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Abstract

Motivated by researcher reflexivity, the author sought to learn from participants about the sensitive, ethical issues of the qualitative research process. The current study followed up with eight women who had previously participated in an interview-based study about sexual assault disclosure. Multiple sources of qualitative data were triangulated, including interviews, follow-up interviews, interviews from the original study, and participant checks. Phenomenological analysis yielded five themes: (a) Meaning of Participation, (b) Trust in the Researcher, (c) Connection with the Other Participants, (d) Changing Comfort, and (e) Recommendations to Increase Participants' Comfort. Based on these results, recommendations are provided for researchers conducting reflexive qualitative research practices.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Qualitative Methods, Interview, Sexual Assault, Disclosure

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Qualitative Researcher Reflexivity: A Follow-Up Study with Female Sexual Assault Survivors

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Motivated by researcher reflexivity, the author sought to learn from participants about the sensitive, ethical issues of the qualitative research process. The current study followed up with eight women who had previously participated in an interview-based study about sexual assault disclosure. Multiple sources of qualitative data were triangulated, including interviews, follow-up interviews, interviews from the original study, and participant checks. Phenomenological analysis yielded five themes: (a) Meaning of Participation, (b) Trust in the Researcher, (c) Connection with the Other Participants, (d) Changing Comfort, and (e) Recommendations to Increase Participants' Comfort. Based on these results, recommendations are provided for researchers conducting reflexive qualitative research practices. Keywords: Reflexivity, Qualitative Methods, Interview, Sexual Assault, Disclosure

Qualitative researchers recognize the importance of reflexivity in addressing ethical issues (Cannella, 2004; Del Busso, 2007; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputpong, 2007; Etherington, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Reflexivity has been considered a hallmark of rigorous qualitative research in which the researcher is considered an instrument of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Hertz, 1997). Guillemin and Gillam (2004) defined reflexivity as a “continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation,” including relational and personal aspects of conducting, interpreting, and representing research (p. 275). Reflexivity for the promotion of ethical practice necessitates that the researcher notice and respond appropriately to “ethically important moments” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

As an early career qualitative researcher, reflexivity compelled me, as the first author, to continue to scrutinize my work. The first author conducted the research under the supervision of the second author; thus, all subsequent first-person singular references are to the first author. I did not view my own insights as sufficient to assure ethical research. As such, I sought to learn from prior participants, specifically female sexual assault survivors, so that I could improve my work with future research participants. Interactions with female sexual assault survivors may be considered “ethically important moments” requiring researcher reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Negative social responses to disclosures have been described as a second rape, potentially as traumatizing as the actual sexual assault, substantially worsening and lengthening the recovery process (Ahrens, 2006; DePrince, Welton-Mitchell, & Srinivas, 2014; Littleton, 2010; Ullman, 1996). Throughout the original interview-based study, I wondered about the dual possibility of harm and benefit because of my clinical and scholarly experience learning about consequences of negative social response to sexual assault disclosures. I hoped to reconnect with prior participants in order to understand their perspective.

The current study is offered as a model of how researchers may engage in reflexivity beyond the completion of an original study. As a follow-up study, I aimed to scrutinize the

first study based on participants' feedback. The study is not intended to generalize to the experience of female trauma survivors as research participants. Nonetheless, there is a growing literature about trauma survivors' experience of research participation (see Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004), including a limited number of follow-up studies with female sexual assault survivors (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2009; Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, 2010; Martin, Perrot, Morris, & Romans, 1999). For example, Martin et al. (1999) compared female participants with a history of child sexual abuse and female participants without such a history. The female victims of child sexual abuse were less likely to endorse the interview as comfortable, yet were also more likely to indicate that the interview was positive. Participants who perceived the interview negatively cited a variety of reasons, including recounting the childhood sexual abuse, doubting the value and relevance of the research, and feeling uncomfortable with the interviewer. Those who perceived the interview positively reported that they found it helpful to talk about the abuse, that it changed some of their feelings about the abuse, and that they felt that they had contributed to the research. As a whole, this literature suggests that trauma survivors' research participation is a complex process, in which participants report distress and benefits simultaneously.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of female sexual assault survivors who had previously taken part in an interview-based study. The overarching question guiding this research was: How did female research participants who participated in interviews about sexual assault disclosures experience the research process?

