it’s having a slow cumulative effect that is not always obvious to me. On one level, I’m fine and I handle it, but on another level, it is disturbing to me, I think on a more subconscious level, because only when certain stimuli later distress me do I realize the stuff is there bothering me, even though I am not aware of it on a conscious level. (Right before taking a 2-week break from interviewing to process the initial effects women’s stories were having on me)

I was pleased to be able to do the interviews with seemingly little impact besides mild reactions I had read about that researchers and clinicians have had in working with survivors. My reactions included some psychological distress at hearing their stories, feeling sorry for what they had experienced, anger at the way they had been treated by others, and a sense of resignation about many stories of negative interactions with informal and formal sources that I felt should have been better. I found that my reactions mirrored the survivors’ emotional responses, although I did not express these responses to them during interviews. I tried to put myself in the role of a calm, positive listener connecting to and absorbing what they told me. I showed some reaction of acknowledgment, empathy, and general mirroring of their emotions, but I also tried to show that I could be someone who would fully engage and hear them during the interview, whom they could trust not to react with distress or in any way give them something else they had to cope with.

Survivors’ descriptions of assaults did not distress me particularly, perhaps because that was not the focus of these interviews except to provide context regarding the aftermath of their disclosures. In contrast, however, the responses of others to them and the impact that those negative responses had on them were at times quite upsetting to me. Of course, hearing about and witnessing the substantial trauma histories of some of the women were also difficult. I tried to nonverbally and verbally communicate that I was safe, non-judgmental, empathic, and responsive to them when appropriate, but not overly reactive, and always focused on them.

The fact that these women had come through these experiences and were sitting with me, able to talk about them, said to me that they were strong survivors who had been able to cope at least somewhat effectively and that surely I was going to be able to hear them and be able to take in whatever they told me. In fact, I saw this as part of what I had to offer in return for them being willing to participate in the research and talk to me (a stranger) and trust me with painful details of their traumatic experiences.

The experience of listening to women talk about their sexual assault was not completely new. I had previously had similar reactions in my personal life when women I knew who had been assaulted or abused told me about their assaults, and with women who have contacted me because of my work in this area to tell me their stories, request information about research or community resources, or offer help with my research. As an aside, I believe this is also an important ongoing part of conducting rape research, not only for research participants but also for survivors who contact us informally and need help to find support sources, research information, or referrals to services. Over the years, I have had many women contact me, both related and unrelated to specific research project participation, to ask for information, share their stories, and ask how they can help respond to rape. This has given me a sense of camaraderie with these women, which makes me feel that despite our feelings of being alone in this work and in dealing with rape in our lives, we are not really alone in that we know how endemic rape is in women's lives and can connect about our mutual interest in fighting this form of victimization.

Later Impact of the Interviews

Not surprisingly, the impact of interviewing survivors became apparent to me when triggered by specific interviewees. For me, this occurred when I did my sixth interview, which hit me harder, surprised me, and led me to take a break from interviewing for 2 weeks. I thought that I would be able to predict when I would get distressed and assumed it would be when a woman was very upset or symptomatic, but I had encountered a couple of women like that already. The woman I talked with who upset me instead seemed quite resilient. Although she had experienced a lot of assaults, she was not that different or in any way "worse" than the other women I had talked to in terms of her assault history or current functioning. I enjoyed this interview and did fine, like the others, and felt okay afterward and thought that it was a positive experience for us both. However, after talking with my therapist in detail and the research team more generally, I realized my stronger reaction of upset and feelings of vulnerability after this interview were due to my greater identification with this survivor. It was not about her sexual assaults specifically, but instead about her childhood and the ways she had been treated by family

and professionals as well as her current functioning. Some of these aspects were parallel to my own life, even though they were not directly or obviously so to me at the time. I had to talk about and work through these feelings of my own and did not want to schedule another interview after this one, which I had always wanted to do before, which again made me realize I needed a break.

