Help-Seeking Pathways of African American Women Who Have Been Victims of Serious Non-Sexual Violent Crime

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Statement of the Research Problem

Encountering a social problem or crisis is a common occurrence during the life course of most individuals. When individuals experience a crisis one of the first things they do is attempt to regain a sense of equilibrium by processing the event internally and seeking help from others. There is little research that describes the wide spectrum of help-seeking pathways that individuals use after crisis events, beyond institutional assistance (Cohen, 1992; Sarason et al., 1992). More recent research suggests that pathways are defined as the sequence of contacts with individuals and organizations prompted by the distressed person's efforts and those of his or her significant others to seek help as well as the help that is supplied in response to such efforts (Rogler & Cortes, 1993; Uehara, 2001). Pathways begin at the onset of the distress and are influenced by the subjective experience of the individual, cultural norms, expressions of distress and the context of social networks. Pathways are not random, have a specific structure and have sufficient integrity to be observed directly as unfolding processes (Rogler & Cortes, 1993).

In summary, this study examined the complex processes embedded in help-seeking and help providing. The inclusion of the subjective experience of the help-seeker and help providers provided a glimpse of the multidimensional aspects of this phenomenon beyond previous studies that focused on the evaluation of received support by formal support providers or individuals who had utilized formal services. There have been few studies that included the subjective experience of the help-seeker and their informal support providers.

Research Background and Hypotheses

This study explores the transactional nature of help-seeking and help-providing. The exchanges between help-seeker and help-provider occur within a socio-cultural context that influences perceptions and appraisals of the event and the resultant actions and responses by the help-seeker and help-provider. This study builds on and expands

literature on help-seeking behavior, social support and ethno cultural aspects of trauma. It provides a comprehensive understanding of help-seeking pathways by focusing on a specific subgroup of African American women who have experienced a violent non-sexual crime by an unknown perpetrator. The study explores how personal identity influences African American women's perception of a violent non-sexual crime and the subsequent help-seeking efforts taken towards the resolution of the crisis.

African American women are deemed vulnerable due to the intersection of race and gender oppression (Hill-Collins, 1990). According to many authors, African American women are vulnerable for social, emotional and psychological problems due to the intersection of race and gender (Davis & Proctor, 1989; Frye, 1998). There are also studies that examine how personal identity and African American women's experience as a 'cultural other' may be a protective factor and a source of resilience when these women are faced with a crisis or social problems (Anderson & Hill-Collins, 1998).

Non-sexual criminal victimization was chosen as the issue that prompted help seeking as this phenomenon has not been studied extensively in the United States (Lurigio, 1987). This study targets African American women ages 26-49 years, a segment of the population that has a high prevalence for non-sexual criminal victimization (Catalano, 2006). The criminal victimization incident occurs in the context of daily life, primarily in the victim's community or in their home, with an element of surprise, fear of the unknown potential for harm or death and is perpetrated by a stranger. This event may yield psychological and emotional problems and also is a life event that immediately places the individual within an institutional context such as the criminal justice system. This context provides a backdrop where transactions with formal support providers in the criminal justice system would possibly be influenced by race, gender and the nature of the crime (Anderson, 1998; Hart & Rennison, 2003). Research supports the ambivalence of crime victims in seeking help within the criminal justice system (Hart & Rennison, 2003; Kaukinen, 2002; Kilpatrick, 1987).

Research Questions:

1) How does the individual woman's perception of her personal identity and subjective experience (appraisal) of the criminal victimization experience, influence her help-seeking pathway?

2) What are the help-seeking pathways (the sequence of contacts with individuals and organizations that consist of informal and/or formal sources of social support) that African American women utilize after a non-sexual criminal victimization experience?

3) What transactions in the help-seeking pathway between the help-seeker and the help providers from the initial occurrence of the event to various points towards resolution influence how each woman takes steps in the help-seeking process?

Methodology

This exploratory study uses qualitative methods implemented from a relativist perspective that acknowledges the existence of multiple views of equal validity (Hill-Collins, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). The study seeks to incorporate feminist research perspectives and values by giving voice to African American women who have been victims of a serious non-sexual violent crime.

In depth interviews were conducted with seven African American women ages 26- 49 years who have experienced a home invasion or aggravated assault with a weapon in Northwest Indiana. In depth interviews were also conducted with eleven of their informal support network members, and questionnaires were completed by two formal support providers. The help-seeking pathway of each woman was reconstructed and analyzed using this data. Grounded theory was used in the analysis of narrative data from each woman and their informal support providers. Several themes emerged such as the influence of self defined personal identity and coping strategies used during previous life stressors and cultural norms regarding help seeking and help providing on the current chosen help seeking pathway. Event Structure Analysis (ESA) (Heise, 1989) was also used as a conceptual framework to analyze narrative data that captured the sequence and nature of transactions between the help-seeker and help- provider along the help-seeking pathway.