Method

The current study was conducted in accordance with Institutional Review Board standards at the University of Utah. First, the design and paradigm are described to frame the study. Second, context about the prior study and the participants is explained. Next, explanation of data sources and analysis are provided. Lastly, trustworthiness is addressed.

Design and Paradigm

This study utilized a phenomenological design to understand participants' subjective experience of the phenomenon of research participation (Moustakas, 1994). Such design allowed for participant-centered data collection and analysis. A feminist-constructivist paradigm informed the design. My attention to subjective realities (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001) was shaped by the desire to seek out marginalized perspectives (Morrow & Smith, 2000), those of sexual assault survivors. Guided by feminist principle of relationality (Morrow & Smith, 2000), I attempted to reduce the power hierarchy by engaging participants in the process of interpreting the data during participant checks. Lastly, from a feminist-constructivist perspective, I sought to be transparent about my values and engage in reflexive practices (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994; Harrison et al., 2001; Olesen, 2007). Throughout the study, reflexive practices included journaling, peer debriefing, and supervisory consultation with the second author (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, I met in person with peers and my supervisor to discuss concerns and receive feedback to reduce researcher subjectivity. These processes allowed me to monitor the extent to which my values informed the study, so as not to override the participants' perspectives.

As researcher and interviewer, I anticipated a challenge from having conducted the previous research and resoliciting participation for this study. This dual role might have had the potential to interfere with participants honestly sharing their experience of the first interview, perhaps not wanting to hurt my feelings as the interviewer. I addressed these

potential challenges in recruitment materials and in the interview by asking for participants' perspectives, including positive, negative, neutral, or mixed reactions. I repeated this permission-giving statement at least one additional time during each interview. Specific to research with sexual assault survivors, using the same interviewer can maintain established trust and increase participants' comfort (Campbell et al., 2009). Further, established rapport improves data collection by promoting "full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 142).

Prior Study

Information about the previous study is described to contextualize this follow-up study. The previous study's recruitment materials were distributed at a small Midwestern college. Materials invited anyone who had "had an unwanted sexual experience or ha[d] been sexually assaulted or raped." The previous study employed an open-ended interview format to understand participants' experiences of sexual assault disclosure. Discourse analysis was employed to describe sexual assault disclosures in light of three discourses: heteronormative, legal, and anti-rape movement. The interview solicited information on participants' past experiences of telling others about the incident, including whom they chose to tell and not tell, how they chose to tell, and why they chose to tell and not tell. The average interview length was 101 minutes. I asked participants to select the interview location and to take breaks during the interview when they needed to. No compensation was provided. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed with sexual assault resources, and we discussed ending the researcher-participant relationship. At the conclusion of data collection, participants were given a copy of the draft to provide feedback.

Information about participants' assault incidents and disclosure experiences helps to contextualize the current study (Hoover, 2008). All incidents of sexual assault were perpetrated by someone known to the survivor. Two of the 15 participants were minors at the time of the sexual assault and reported to their parents, which resulted in legal actions against the perpetrators. The remaining thirteen individuals did not make legal reports of the sexual trauma. The research found commonalities in participants' experiences of disclosure. All participants disclosed the incident to close female friends. Disclosures to friends served a number of purposes: to ascertain if the incident was or was not considered sexual assault, to deepen a friendship by sharing personal history, and to offer support to a friend who disclosed about a similar incident. In addition to disclosing to close female friends, the majority of participants had disclosed the incident to romantic partners because they perceived the incident to be an important part of their personal and sexual history that needed to be shared as the relationship became increasingly intimate. A minority ($n=2$) disclosed to a formal service provider. The disclosures to close female friends were primarily shaped by heteronormative discourse about dating and desire. The legal discourse was evident in disclosures to significant others, which often focused on reporting to authorities and defining the incident as nonconsensual. The anti-rape discourse was evident when participants voiced the importance of disclosing the sexual assault to raise awareness of this social problem.