It was not that I “could not” go do another interview, but I realized I should not do so until I had resolved this one. I also realized I had made some errors and that maybe six interviews was a good, reasonable number after which to take a break. The errors were things I had read about but did not think about, because one often does not notice the effects of factors triggering these emotional reactions until afterward. I had watched too much disturbing television and had watched a movie after this interview that had a rape scene that I did not anticipate would be in it, so I had already consumed more traumatic material before and after this interview than normal, plus the interview was more personally disturbing to me, which all together perhaps was harder for me and induced a stronger reaction.

Initially, I did not want to take a break, but after my therapist and research team seemed to validate taking a break, I decided it was the right thing and did so. I started to feel relieved that I did not have to do an interview for awhile. Still, I worried about how long it would take to feel better and whether I had reached some point of no return or threshold and would now be distressed or less able to deal with the interviews. Assured by my reading that processing and coping with these feelings would restore my equilibrium and allow me to continue, I tried to let go of these worries. I tried to stop judging myself, which my team thankfully challenged me to do, and not to feel I was not tough enough, because I had read about therapists who fall into this trap and then end up with secondary traumatic stress. I read Saakvitne and Pearlman’s (1996) *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization*, which addresses coping with the effects of working with survivors, and found it extremely helpful and validating. This book was helpful because it was quite accessible; it described all of the symptoms and reactions that came up in work with survivors of trauma and offered specific coping strategies for dealing with those effects. Thus, this book was practically useful while I was undertaking this work. In fact, I ordered a number of copies so that my research assistants could have it in addition to our other reading material on interviewing female survivors of violence and trauma.

The impact of interviewing survivors had been only theoretical to me prior to this experience, and although I knew it could have this effect on me, it seemed remote and unreal until it did. I was glad to be informed and to be catching these effects early and not just going on without really dealing with the impact on myself. I also felt this would help me to help my research assistants

once they started interviewing so they would not be at risk of being harmed in this process either. I started being very good to myself in giving myself time off of interviewing and letting myself work more slowly on other work I had to do. Part of my work tasks at the time involved coding my previously conducted service provider interviews. This task actually proved to be great timing, because I would read about how these service providers coped with working with survivors at the same time that I personally needed to reread/hear this advice because of my own interviews with survivors. I also tried to do what I felt like in terms of fun and relaxing activities and to not let work pressure dominate. I focused on exercise; my relationships; and other nurturing, restorative activities that studies show help trauma workers cope with vicarious trauma.

In addition to these things, writing in my research log anytime I felt like it about my reactions and beginning to write this chapter helped me to cope and feel stronger, which I needed, because these feelings make one feel alone, vulnerable, and out of control, similar to reactions of survivors.

Processing During the Interviewing Break

As mentioned earlier, I took a 2-week break, which was important because although I was able to talk about and write about the immediate feelings and thoughts I had, I initially recognized and started to process only the obvious things, such as similarities and differences of the survivor to myself and disturbing aspects of her assault history and the reactions she got from others. Only after a week had passed since this disturbing interview did I realize the deeper issues that hearing the survivor's story evoked in me. I was out running exactly 1 week since I had interviewed her when I realized suddenly that this woman's story upset me because of some of her childhood/adolescent experiences that related to my own unresolved childhood issues; that is, the more long-standing unresolved issues that she evoked in me came into my awareness without warning.

In her case, she had had a mother who did not protect her from several abusers in the extended family, and this reminded me of my mother, who allowed my father to administer physical corporal punishment and did not protect me. The trauma of having to acknowledge that both of my parents did not protect me, not just the overtly abusive one, was difficult because it forced me to face that there was no safe, protective parent in childhood and as an adult there is no absolute safe place/person either. Even though I had been aware previously of these parental issues prior to doing this study, they were still emotionally powerful and triggered by doing the interviews. This experience seemed to me to be an example of having one's basic beliefs in the benevolence of others and safety in the world be threatened, as described by Janoff-Bulman (1992) and others who study psychological trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

I also realized that because it took a week for me to recognize and deal with this deeper material, it was important that I had not done another interview in a week as I had been doing, because that would have likely taken my energy, attention, and focus and perhaps precluded my ability to process this experience and the reactions I had to it. Not knowing how long this processing would take, or when I could get back to interviewing was hard, but having the issues come up and dealing with them made me feel I could have faith that I was doing what I should be doing to care for myself and be in good shape when I again began interviewing.

