

Why Do Rape Survivors Volunteer for Face-to-Face Interviews?

A Meta-Study of Victims' Reasons For and Concerns About Research Participation

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There is growing interest in understanding how different research methods are perceived by victims of violence and what survivors will reveal to researchers (termed *meta-research* or *meta-studies*). The purpose of this project was to conduct a qualitative meta-study on why rape survivors chose to participate in community-based, face-to-face interviews. Participants mentioned four primary reasons for why they decided to participate in this study: (a) to help other survivors, (b) to help themselves, (c) to support research on rape/sexual assault, and (d) to receive financial compensation. Implications for designing research recruitment protocols are discussed.

Keywords: *rape; sexual assault; qualitative; interviewing; meta-research; participation*

In the field of violence against women scholarship, there is growing interest in iatrogenic processes in trauma research: How does what we study, and how we study it, influence who participates and what they tell us? This kind of meta-research can be useful for designing recruitment protocols that are responsive to victims' interests and needs, thereby increasing the likelihood of accessing this difficult to reach population (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2008; Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006). In addition, such work can help researchers anticipate victims' concerns and

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facilitate their trust. In this vein, the purpose of this study was to examine why rape survivors volunteered for a community-based, face-to-face interview. Our goal was to expand the meta-research literature by exploring survivors' reasons for participating in a personal and nonanonymous method of data collection.

There is a small literature on why people volunteer to participate in community-based studies (i.e., noncollege samples). Generally, research participation is framed within a cost-benefit perspective: If the benefits of being in the study outweigh the costs, people may choose to participate (Newman, Risch, & Kassam-Adams, 2006; Newman, Walker, & Gefland, 1999). However, in trauma research, the potential costs could be steep, including emotional upset, shame, stigma, safety, and loss of anonymity (Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006; Sullivan & Cain, 2004). Yet the gains of participating may be particularly meaningful. It can be psychologically beneficial for victims to share their stories with engaged, empathic listeners (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco, Ahrens, 2004; Pennebaker, 1997). In addition, some people are motivated to participate in research for the potential of helping other people (Groves, Cialdini, & Couper, 1992; Newman, Kaloupek, Keane, & Folstein, 1997). Volunteers for community research studies often have a general desire to contribute to scientific knowledge about social issues and/or to help others with similar specific life circumstances or health problems (Baker, Lavender, & Tincello, 2005; Ellis, 2000; Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004; Liaschenko & Underwood, 2001).

In victimology research, the method of data collection itself may influence whether victims participate in a study and what they disclose (Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006). In experimental studies with college samples, participants have expressed a preference for phone or computer data collection methods because they were viewed as more confidential for disclosing sensitive information and more convenient for participation (DiLillo, DeGue, Kras, Di Loreto-Colgan, & Nash, 2006; Reddy et al., 2006; Rosenbaum, Rabenhorst, Reddy, Fleming, & Howells, 2006). However, there have been mixed findings whether method affects disclosure: Two independent research teams have found no significant differences in disclosure of abuse as a function of data collection method (DiLillo et al., 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006), but in a replication study, Reddy et al. (2006) found higher disclosure of abuse among students randomly assigned to the automated telephonic data collection system (ATCD) compared with face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, or written questionnaires. These differences were hypothesized to result from the greater anonymity afforded by the computer-administered protocol. It is unknown whether noncollege, community samples would also prefer such methods, as it is possible that

phone and computer access could be a prohibitive barrier. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that victims may be differentially drawn to particular methodologies, which may affect who volunteers for what kind of study and what they will disclose to the researchers.

The purpose of the current study was to add to the growing literature of trauma research meta-studies by examining why rape survivors chose to participate in community-based, face-to-face interviews. Our aim was to develop a qualitative meta-study that focused on understanding one methodology in-depth rather than an experimental comparative study of multiple data collection techniques. As such, this meta-study complements existing work by providing information about a different sample (noncollege rape survivors) and more labor-intensive methodology (in-person interviews). This research was part of a larger project that examined rape survivors' postassault help-seeking experiences and health outcomes (see Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001). As part of these interviews, we specifically asked the survivors about their reasons for participating in this study, and their answers to these questions provided the primary data source for this qualitative meta-study.

Method

Participants

The recruitment protocol for this study was modeled after the techniques of adaptive sampling (Campbell et al., 1999; Thompson & Seber, 1996). The city of Chicago and two contiguous suburbs were divided into regions based on zip codes, and geographic areas representing women of varying races and socioeconomic statuses were targeted for recruitment efforts. In each zip code, the study was advertised through posters, fliers, and in-person presentations to groups of women. The content of the advertisements emphasized five key themes: (a) many women have experienced rape/sexual assault; (b) the research team wanted to interview adult rape/sexual assault survivors regardless of whether they reported the assault or disclosed it to others; (c) we assure confidentiality and a respectful, safe interview environment; (d) financial compensation of \$30 for participating; and (e) survivors can help other women by sharing their stories. We interviewed 102 sexual assault survivors who were representative of women from the regions of Chicago in which we recruited (see Campbell et al., 2004), and 92 are included in the analyses regarding why survivors decided to participate in this study. Seven women did not consent to have their interviews tape-recorded, and in three other cases, the tape quality was too poor to allow for reliable transcription.