Participants

Recruitment was limited to the prior study sample. Participants were recruited through electronic contact information. Eight of the 14 potential participants consented to participate in the current study. The participants were 23-24 year old women. The majority were White ($n=6$); one participant identified as being both White and Asian American and another as Jewish. Seven participants identified as heterosexual and one as bisexual.

Approximately 18 months had lapsed between the data collection for the two studies. The delay may have allowed participants more time to reflect on their experiences and develop greater awareness of how the original study had an impact on them. However, because participants and I were no longer affiliated with the university where the original study was conducted, there was likely a decrease in potential participants' sense of connection with the study, which could have decreased response rates. In addition, available contact information was not updated and likely had inaccuracies.

Differences between the eight participants of the current study and the six women who did not respond to recruitment efforts of the current study were examined. The six women who did not respond to recruitment efforts for the current study (nonparticipants) reported different sexual assault and disclosure experiences when they participated in the prior study. Specifically, the nonparticipants were more likely to have experienced ongoing sexual assault by someone who was known to them (four of six nonparticipants, versus none of the participants). They had disclosed to approximately half as many people (4.4 disclosures by nonparticipants, versus 8.6 disclosures by participants). Nonparticipants' experiences of repeated trauma and fewer disclosures may be related to their choice to decline participation in the current study. However, without more information from the nonparticipants, no conclusions can be drawn about the participation rate.

Procedures

All interactions with participants followed feminist interview guidelines (Campbell et al., 2009), which recommend providing information, exhibiting a warm demeanor, listening to participants, and allowing participants to make choices about their participation. I asked clarifying questions and posed potential interpretations, especially in the follow-up interview and participant check, as explained below. All interviews were semi-structured, allowing for directed exploration (Charmaz, 2006; see Appendix A for interview guide). All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I triangulated multiple data sources, including individual interviews, follow-up interviews, interviews from the prior study, analytical notes, and participant checks (Denzin, 1970). First, eight individual interviews occurred, the majority by phone. Participants chose the most convenient interview option; two chose Skype and one chose e-mail. The e-mail interview occurred over the course of multiple correspondences. I engaged in direct communication with the participant about her preferences for how to structure, complete, and end the e-mail interview; I interacted according to her preferences. The average length was 76 minutes. Second, follow-up interviews occurred with six participants. The follow-up interviews were tailored to each participant to probe about analytical hunches (see Appendix B for generic follow-up interview guide). For example, some participants used the words "comfort" and "discomfort" to describe the interview process, so I wanted to learn more about what that meant to the remaining participants. The average length of the follow-up interview was 32 minutes. Last, the interviews from the prior study were incorporated into the data corpus ($n = 14$, $M_{\text{length}} = 101$ minutes). Only portions of the prior study interviews with explicit conversation about the interview itself were included. Typically, these data were drawn from the beginning and end of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using phenomenological techniques. First, I immersed myself in the data, completing transcription, transcription check, and re-reading the transcripts. Next, I identified salient statements from the transcripts and grouped them into themes. For example,

statements from participants about their emotional reactions to the interviews were grouped together. When statements were initially grouped together, many revisions occurred, and I had many uncertainties about the data. These uncertainties were used to develop questions for the follow-up interviews. After completing the follow-up interviews, salient statements were identified and incorporated into the existing analysis. The analysis was modified, and I identified the themes to describe participant's perspectives. For example, during analysis, the statements about participants' reactions to the interview were reviewed. It became clear that each participant had multiple reactions to the interview, and the underlying meaning represented participants' changing comfort. As such, the group of themes was named "Changing Comfort." After developing a full draft, I sought feedback from participants (participant checks); three participants provided their input. Their input focused on clarifying the results, not substantively altering the analysis. Their suggestions were incorporated. I utilized ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2009), a qualitative data management program, to manage data analysis and create an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (2000) described criteria to determine the rigor and trustworthiness of a study. In this study, credibility was secured by debriefing with peer researchers, searching for disconfirming evidence, participant checks, follow-up interviews, and reflexive practices. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficient information about the participants, the research context, and myself that the reader is able to make an informed decision about how the results of this study may be relevant to another context. Dependability was accomplished by careful tracking of the research process, which is evident in an audit trail examined by the second author. Finally, confirmability was established by carefully tying together data, analytic processes, and findings and continually tracking these processes in the audit trail. In addition to these criteria, criteria for trustworthiness in a feminist investigation go beyond traditional definitions of reliability and validity, focusing on authenticity criteria (Lincoln, 1995). This study honored different constructions (fairness), expanded and elaborated participants' constructions (ontological authenticity), and provided an opportunity for appreciating the constructions of others (educative authenticity). As stated, trustworthiness of this study was established in multiple ways. Reflexivity, an important contributor to the trustworthiness of the study was addressed in the Introduction and will be explored further in the Discussion.