Getting Back to Interviewing

Two weeks later, I did an interview and was greatly relieved to find that I felt much better and did not experience the same emotional reaction as I had to the previous one. Although I was not back to where I started before I began interviewing survivors (which maybe I never would be), my equilibrium seemed to be restored, and I felt my reactions were more proportional. I was less agitated in general in my life, and my feelings were on a more even keel. I was also able to engage with the woman I interviewed, was glad to be doing the interview, and felt it went well and that I was fully present for her. I began to realize that this experience was a learning process that would unfold over time, and I also became aware of the positive attributes that doing these interviews was bringing out in me. I felt I was able to empathize and be supportive and validating of the positive steps survivors told me they were taking in their lives. I was also able to have the interviews be a positive disclosure experience and a collaborative process whereby together we could do something by talking about survivors' experiences to help women (which, as mentioned earlier, almost all mentioned this as a reason they agreed to do an interview).

In contrast to the negative feelings of fear, anger, sadness, and threat to my assumptions about others and my own safety that hearing about women's assaults brought up, I was now able to feel and recognize that I was also manifesting positive attributes and feelings such as warmth, supportiveness, empathy, and wonder/awe at the strength of the women. Although this process was an individual one in terms of talking to each survivor in individual interviews, I felt that we could learn from each other and take away helpful lessons and even empower each other, even though the focus was on them and their experiences in the interview. I hoped they would gain something from talking to me and having me reflect back support and affirmation to them. I also felt that I was indirectly learning from them, often feeling that they were telling me in very eloquent ways things I needed to know about recovery from sexual assault for my research as well as for me personally. Sometimes women would

say something about their recovery that would echo the very issue that I felt I was thinking about as if they could read my mind or knew me better. I felt a sense of kinship and that in doing this work they were on this journey with me as partners trying to address this issue in their individual lives as well as for women collectively.

Self-Transformation

After conducting 12 interviews, I decided to read my research log, in which I described my interviews and reactions to survivors. I realized that the way I cope with the survivors and hearing about their assault experiences parallels the way I have coped with my own past stressful life experiences. I perceived that I coped in general by attuning myself to the survivors and what they told me during the interviews, taking in what they said, and trying to connect with them and support them. Later, however, I tried to move past it by processing the interview, absorbing the impact, and then, I hoped, putting it aside. Much of my own coping with past emotional and physical abuse as a child and adult sexual assault has involved minimizing its impact, acknowledging it, and trying to move past it. Anger can be a useful emotion that I experienced because of my own past experiences and that I re-experience in hearing survivors' stories. Harnessing this anger has energized me to continue working against sexual violence with others dedicated to this task and has helped me to feel less alone in this world where so many women share these experiences.

Sometimes survivors said wise and insightful things that I feel I needed to hear even though they were talking about their own reactions and recovery—often, they had lessons to teach me. I think I see how much easier it is to understand survivors' assaults for what they are and to have compassion for them, which I realize is what I need to have for myself. At one point, I remember feeling that doing these interviews could make me a better person—a more caring, patient, understanding listener with more to give to others in my life. I wondered if bearing witness to survivors' stories could soften my often-harsh views of people and the world and make me less defensive and more open to the good and bad in life. Despite occasional vicarious trauma symptoms and the general stress of interviewing survivors, there is also the positive side of connecting with women, supporting them, and validating their experiences. I can be helpful/empowering to the women and also learn and broaden my experience by talking to them. There are lessons I learn from each survivor, which I hope to use in my research as well as in my personal life. Witnessing their strength and resilience despite adversity gives me hope and makes me see how everyone has to work individually to recover and collectively to end rape.