The methods of this study were unique as the help-seeking pathway was reconstructed using not only the subjective account of the help-seeker but included the complimentary account of the help-providers. This type of multidimensional approach has not been applied extensively in looking at help-seeking and expands the understanding of the subjective and intersubjective nature of help seeking. Although the findings are not generalizable, the findings provide some insight into the experience of African American women who sought help following a specific crisis. This same approach can be replicated with other target populations and social issues and is culturally sensitive as the subjective experience of the study participants was sought. Of significance is a sequencing framework of the help-seeking pathway that emerged for each of the study participants. It would be interesting to replicate this framework and develop an assessment tool to inform help-providers in determining what type of support is indicated at different points in the helping process.

Results

This study builds upon and expands on previous findings in the area of help-seeking and social support. Findings support previous studies that suggest that the help-seeker's definition of the problem is subjective and is embedded in a sociocultural context. The defining of the problem then influences the help-seeker's assessment on what assistance they require and from what source. This study goes further as it introduced the intersubjective meaning of the help provider as an essential component in these transactions. The help provider's appraisal of the nature of the problem directs

their reading of what the individual needs and directs their responses. An agreement with the help-seeker's appraisal leads to responses that convey empathy.

The concept of time sequencing was also explored in this study and it was discovered that the needs of the help-seeker were fluid and changed as they progressed along the help-seeking pathway. In this sequence it was apparent that the initial crisis point immediately following the event, required a specific response from those who were first responders. In this study this was either police or close informal network members. These people provided what is inherent in crisis intervention; securing safety, providing emotional support and reassurance, and physical presence. These responses conveyed situational empathy and promoted a deescalation of the crisis. This was seen as a pivotal point in the sequence as this was the only moment where these women showed a public display of distress. After this point, women were more prone to resume their daily routines and retreat to internal processing where they would then express distress only to those closest to them. This suggests that this initial point may be an optimal time to provide information on usual trauma reactions and referrals for further assistance.

Another dimension of help-seeking emerged as women weighed the cost and benefits to seeking help based on cultural meanings of help-seeking/help providing, previous experiences with seeking social support and current life demands. These findings support literature that focuses on negative implications in seeking help. The women in this study had a strong value in being self reliant and primarily assumed the support provider role with others. It appeared to be 'out of character' to openly express vulnerability and seek support. Women also balanced many life demands and were keenly aware of constraints on their time and energy and looked to quickly resume their lives while simultaneously coping with their internal distress. In weighing the costs and benefits in seeking assistance, these women primarily sought assistance in their informal network and only when experiencing prolonged distress did one woman seek assistance for mental health intervention.

Findings also supported the idea of resilience as a protective factor, while also introducing another dimension of resilience as a guard against vulnerability. The resilient self, literally acts as a shield or mask that not only protects and buffers but may in certain situations prevent the expression of distress and the active seeking of support. The study participants had a stronger identification as being resilient and in varying degrees had to reconcile their resilient self with the discomfort experienced with displaying vulnerability.

The help-seeking pathway was adversely impacted resulting in a shut down in the process when the convergence of several factors such as characteristics of the help-seeker, quality of transactions between the help-seeker and help provider and the quality of the support network when the distressful event occurred. A complete shut down of the help-seeking pathway occurred when transactions conveyed empathic inaccuracy, where the help-seeker had difficulty expressing her needs and where she has lost the key support person(s) in her informal support network.

In conclusion, this study builds upon previous research on help-seeking, social support and ethnocultural aspects of trauma. There are few studies that included all dimensions of the transactions that are embedded in the help-seeking process. This study

also included an exploration of how the personal identity and coping style of the help-seeker influenced their subjective meaning of this adverse event and the prospect of help-seeking. The findings support literature that has found that resilience can act as a protective factor for African American women. Furthermore, this study introduces another dimension of resilience as a possible barrier to displaying distress and actively seeking help. These factors in concert with the intersubjective meaning of the help provider(s) were shown to be pivotal in understanding the chosen help-seeking pathways of these women. The findings suggest a next course in the inquiry of the phenomenon of help-seeking possibly with a different population and social issue to further substantiate these results.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This study has very relevant implications for social work practice on a micro, mezzo and macro level. This study focuses on help-seeking pathways of African American women within a sociocultural context, which is in line with social work perspectives. Social work seeks to understand individuals within their environments and this perspective informs assessment and intervention strategies. As previously stated in the review of relevant literature, all too often individual behavior is understood in isolation of the social context. Social problems are quantified and labels are given to those who are most likely to be affected. Those who experience these social problems first hand are often faceless and voiceless and those who develop policy and programs define problems and assume they know what is needed. These assumptions yield ineffective interventions that may not address the needs of the help-seeker.