The average age of this sample of 92 rape survivors was 34.79 years (standard deviation [SD] = 9.43), and the majority of participants were women of color: 50% were African American, 37% Caucasian, 5% Latina, 7% multiracial, and 1% Asian American. Almost one third of the sample (30%) was currently married, and 51% had children. Most women (85%) had a high school education, and 61% were employed. Most participants were assaulted by someone they knew (acquaintance, date, partner; 67%), and most were raped by a single assailant (95%). Thirty-eight percent were not physically injured in the attack. Most women did not have a weapon used against them (69%), and most were not under the influence of alcohol (70%). On average, the rape had occurred 8.77 years prior to participating in this interview (SD = 8.65).

Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person with a mean duration of 2.27 hr (SD = 54.96 min; range = 45 min to 5.5 hr). Each participant was given \$30, public transportation tokens to reimburse her for transportation expenses, and a packet of community referrals for victims of violence. The tape-recorded interviews were conducted by the faculty principal investigator and a team of 11 female graduate and undergraduate research assistants who received course credit for their participation in the project.

Measures

At the beginning of the interview, all participants were asked, "How did you decide to participate? What made you decide to contact us for an interview?" The verbatim transcriptions from these questions were the primary data sources for analysis. Supplemental data sources were also consulted, including the audiotapes of the interview, full transcripts, and the principal investigator's field notes from the entire project.

Data Analysis

We used Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-phase process for data analysis. First, for data reduction, two coders (the authors of this article) independently read the transcripts to identify themes in the participants' answers. We codeveloped a codebook explicating each theme and then independently coded 10 cases, compared analyses, identified discrepant coding, and negotiated final coding decisions. This process was then repeated with 10 more cases, and by this point there was substantial agreement between both coders.

Thirty percent of the cases were double coded with 98% interrater agreement (i.e., the same text was identified with the same thematic code). For the second stage of data display, we constructed micro-level tables organized by the individual themes and then combined those tables into macro-level tables that addressed our primary research question. For the third phase, conclusion drawing, the coders worked sequentially. Using the data tables described above, the first coder developed a summary of key findings and selected illustrative quotes. The second coder then independently reviewed these materials and cross-checked them against the data to ensure their accuracy and interpretative validity (see Erickson, 1986).

Results

We identified four primary themes in the survivors' reflections on why they decided to participate in our study: (a) to help other survivors, (b) to help themselves, (c) to support research on rape/sexual assault, and (d) to receive the \$30 compensation. In addition to presenting narrative data for each theme, we also report the percentage of women who discussed each of these four issues. These figures will not sum to 100% because some survivors discussed multiple themes in their answers.

To Help Other Survivors

The most common reason why survivors volunteered for this study was to help other women (38%). Although they knew it would be difficult to reopen the wounds from the assault, many survivors thought that their stories could help others. They wanted to let other victims know that they were not alone and that other women have also survived rape. For example, one stated the following:

Because if I could help somebody out there by way of my words or by what I've been through or to avoid some of the things I've gone through or to maybe if nothing else to make them realize they're not alone . . . And if this helps them in some way, you know. Give back to society a little bit of the gifts they've given me.

Among the women who emphasized that they wanted to help other survivors, some specifically highlighted that they felt it was important for them to come forward and tell their stories because they were at a place in their

recoveries where they could talk about the assault. They realized that other survivors may not yet be ready to talk about the assault, but because they can talk about it, they felt it was their duty to do so to help other survivors, as one survivor described:

Because I know it's hard. It's really hard for women who have been raped to get over it . . . I wanted to help somebody. I said oh maybe they are really looking for someone who has been there that can possibly help somebody else. So, I've been there. I've gotten over it and grown past it so I want to help somebody else.

Other survivors highlighted that participating in research helps other women because it contributes to raising awareness about sexual assault and the changes needed in our social systems and society. For these women, their motivation was rooted in helping other women by contributing to a project that was trying to learn more about how to improve community services for sexual assault survivors:

For a while I had wanted to do something to help people who had been through this and I've been dissatisfied with the way my university handled it because it happened during college. If I can do anything to help somebody else and improve the programs for people who go through this then I would like to be able to do that.

Although less common, some survivors came forward to participate specifically because they were members of underrepresented groups (e.g., women of color, women in prostitution) and by helping researchers understand their unique experiences, they would be helping other marginalized survivors:

The reason why I wanted to participate because I thought I had something special to say about what it is. I think it's just because I feel like there's certain groups of women who I think are underrepresented in, who are being sexually assaulted and getting any kind of assistance. And I know, there are other women who I know who are working as, whether they are strippers or working in prostitution . . . I feel like I'm one of those women who feel like I have a foot in both worlds, I've been there, but I'm not there right now.