To be able to do our best work in interviewing survivors, it is important that the rest of one's life be in the best order possible, in terms of having a support network in both one's personal and professional life. This is important so that one will have others to talk to about the impact of doing this work and to enjoy life with and escape from the ever-present issue of sexual assault. Therapy is also important in that one can always have a trained clinician to help in debriefing from traumatic interviews, if needed, and in processing one's own reactions when particular survivors' stories resonate with one's own experiences. Other self-care routines identified by other researchers to take care of one's health and general well-being are also important. One can be there for survivors only to the extent to which one is there for oneself and functioning optimally. For me, this meant that it was important to cut back or take a break from interviewing sometimes during more stressful work periods. All crisis workers know the importance of self-care and support in avoiding vicarious trauma and burnout that can occur in working with trauma survivors.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are ethical concerns to consider when conducting interviews with survivors of sexual assault, both with regard to survivors who are studied and researchers undertaking the work. Others have written about how to carefully train oneself and one's research team and how to take care of interviewers and survivors during research projects involving interviewing trauma survivors (Brzuzy, Ault, & Segal, 1997; Campbell, 2002; Hlavka, Kruttschnitt, & Carbone-Lopez, 2007). Here, I discuss the precautions I took to ensure the safety and protection of my research team, myself, and the survivors.

Protecting Graduate Student Researchers From Vicarious Trauma and Secondary Traumatic Stress

Researchers who interview trauma victims are not immune from the experience of secondary trauma, especially student researchers, who have less experience and training than licensed mental health professionals. As the leader of a research team consisting of graduate-level psychology and criminology students, it was my ethical obligation to protect the student researchers from potential secondary trauma reactions (e.g., anger, sadness, anxiety) resulting from interviewing survivors.

I began conducting interviews myself before other members of our research team did, which seemed best because I wanted to be sure I understood what this would be like and how I handled it personally before asking my research assistants whether they also wished to do interviews. We were

fortunate to have a 2-year period during which to conduct 60 interviews in our study. This was very important in that it allowed us time to do the interviews at a pace that was comfortable for each of us and that fit with our other work responsibilities.

I felt it was important that we all be in a situation in which we were not overly stressed by other work or personal demands so that we could devote our full attention and energy to survivors during the interviews. This sometimes meant checking in with each other to be sure we were each feeling comfortable about interviewing. I found that if I felt tired or stressed or was experiencing vicarious trauma symptoms, like after the difficult interview I described, it was critical to be able to step back and give myself time away from interviewing. This type of research is not the kind that one should try to “push through” and continue to interview even if one can get by and manage to do it. This is because burnout and worsened stress reactions may result, given the cumulative nature of vicarious trauma exposure (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), and this, in turn, affects survivors. Because we may not be able to see when we are too stressed or not in a good place to be in contact with survivors, we need to rely on each other to tell each other if we think a member of the research team is not up to interviewing. Of course, this has to be done in a sensitive manner and in a way that brings this issue up as one’s perception. This can, it is hoped, engender a discussion that leads the person to conclude on his or her own that he or she wants to wait to interview until he or she is in a better life situation. It is an ethical responsibility to proceed in this manner, for both taking care of ourselves and taking care of survivors. This is probably a key reason why clinicians who do this work talk about limiting the number of clients with victimization histories that they see as a way to cope with vicarious trauma (Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Ullman, 2005).

Just as I conducted most of the interviews with survivors before anyone else on the research team did interviews, I modeled talking about my interviews in the group before students did this. We applied the same model to transcription of the interviews, which can also yield reactions that need to be processed and/or any issues related to conducting rape research or sexual assault in general that any of us wanted to raise, such as media portrayals of rape cases or other issues surrounding rape that came up. We all spoke to others after we did an interview and when we felt we wanted to do so, sometimes at research group meetings, as Campbell (2002) suggested, but other times to each other individually, as sometimes students or I preferred.

I realized that my role as professor/supervisor with more power on the team made it risky for them to talk about sensitive issues, especially their own reactions to interviews. Thus, I also acknowledged that my graduate students should make their own decisions about whether and how much to talk about their interviews in the group context and/or to me, depending

on what was comfortable for them. Sometimes they did discuss sensitive issues, which made me feel glad that there was the trust to do that and that my graduate students and I could provide support to each other in the group context. However, although I emphasized the confidentiality of these discussions I did not expect or mandate that students discuss anything unless they wished to do so, and I believe there were times when they sought support from each other or from persons outside the research context in their social networks. I also told them I was available by telephone if they wanted to talk to me privately. I believe it was important to provide a safe space for discussing the interviews in terms of the research process and how they were proceeding as well as in terms of the effects on us of conducting the interviews. Sometimes the feedback graduate students and/or I would give each other was very validating and/or helped us to get perspective and simply feel supported. I think this is essential in this work and can model what we collectively and individually were trying to provide to survivors in the research project.