This study gathered data directly from a vulnerable population, African American women, and provides an alternative paradigm in understanding the help-seeking pathways of these women. African American women are identified as being vulnerable to social problems due to their social and economic position in society. Alternately there is recognition of their capacity for rebounding under adverse conditions. African American women are often the primary support providers within their support networks. These factors provide an interesting picture of the African American woman. By including data from the help-providers, I have captured the complexity of help-seeking and help providing. Assessment of needs, negotiation of resources within the community, reciprocity, and roles within one's social support network can best be understood through the lens of the help-seeker and help provider.

Research that provides a deeper understanding of how African-American women respond to distressful life events can inform traditional practice models. Results of this study reveal various patterns in the use of informal and formal support. Women primarily used their informal support network and only sought formal support when emotional distress was not manageable. Practitioners need to be aware of the ethnocultural differences in how one may express distress. In the assessment process, the emphasis is on the detection of observable symptoms, a change in behavioral patterns or a self reporting of emotional distress by the help-seeker. In looking at these African American women, they were more likely to resume a public image of being resilient while masking their internal distress. They were also uncomfortable sharing their vulnerabilities with

those outside of their trusted informal network. These findings indicate a need for a culturally sensitive assessment process where establishing trust is an important step. Practitioners also need to go beyond the observable public reactions to assess the more private internal world of the client.

Findings also support the benefits of including an assessment of the social support network of the individual seeking assistance to determine the quality, density and viability of this network. Individuals primarily use their informal network and continue to do so even after formal assistance is received. Those with a viable support system fare better when confronted by adverse life situations. This perceived support system acts as a protective and buffering factor. When key network members are not available the person may be at risk for prolonged emotional distress as they have no one to share their experience with and will most likely not receive the needed support.

The findings also indicate a need to acknowledge that individuals may come into contact with various formal sources of support, such as law enforcement, physicians and clergy rather than mental health providers. These help providers can be instrumental in building trust, educating, disseminating information and making referrals for mental health services. As evidenced by the women in the study, they did not view the criminal victimization as necessitating mental health intervention. However, it may have been helpful to provide them and their informal support providers with information on trauma reactions and recovery and a list of referrals.

This study also revealed the degree to which the assistance provided by informal and formal sources of support match the needs of the help-seeker and also identified obstacles in the help-seeking process. In reconstructing the help-seeking pathway, a distinct sequence emerged that identified how the help-seeker identified their needs and determined who they sought assistance from at various points. Exploring this sequence could inform practitioners in choosing their assessment and intervention strategies at various points in the sequence to meet the changing needs of the help-seeker from the initial occurrence of the event to assist them in reaching a resolution. Obtaining the subjective experience of the help-seeker would also invite them to share their expectations of the helping relationship and determine their self defined point of resolution which may differ from the help provider.

These results indicate a need for collaboration of informal and formal support providers to meet the unique needs of African American women who are victims of non-sexual violent crime. These results suggest areas for education and training for formal helpers to help them understand the types of support needed by African American female crime victims at various points in the help-seeking process. Findings suggest that the informal network of the victim should be included in the helping process. Informal help providers may also feel overwhelmed in their attempts to meet the needs of the victim. These informal helpers may benefit from information that details the usual responses to trauma as well as the potential for vicarious victimization for those who provide support to the trauma victim. There is a need for a closer collaboration between various helping institutions to share resources and increase awareness and accessibility. This study highlighted a need for police officers to have on going training in crisis intervention and sensitivity to cultural differences in trauma responses. Collaboration between the police departments and mental health providers could result in a social worker being on site at

the police department to offer assessment, referral and to disseminate information. As the study indicated many individuals do not seek assistance from a mental health provider, however they may seek support from an emergency room, family physician, or clergy, etc. It is imperative that these help providers are aware of the possibility that there might not be an open disclosure of emotional distress or obvious symptoms that would indicate a need for formal intervention. Establishing rapport and trust in conjunction with providing information can facilitate the person in obtaining the assistance that they need and may promote the resolution of their distress.