Results

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of female sexual assault survivors who had previously taken part in an interview-based study about their assault disclosures. From participants' perspectives, five themes emerged: (a) Meaning of Participation, (b) Trust in the Researcher, (c) Connection with the Other Participants, (d) Changing Comfort, and (e) Recommendations to Increase Participants' Comfort.

Meaning of Participation

The first theme explains the meaning of participants' participation. In deciding to participate, many participants felt that their participation was both personal and political. Generally, participants felt invested in the study. For example, Joanne explained: "Like it kind of became, like, my project, too, like, my paper, too, even though, you know, like, I didn't really obviously ... write [the manuscript] with you. You know what I mean?" In terms

of personal meaning, Natalie, who had had legal experience with sexual assault, stated, “Never before had I really been able to [tell my story without having to defend myself]. Even in talking to, I think, those family and friends . . . there was always something, I guess, keeping me from telling the whole situation from my point of view.” As another example of personal meaning, Summer stated: “It was kind of almost like a personal thing, a personal stepping stone to be able to say, “I can talk about these things without it causing...a breakdown.” Some participants also felt compelled to participate for more political reasons. For example, Theresa shared in the original interview: “I’m not going to continue to sit here and be silent and feel guilty and let this knowingly happen to other women unless they—I—speak. So I need to speak, and I need to say something.” The meaning of the study motivated their decision to participate.

Trust in the Researcher

This theme refers to the participants’ experience of relating to me, specifically their trust in me. Participants reported being conscious of perceptions of me, especially that they could trust me to not judge them. Summer remembered, “Just a feeling that you might have, not a similar viewpoint, but a nonjudgmental viewpoint, which I think is a fear, when you talk about these things, is being judged.” Alice felt it was my role to listen: “I was the expert, too, right? I was the only one who knew what happened, and I had to communicate that to you.” Some participants expressed being able to trust me as a woman. Bridgette commented: “I felt like a man couldn’t listen and truly understand what I was going through. Even though you didn’t offer any of your own experiences, I still felt like in some way you kind of knew, not exactly what I was going through, but you could understand because you are also a woman.”

Participants also expressed perceptions about the researcher’s role beyond the interview. During the original interviews, I provided information during the informed consent process about how the interviews would be used; still, concerns persisted among many of the participants. Specifically, 7 of the 13 participants asked during debriefing how I would be using the interviews. Joanne explained: “The researcher can take what you say and do what they want with it.” That being said, all of the participants reported that they were in agreement with how they were represented in the final manuscript.

Connection with the Other Participants

This theme describes participants’ connections to the other participants. Despite not meeting the other participants, participants felt connected to one another. In her original interview, Candice said: “You’re talking to other women about this because you want to know, not because it’s like something horrible that happened to Candice, but because it’s something horrible that happens to women, and it has to stop.” Alice emphasized the importance of the other participants: “Even though I didn’t know who you’d be interviewing, I would know that there would be other people. And they would know that I was there, too. . . . knowing that your study wouldn’t have been successful if there weren’t other people like us there.” In the original interview, during debriefing, when I asked participants what questions they had for me, seven of 13 participants asked me about other participants. In particular, when I told Lauren that she was the ninth participant, she replied, “Good, well, not good, but I’m glad people are stepping up and supporting.”