I tried to protect my research team in several specific ways, including providing information, such as articles on interviewing trauma survivors; developing plans for conducting the interviews and talking about them afterward; providing students with support individually and on the research team in weekly group meetings where they were given time to discuss their reactions to conducting interviews and/or transcribing them; and giving students copies of Saakvitne and Pearlman's (1996) self-help book *Transforming the Pain*. In addition, the students had access to all of the community and clinical resources provided to survivors in the study as well as to the university counseling center. Also, the graduate students on my research team who chose to do interviews (and it was a voluntary choice, not a requirement, which I made very clear) all had prior training and experience about how to deal with victims of sexual assault and domestic violence from their previous work in rape crisis centers as advocates and/or on crisis hotlines. Thus, they also had access to those community resources and collegial sources of support from their work in those contexts.

In my view, the nature of what is needed to train interviewers to do such research will partially depend on their background and past experience working with survivors of sexual assault. Various researchers have provided some helpful guidelines to the research community on how to conduct interviewer training for research on sexual violence that suggest various approaches that may be effective (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2009, in press; Jansen, Watts, Ellsberg, Heise, & Garcia-Moreno, 2004). All of these writers, including myself, seem to agree that specific training on and/or background in issues related to violence against women is needed as well as support for interviewers during the interview process.

Protecting Myself From Vicarious Trauma and Secondary Traumatic Stress

I discussed my experiences with my research team periodically when they would bring up stories in the news or experiences they had had doing advocacy or other work regarding rape that we discussed in what I believe was a supportive research group context. However, because I was the professor/supervisor in this context, I provided only a general summary of interviews with my team and would let them know about my decision-making processes with regard to conducting the interviews. In terms of the emotional impact of doing the interviews, I sought support when needed from my own therapist and did not expect to get such support from my students. I was careful not to lean on them for emotional support; however, when I spoke about the interviews, my students did express support and asked questions, sometimes giving me their perspectives and advice, which was quite helpful.

Self-Disclosure to Survivors

An important experience of self-awareness occurred when I was planning to interview a woman who had given me her narrative of her sexual assault experience and whom I had talked with on the phone. She had asked me on the phone prior to the interview if I was a survivor, and I said yes. I did not talk in detail about my assaults because I did not want the interviews to focus on my experiences, but I was willing to at least briefly answer the question if a survivor asked. Although there are no standard guidelines about self-disclosure in trauma interviews, and social science methods vary widely on this issue, my view is that these interviews are for the participant and should be focused on them with minimal self-disclosure and that only if asked a direct question would I answer, and even then only briefly. Campbell et al. (in press) echoed similar views about how to handle researcher self-disclosure, reporting recently that it was quite rare in their interview study of survivors of sexual assault that interviewees asked interviewers about their own sexual assault histories.

I realized, though, when this woman asked me about my survivor status, that I really had not talked that much about my own experiences of victimization with others. I then was somewhat worried about whether that mattered, especially if she wanted to ask me more about the issue during or after the interview. I realized that this woman had a lot in common with me in terms of her survey experiences and her demographic background. I worried about what would happen if I somehow responded to her on the basis of my own reactions and similar assault experience. I ended up talking to a senior member of my research team about this concern before the interview, and I told her briefly

about my experiences after she suggested that maybe I should talk about them. She was, of course, supportive, and I had no problem telling her what happened to me and about my concern about my similarities to this other woman I planned to interview. I felt fine about my disclosures to her and that my experiences were resolved as much as possible. Talking about my experiences helped me clarify them and my responses to them for myself and enabled me to receive a supportive response from my team member. I believe that it was important for me to disclose my own experiences and receive supportive responses before I interviewed someone similar to me who might ask me about them. I also found it ironic that I was studying a topic that was personally relevant and that I was having the women talk about their assaults but had not really talked about my own experiences more than minimally in the past!