To Help Themselves

It was also typical that women decided to participate because they felt it would be helpful to them and their recovery (34%). Our recruitment materials and phone screenings were clear that this was research not counseling,

and survivors understood this distinction. Even so, many reported that they thought it would be helpful to talk about the assault with someone who was genuinely interested in their experiences. It was also very common that when women participated to help themselves, they also mentioned that they believed it would help other women as well. For example, one survivor felt the following. "Because I thought it would be therapeutic, and helpful because I've always wanted to help out . . . I understand what it's like."

Other women noted that they were struggling with the long-term effects of surviving rape—chronic posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, health problems, and alcohol and drug use. They realized that although we could not provide therapy, having a supportive context to talk about the assault would be helpful to their coping:

Well, I'm sort of experiencing a rebirth, if you will, of some of these symptoms associated with rape trauma syndrome . . . it's been difficult so I thought that maybe it would help to talk about it. And also, I thought if it helps other people, that would be good as well.

The Importance and Value of Research

Consistent with prior studies on research participation, for some women (25%), their decision to volunteer for our interviews stemmed from a general interest in supporting research. These women described how they value research, particularly on such an understudied topic and felt that it was worth their time and emotional energy, as can be seen from what one survivor had to say:

I want to share this, I want to help other women because I do have knowledge of what kind of things happen with research, how this will be helpful for education and there will be programs, and how things are structured, and the services they offer, and legal services . . . This is just such a great way to do it.

But other women were a bit wary of researchers, and although they wanted to support research on violence against women, they needed some reassurance about our project. These survivors wanted to know how we would be using the data and how the findings would be useful to other rape survivors:

I was thinking of some of the other women I knew so I wanted to check out and see is this a legitimate research project that will really lead to any type of change in social policy? Will this help in the manner which women are perceived by law enforcement people? Will it help the way they are perceived by men?

Need for Money

Some women (14%) specifically mentioned that the \$30 compensation offered for participation was a primary motivating factor. Although a few mentioned money as the only reason for doing the interview, most women who raised this issue also discussed other reasons for their participation. Some women highlighted that their current financial circumstances in life were very difficult and that they really needed the money:

Well, I was just curious at first. Now it was also the help of the money because where we live we don't get paid anything. I just thought it sounded like something really good that I would probably be doing it. I wanted to get paid. Because I felt like I couldn't do much to help [but] maybe I could help in a different way.

Others framed the financial compensation as an appreciated "extra" in addition to other reasons, such as helping women or helping themselves. For example, one participant shared the following thoughts:

I knew that I would like to when I saw the poster. I thought it would be interesting. And a chance to talk to people who just wanted to hear the story because it's not something I have much of an audience for in my life. It's not something that people just want to sit down and hear about. And, you know, so I hope this doesn't sound bad or whatever, but I thought it would be nice to make \$30. I'm just really broke. And I called and sort of explained some things about myself to the woman on the phone and she said I'd be eligible.

A small number of women stated that they did not want the money, but appreciated that it was given to all women regardless of their financial needs.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on how research methodologies affect victims' participation and disclosure. Consistent with prior studies on other substantive topics, altruism was a primary motivating factor for many survivors. By participating in this research, survivors felt that were letting other women know they were not alone and were also helping to improve community services. Many women mentioned that they thought being able to talk through the assault would also be helpful to their own healing process. Whereas we did not ask our participants whether they

would have also liked, or even preferred, a more anonymous method of data collection (e.g., ATCD), these data suggest that for some women face-to-face interviews may be particularly appealing because they afford the opportunity for discussion, reflection, and support (see also Campbell et al., 2008).

Our findings highlight several strategies that researchers can use if they are trying to recruit community-based rape survivors for one-on-one interviews. This methodology requires that women are willing to discuss the assault with others, which essentially puts them at risk for stigma, blame, and negative social reactions. To anticipate that concern, researchers should consider adding text to their recruitment materials that emphasizes interviewers' commitment to being understanding and compassionate. Because helping other survivors is clearly important to those who volunteer, the varied positive outcomes that can come from the research is worth mentioning. Some of the women in our project were appropriately skeptical and somewhat wary of researchers, so such claims should be reasonable and realistic to not overstate what any one study can accomplish. Finally, financial compensation was a draw for some women, and should be advertised explicitly.

Our project was an exploratory qualitative study, and as such, there are several limitations that are worth noting. First, we did not collect a comparative sample of survivors with a different data collection technique. Our aim was to study one method in-depth with a community sample (rather than a college sample) to expand the meta-research literature regarding survivors' motivations to participate in face-to-face interviews. Second, our recruitment materials specifically stated that survivors can help other women by sharing their stories, so it is perhaps not surprising that this was the most common reason given for participation. We do not know whether the participants were just repeating what they read on our materials or telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. Prior research has found that altruism is a key motivation for research participation, so it seems reasonable to include this information in recruitment materials. However, such text may yield a biased, self-selected sample, but this is always a risk with recruitment strategies that require participants to initiate contact with researchers. Multiple strategies are needed to identify and recruit rape survivors, and continued meta-research will help identify which subgroups within this diverse population are most drawn to what kind of research experience.

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