Reading the study, participants felt validated because they were linked to the other participants. For example, Natalie stated: “[Even] experiences that I couldn’t personally relate to, there was always an aspect that I was, like, Yeah, that, I can relate to that. That resonates

with me.” As another example, Bridgette explained, “Just having them all [the participants’ stories] together, finally, um, I thought was a really positive thing. ... Instead of them being these phantoms—I wonder what their stories are; I wonder who they are. Even though they were still anonymous, you had their words there, and you had their stories. It paired up. And in the same paper was my story and my words, so I felt like, I wasn’t just this one individual person. But I was in the community now, and we were all kind of dealing with it together.”

Changing Comfort

Participants discussed how their sense of comfort fluctuated throughout the prior interview. Many participants expected that the interview would not be emotionally easy. For example, Natalie explained: “It’s just always painful to think about, like, that’s the society we live in. I think it’s always hard just to have that reminder and to know, too, that your life has been jacked up, too, because of this experience.” Participants noted the ways in which my questions provoked unexpected reactions. For example, Joanne stated: “Just like those emotions, you know, came out of me just talking about it. ... There was other, just other things I hadn’t thought about before, because you asked me specific questions. Those brought different emotions.” Being asked to think, feel, and speak about things she had never articulated before was challenging.

After the end of the interview, participants’ emotional reactions shifted again. For example, Candice stated that she was shaky during the interview; then, at the end of the interview, she said, “I actually feel better about it than I have. I figured this would happen. I feel better about it than I have in a long time.” However, Candice reported in her follow-up interview that she was tired after ending the original interview: “I went to bed when I got back to my room and slept for a long time, like I was physically tired.” Some participants disclosed to others that they had completed the interview. For example, Summer explained how she shared with others and continued to react to the interview:

Like I said, it took me a couple of days to deal with sort of some of the things that came up during the interview. And, um, just to kind of put feelers out to my friends, “Hey, I’m having a weird couple of days dealing with these things.” So I kind of want people to know somewhat what’s going on, so it’s not just that I’m acting really weird. Just, you know, to tell them and say, like, “Oh, well, this happened, but I’m kind of upset. And I’m dealing with it, but I think it was a good decision. Just to be able to work through some of that stuff, again with someone that might know something about the situation, that might help me be able to deal with it further.” ... So I probably spent, you know, some time to myself for a couple of days. I probably was not that into sex for a week or so, just kind of pulling into myself. I mean, you’re opening up a situation in which you were vulnerable. And it makes it that much harder to open up again after you’ve rehashed these different experiences.

Despite short-term distress, no participant reported negative long-term consequences. As an example, Natalie shared, “And even though that [negative experiences of disclosure] was hard to think about and realize [in the interview], ... it did help me think about what happened to me differently, in the sense that ... I saw a larger impact, which is hard to see, but it made me aware of something that I wasn’t necessarily aware of.” All participants reported that their participation was helpful.

Recommendations to Increase Participants' Comfort

Participants offered suggestions about how interviews could be conducted to help research participants feel more comfortable. Joanne and Riley recommended offering follow-up interviews to reduce pressured feelings during the interview. Some participants offered the idea of different data sources, using art and writing. Joanne stated: "Speaking is just one, you know, way of expressing something...I said this before, I have a hard time, like, you know, speaking. Sometimes art, even though it can be a more abstract thing, sometimes it's easier." Lauren indicated that writing might be easier: "I think that writing helps people. It gets to the heart of what they are really trying to say when you look at bullet points, when you look at outlines, when you look at their thoughts." In addition to the interview itself, Riley recommended that the researcher provide participants with their pseudonyms prior to participants reading results, which would help "getting ready to confront the final write-up, knowing that [participants] would see [their] story in it."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of female sexual assault survivors who had participated in interview-based research. The question guiding this study was: How did female research participants who participated in interviews about sexual assault disclosures experience the research process? From participants' perspectives, five themes emerged: (a) Meaning of Participation, (b) Trust in the Researcher, (c) Connection with the Other Participants, (d) Changing Comfort, and (e) Recommendations to Increase Participants' Comfort. Participants' experiences of the research process were influenced by the meaning and comfort that they felt, along with their relationships with the researcher and their imagined relationships with the other participants. Out of their perspectives, they offered recommendations aimed at increasing participants' comfort. Given the intent of the study to support researcher reflexivity, each theme is the basis for recommendations that may resonate with qualitative researchers' concerns. As I discuss thematic recommendations, I also incorporate my own reactions to the findings in order to demonstrate how the follow-up study promoted researcher reflexivity.