POSTINTERVIEWING REFLECTIONS

Growth as a Researcher: Shift to a More Interpretive Stance

Interviewing survivors showed me the limits of survey approaches I had been using to study recovery from sexual assault. Although theoretical models may best be tested with quantitative survey-based methods, the nuances and multiplicity of both women's assaults and their constructions of themselves and their experiences are best captured with qualitative interview data.

As a social psychologist, I was trained in research methods based on the logical positivist philosophical tradition (for a review of philosophies of science, see Singleton & Straits, 2005). This approach assumes that a reality exists that can be studied and observed, such that objective known empirical facts can be uncovered and confirmed by others. However, challenges to the notion of an empirically verifiable reality have come from phenomenological/interpretive traditions. These philosophies suggest that science and scientists are subjective and that both the subjects studied and researchers' views may affect the phenomenon being examined. Furthermore, these subjectivities should be acknowledged and studied to understand their influence on social phenomena. Such approaches include critical theory, historicism, discourse theory, and postmodernism (see Singleton & Straits, 2005). These critiques suggest that one must acknowledge the biases of researchers and participants in social science research; however, some scholars argue that although these perspectives have contributed to development of social science theory and method, they have not undermined the scientific approach (R. Collins, 1989).

Feminist theory is an example of such a critique. According to feminist theory, no method is without bias, multiple methods are needed in research,

power relations between the researcher and persons studied should be reduced to facilitate trust and disclosure, female participants should be allowed to connect with each other in research where appropriate, and we need to recognize emotionality of women's lives as well as the emotional responses of the researchers (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Campbell and Wasco (2000) discussed various feminist approaches that recognize gender and other factors as structuring our understanding of reality. I agree with both the empiricist perspective that argues we can uncover social realities by studying them and the feminist perspective that suggests we need to understand rape as a "gendered" phenomenon. Taking a feminist standpoint is also important in order to acknowledge the variety of truths and experiences survivors have based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities.

Overall, doing this research clarified for me that studying survivors' experiences from their own perspectives is essential. They can contribute vital knowledge about their experiences in narrative forms and tell us how they feel informal and formal support providers can be helpful. The lack of survivor-informed scholarship is a problem that has been noted by many in the field of sexual assault (Gilfus, 1999; Wasco, 2003). Qualitative research can be just as theoretically driven and rigorous as quantitative data, but it yields a richer and more complex set of data that go beyond quantitative research that limits women to the few response options that researchers think of to offer respondents. Thus, such methods can help us to understand phenomena that are not captured with other methods, such as surveys. This is important because it leads to novel insights about what psychological mechanisms are affecting women's decisions about disclosure and how responses to disclosure impact their recovery.

Mistaken Assumptions

Many of my own assumptions of how decisions about whether to disclose and the timing and sequencing of disclosures were brought into question by these interviews. For instance, our interviews showed that there are numerous patterns of disclosure and nondisclosure to informal and formal support sources and that no simple linear model explains the multiple patterns of talking about assault evidenced among survivors of sexual assault. I assumed that negative disclosure experiences would lead survivors to stop telling others, which in some cases was true. In other cases, however, survivors saw rape as an important thing to tell others, whose responses would affect whether they wished to continue a relationship or friendship with that person. In other words, they wanted to be sure that people in their lives were really those whom they could trust. Telling them about sexual assault was a way to find this out, even if it carried the cost of negative social reactions, which it often did.