These findings suggest that there would be a benefit in social workers being employed within these settings to provide crisis intervention, assessment and referral. Social work education prepares social workers to be culturally competent and to be in tuned to an individual's subjective experience which are elements in developing empathic accuracy.

Information could also be developed for informal support providers who play a key role in the help-seeker getting the assistance they need. These people need to be affirmed and supported in their role as support providers. In traditional interventions the individual is seen in isolation of their support network. This study indicates that the support provider is an essential component in the healing process and should be included in the intervention process. The informal support person provides an insider perspective of the help-seeker and could assist in the process of gaining trust and access into the more private internal world of the individual.

Unfortunately the study also found that obvious barriers such as the lack of available services in a community, disparities in the availability of practitioners of color, and system failures where individuals have to access services through a complicated and faceless telephone network all impede the help-seeking process. This indicates a need to continue to focus on the system of managed care, its sensitivity to culture and the equitable access for various segments of the population.

Social Work and social justice in theory espouse the same principles and perspectives in striving for equality and the fair distribution and access of resources and opportunities. Inherent is the recognition of forces such as oppression, discrimination and racism as impediments in achieving this goal. Social justice can at times become a theoretical conversation that is not integrated into actual social work practice. Social workers in all levels and areas of practice and research need to understand and challenge connections among forms of difference, relations of power and practices of devaluation (Finn & Jacobson, 2007; Hill-Collins, 1990).

This study strives to do just that by recognizing the meaning of race and gender in the life experiences of the study participants. In addition, the phenomenon of help-seeking and help providing is recognized as occurring within a socio/cultural/political context where transactions between the help-seeker and help provider is guided by subjective and intersubjective meaning. The subjective experience of the women was affirmed through the chosen methodology of the study. In applying the just practice framework developed by Finn and Jacobson (2007), this study explores the: (1) meaning of the women and shared meaning of their informal help providers, (2) explores help-seeking within the context of the women's lives, (3) recognizes that power is inherent in

the institutions that the women sought assistance from, (4) focused on the women's construction of self as developing from life experiences and also explored what meaning the women attached to certain historical events as well as the current criminal victimization, (5) what emerged was possibility, in the form of women's agency, that highlighted their resilience and capacity for forward movement in spite of adversity.

The findings of this study have several policy implications. As mentioned previously, mental health services are designed from a managed care model that is not culturally sensitive. This model is impersonal and may be experienced by cultural others as unfamiliar and contrary to their preference for privacy. In addition, there continues to be a lack of practitioners that reflect the cultural membership of those seeking assistance. These realities highlight a need for policy reform in how mental health services are designed and rendered to better serve the needs of cultural others. There also continues to be a need to develop strategies to increase the numbers of racially and culturally diverse mental health providers in the managed care system. Community based services need to be developed that are accessible and comprehensive and that provide multiple services such as medical, mental health services, and provide resources and referrals to community resources. Additionally, policies that focus on education, prevention and wellness would better address the need of those who experience a crisis and may be instrumental in averting a chronic post traumatic stress reaction.

In addition, policy reform is needed in the area of crime victim's services. In the geographical area where this study was conducted, funding for such services was quite inadequate and priority was given to those crimes that were deemed more serious. The Victims of Crime Act Crime Victims Fund was established in 1984 and provides financial compensation for victims of crimes who report the crime to police within 48 hours, cooperate in the investigation and prosecution of the crime, have out of pocket expenses of at least $100 and an application of benefits filed within 180 days for sex crimes and two years for all other violent crimes (OJP, 2005; Office of the Indiana Attorney General, 2006). A problem in implementation of the policy and equal distribution of funds seemed apparent as the Victim's Assistance Program had been established in this geographical area, and was inadequately funded and staffed and information was not disseminated. For these women who experienced some minor physical injury, and more so suffered psychological distress their needs were minimized. They also did not receive information on their rights as victims or referral information. Additional impediments to accessing these resources were the victim assistance program being housed in the police department and it was also linked to the prosecutor's office. Information regarding the victim's compensation fund was only disseminated when a perpetrator was apprehended and prosecution was in process. In this case, the probability that the perpetrator would be caught was unlikely, therefore the victim did not receive services.

All victims should have access to the variety of services offered through this program whether the perpetrator is apprehended or not. In further looking at other victims assistance programs in Northwest Indiana I discovered that these programs were more adequately funded and staffed and were able to provide more comprehensive services to victims regardless of the nature of the crime. It was ironic that an area that has a higher proportion of crime victims appeared to have the most inadequate services.

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