Meaning of Participation

The meaning-making aspect of research participation was not surprising to me; it fit with my observation that participants were invested in the research, responding quickly to recruitment materials and actively participating in the interview. In order to promote meaning-making, I consider certain practices helpful during debriefing and original informed consent. During debriefing, the researcher might ask participants about any unanticipated reactions, including benefits. Secondly, the political meaning could be enhanced by discussing the researcher's intent to promote social change through the research. This discussion could occur during the original consent process. Though informed consent statements oftentimes indicate potential societal benefits of the research, special care may be taken to discuss this with participants. This discussion might increase participants' consciousness about their own political agency to promote social change.

Trust in the Researcher

This investigation suggested that the participant-researcher relationship was core to participants' experience of qualitative research. I found this finding interesting because it

demonstrated the feminist principle of relationality (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). In order to facilitate trust, the researcher can revisit the use of interview as data during debriefing and engage in transparent communication with participants about its use. When I analyzed the original interviews, I was surprised that seven of thirteen participants had asked me about how their data would be used at the end of the interview; at the time of the study, despite the high frequency of this question, I did not realize that participants had this concern. When I consider that participants' comfort shifted throughout the interview, I imagine that revisiting the use of data promotes participants' comfort. Specific to this study, I am aware that, as college students, the participants were likely more familiar with research and perhaps more assertive to ask questions. In the case of participants with less baseline knowledge, special efforts to engage in transparent communication may be necessary.

Participants in this study indicated that the researcher's influence continued after the termination of the investigation. Though surprising at first, this finding mimicked research on therapists' continued importance to clients post-therapy (Hannigan, 1975). Because of the apparent similarities in the experiences of therapy clients and interviewees in a study of traumatic events (Scerri, Abela, & Vetere, 2012), the researcher may bear an extra responsibility for establishing and ending the research relationship. This finding disrupts my assumption that participants' involvement with the study ends after data collection; from their perspectives, it does not.

Connection with the Other Participants

Of all the themes, I was most surprised participants found other participants so important. Participants did not ever meet one another, yet they imagined one another. Not only were participants interested in one another, they believed they were collectively contributing to the success of the study. As the researcher, I thought of the participants collectively, and a similar connection was experienced by participants. This prompted me to consider how to facilitate a sense of community among participants, directly (e.g., focus groups; Montell, 1999) and indirectly (e.g., member checking; Harper & Cole, 2012).

Changing Comfort

Comfort may be improved by considering participant's own strategies, providing information, and thorough debriefing. First, the participants' perspectives on how to improve the research process remind me of the diversity of options that could be implemented to be more participant-centered. Based on the variety of recommendations, participants likely are aware of specific ways to ease their distress. As an emerging scholar, I focused more on reading the ethics literature and being compliant with Institutional Review Board guidelines, as opposed to also prioritizing the expertise of participants themselves. Even though participants selected where to meet for the interview and were offered breaks, I did not ask participants many questions about their ideas on what could make their participation more comfortable. Participants' experiences of comfort shifted, and it was not predictable for them. As such, comfort could be increased by helping prepare participants for the unexpected. Given that participants' reactions to the interview may fluctuate over time, the researcher needs to debrief with all participants (not just those indicating potential distress; Scerri, Abela, & Vetere, 2012). Further, a secondary debriefing could provide participants with additional information about the progress of the study and allow them to ask questions (Johnson & Benight, 2003). This would respect participants' concerns, include any additional concerns about use of data, and convey an ethic of care (Haverkamp, 2005).