Another mistaken assumption of mine was that telling informal support sources would always precede telling formal sources about assault, because most women tell informal sources of friends or family, and few typically tell formal support sources only. Although this pattern was true of some women, in other cases (e.g., child, adolescent assault), assault circumstances and other events outside of survivors' control led formal sources to find out about assaults. This led me to realize that I would need to consider women's lifetime history of victimization to really understand women's disclosure and help-seeking regarding sexual assault. Experiences earlier in life clearly were often linked to later victimization experiences. For example, disclosure and reactions to child sexual abuse often played a role in decisions about whether to talk with others about sexual assault in adulthood. This is not completely surprising, because other research shows that having a history of sexual assault in both childhood and adulthood is associated with worse psychological consequences and greater rates of mental health-service-seeking (Follette, Polusny, Bechtle, & Naugle, 1996; Ullman & Brecklin, 2002). This type of information was helpful given how little we know about why and how women seek help following sexual assault, and it can help to inform future research to better understand this issue from the perspective of support providers and survivors. It is unlikely that this information could have been uncovered with quantitative methods; in fact, subsequent qualitative research suggests we cannot fully understand complex patterns of recovery among individual survivors without using both qualitative and quantitative data (see also Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens, Campbell, Temier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007).

Survivors' Appraisal of Sexual Assault

A striking thing I have noticed in interviewing women about their experiences and then talking about my experiences is how different one's own appraisal of sexual assault is from those of others. In general, individual women, including myself, are harder on themselves than are supportive others. Because the interview provides a safe, supportive place to disclose sexual assault, women who participate are not afraid of getting the negative reactions they fear getting, or have often gotten, from others they told (Ullman, 1999). This is critically important, because most trauma experts feel that validating responses to trauma disclosure are therapeutic (Wortman, 2004). It is amazing to realize how easy it is to make judgments and have harsh attitudes about one's own assault, while at the same time being able to see how other women are not to blame for their assaults, even when they cannot see it (see also Phillips, 2000). The ability to self-reflect and be sympathetic and supportive toward other woman disclosing sexual assault and to oneself probably

constitutes the most positive transformative possibility of interviewing survivors of sexual assault.

Giving Back to Survivors

As much as we can gain from talking to women about their experiences, it is also important to give back in multiple ways to survivor participants in our research. We did this by paying women; going to interview them when and where convenient for them; giving them comprehensive community resource packets should they wish to seek further help, as advised by other researchers (Campbell, 2002); and talking with women as needed by telephone and after the interview should they wish to connect with us.

Although as researchers we see women as helping us to understand sexual assault by telling us their stories, women also frequently told us they wanted to help us and other survivors in working against sexual assault. Although responding to such offers is not often part of formal research protocols, and certainly not often taught in formal research methods courses, we believe that we must respond to the offers sensitively and with humanity. Examples from our study include responding to survivors' requests of us and offers of help to us when and where possible. For instance, I connected a survivor with resources in a new city where she planned to move soon, because our local resource packet would shortly be of little use to her. I also accepted, when appropriate, offers of help from survivors, such as offers of written material, including books they had access to and wanted to share with us regarding sexual assault and offers to advertise our study in their own local community publications/newsletters. I considered this part of an effort to empower survivors and to collaborate with them in both of our efforts to respond to the problem of sexual violence in society and in our own lives as women.

CONCLUSION

Writing about the process of interviewing survivors was one of the ways I chose to cope with the task. Despite the professional and personal risks involved in exposing parts of my own life in this piece, I think that without doing so we may not fully understand the impact on ourselves and perhaps on others in our field of doing this type of work. Graduate students and faculty need access to information about how others embark on interviewing survivors in an ethical manner and how they deal with it in their lives. That type of account is sorely needed and particularly lacking in the field of psychology, which is based on objective, non-self-disclosing, logical positivist methods. Therefore, inspired by Campbell's (2002) entreaty to researchers to acknowl-

edge the emotional engagement involved in studying sexual assault and to discuss this aspect of our work, I decided to share my own experience. Some time after completing these interviews, I also wrote an account of my own experiences, which I shared with my therapist and have reflected on from time to time. It is unclear whether this has had any impact for me, but it seemed like a logical step and one that is fairly safe in comparison to talking in detail about one's assault experiences with other people. Such narratives are common in certain areas of qualitative research (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), such as autoethnography and in the field of sociology in general as well as in accounts of research written by feminists. Researchers have argued that by examining our own role in the research process, the impact of those we research on us, and the impact of ourselves on those we research (Hertz, 1997; Reinharz & Chase, 2002; Stanko, 1997), we may come to a fuller understanding of the phenomena we seek to explain.



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