As a whole, this discussion illustrates potentially “ethically important moments,” in which the researcher can reflexively consider the perspectives of participants. I do not intend to suggest that these participants’ experiences are representative of other female sexual assault survivors. The follow-up study design involved was highly contextualized and conducted with mostly White, educated, heterosexual, young women. As such, the sampling decisions limit the generalizability. Also, findings could have differed if someone else, other than the original researcher, conducted the follow-up interviews.

Beyond my reflexive practices of journaling and peer debriefing, this follow-up study allowed participants the opportunity to communicate with me about their perspectives, of which I was previously ignorant. As an emerging scholar, I found participants’ insights to be an invaluable resource to shape the method choices I make. Ultimately, I have learned specific ways to uphold my ethical responsibility to participants beyond what is specified by regulations. The recommendations of this follow-up study are grounds for empirical examination to explore what recommendations could be useful in other qualitative studies with trauma survivors.

Implications

I encourage other qualitative researchers to engage in follow-up research to increase their own awareness of the research process. Researchers may learn about their proverbial blind spots, which is helpful information to improve future research practices. Veteran researchers guiding novice researchers could direct them to engage in reflexive practices, including thorough debriefing and feedback from participants about their data collection experience. The participants’ feedback is invaluable to promote better research. Especially in the case of critical theory-oriented research (such as feminism) and constructivist assumptions, participant-centered data collection is essential.

Future research is needed on participants’ experiences and researcher reflexivity. First, researchers need to know more about how participants experience research participation, as well as how participants would prefer to experience the research process. Further studies on research participation on other sensitive topics, investigated in diverse contexts, would yield a strong empirical foundation. Such participant-centered research could inform ethical research practices. Also, research on the various relationships would deepen understanding of feminist research relationships and sensitive topics: researcher-participant relationship and participant-participant relationships. Longitudinal designs could explore the long-term consequences and meaning of research participation. Secondly, though publications on researcher reflexivity are prevalent, empirical studies on researcher reflexivity could shed light on the researcher developmental process. Overall, future research on these topics would lend themselves to improved research practices.

Conclusion

This follow-up study highlights the benefits of engaging in reflexive processes after completing original research. In addition to reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and other reflexive processes (Clark & Sharf, 2007; Rew, Bechtel, & Sapp, 1993), follow-up studies such as this one may illuminate opportunities to enhance research practices. Considering the researcher-as-instrument, the qualitative researcher has a potential lifetime of opportunities to promote ethical practices with participants. This follow-up study offered an alternative perspective—that of participants themselves—for considering how to improve research practices.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Would you please tell me about your experience of participating in the original research study?
2. Why were you interested in participating in the original research study?
3. What expectations did you have about the interview before we met?
4. In what ways were your expectations met and not met?

5. What reactions and responses did you have to the informed consent?
6. What reactions and responses did you have to the interview?
7. What emotions, feelings, and thoughts did you have about talking about a personal topic for research purposes?
8. What specifically was rewarding or challenging about the interview?
9. What short-term and long-term effects did/do you experience as a result of the interview?
10. If you read the previous study, what did you think?
11. How did participating in the study change you? For example, how did it change your view of yourself, the incident you talked about, and your decisions to disclose or not disclose to others?
12. Have you told anyone else about the incident since you participated in the prior study? What was that like? Did participating in the prior study influence your decision to disclose?
13. How did participating in the prior study affect your healing?
14. How did/do you feel about your level of involvement in the overall study?
15. What remains ambiguous or uncertain to you about your participation in the original study?
16. What have I forgotten to ask about your experience of participating in a research interview?

Appendix B

Follow-Up Interview Guide

1. Other people mentioned feeling connected to other women. Was that your experience? If so, how?
2. You said that (specific example) made you feel comfortable participating in the study. Where there other things that made your participation feel comfortable?
3. You said that (specific example) was uncomfortable about your participation. What other things were related to your sense of discomfort?
4. You said that (specific example) could have made it easier for you to participate. What else could have made your participation easier? If you were doing a similar project, what would you do differently?

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