

Conducting qualitative research on sexual violence

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Sexual Violence Research Initiative**

Conducting qualitative research on sexual violence -- rationale

- High quality qualitative research is needed in order to better understand the impact and prevention of sexual violence.
- Research and practice need to be informed by the voices of victims and others so that research is able to advance new theories and critically evaluate current approaches to prevention and intervention.

Qualitative Research on sexual violence requires:

- an understanding of the design and conduct of such research -- using basic methodologically sound principles

Introductions and current work/ research interests of participants

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Research focus on interpersonal violence and abuse – 15 US federally funded studies and scholarly papers and books on:

Sex trafficking of women and children; violence against women in the military; child fatalities; the criminal careers of sex offenders; risk factors for child sexual abuse; the consequences of sexual assault; recall and memory of child sexual abuse.

Williams' research relies on interdisciplinary collaborations and multiple methods including longitudinal, quantitative and qualitative designs. Current research interests reflect a focus on global issues and applying a human rights' perspective to understanding and responding to violence in the United States, and studies and papers on the impact of extreme poverty, conflict, war and terrorism on interpersonal violence.



Recently completed research: Pathways into and out of commercial sexual exploitation— Funded by the US Department of Justice. Report available at: <http://faculty.uml.edu/lwilliams/> along with 2 publications available to date based on this study.

Collaboration, “an unnatural act between non-consenting adults.” *Jocelyn Elders*
--- *But collaborative work is a key aspect of research on violence*

Current research: Enhancing Bystander Efficacy to Prevent Sexual Violence: Primary Prevention on Two College Campuses-- Funded by: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. UNH: Victoria L. Banyard and Sharyn Potter, Investigators. UML, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology: Linda M. Williams, Alison Cares, Eve Buzawa and David Hirschel, Investigators Mary Frederick, Research Associate.

Qualitative Research Requires...

- careful consideration of a number of very challenging methodological issues. These issues include:
 1. Ethical conduct of interviews with vulnerable children and youth or with participants who have experienced significant trauma;
 2. Recruitment strategies to maximize opportunities for interview and recontact success;
 3. Interview approaches that maximize the participant involvement in and sharing of experiences that are highly personal and behaviors that are high risk;
 4. Approaches that maximize safety for both the participant and the researcher;
 5. Maintenance of confidentiality during the data collection, analysis and reporting.

Qualitative research methods

- Often driven by need to understand the foundations— the logic -- of what is going on. This need may come from a concern for the inadequacy of existing theory, a desire to advance new theories, and **an interest in critically evaluating the tenets or assumptions of widely held explanations.**
- May be highly **collaborative** – research-practitioner-participant , etc. Focus on the voices of the participants
- Includes first and foremost—Careful **OBSERVATIONS.** May include **in-depth, case-oriented** study of a relatively small number of cases.
- Produce detailed knowledge of specific “cases,” experiences, etc.-- often with the goal of finding out “**how**” things happen (or happened) and “**making the ‘facts’ understandable**”– it places less emphasis on deriving inferences or predictions from cross-case patterns. More likely to identify factors and how they work rather than “counting” things or “how many say this or that.?”



For the Pathways Study—argued the prior research was inadequate....

- Commercial sexual exploitation of children and teens is *understudied* due to secrecy of the behaviors and fact that often the prostituted children are “throwaways,” or are poor, minority, runaway or drug-involved and garner little sustained public concern or attention.
- Prior research was based on select sample of cases -- known to police and “pimp” involved.
- CSEC-involved children are not found in most clinical or prior research samples— but there are many victims out there.
- Treatment approaches developed from research on other types of child sexual abuse, for example, intrafamilial CSA, may not be sufficient to address (the complexities?) of CSEC.

Pathways Study citations

- Williams, L.M. (2010). Harm and resilience among prostituted teens: Broadening our understanding of victimization and survival. Social Policy and Society, 9,2: 243-254.
- Williams, L.M. (2009). Provide Justice For Prostituted Teens: Stop Arresting And Prosecuting Girls. In Natasha A. Frost, Joshua D. Freilich, and Todd R. Clear (Eds.), Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice Policy: Policy Proposals from the American Society of Criminology Conference. (pp. 227-306). Belmont, CA: Cengage/Wadsworth.
- Williams, L.M. & Frederick, M.E. (2009). Pathways into and out of commercial sexual victimization of children: Understanding and responding to sexually exploited teens. Lowell, MA: University of Massachusetts Lowell. <http://faculty.uml.edu/lwilliams/>

What qualitative research IS and IS NOT

- It is neither **OBJECTIVE** nor **SUBJECTIVE**
- It does not take a **positivist** approach which in social sciences this is the notion that if only you have a good enough research “design” you can know the objective truth.
- One of the hallmarks is that it recognizes shared meanings that involve the people being studied, the researcher and her/his discipline, and the society.
- But it also is not subjective or based on feelings or intuition

LIBERATING METHODOLOGIES FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFORMING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (see Williams and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2002)

- In a search for methodologies for contextually-sensitive research – our prior research on VAW in oppressive socio-political contexts demonstrated the connections between feminist research, women’s experiences, activism and liberation. A politico-gender context and social consciousness influence VAW, the researchers, our understanding of abuse, and caused us to raise questions about methodologies.
- **Studying women is as much ethical and personal as academic and political.** The dilemmas facing researchers in the field confront at every turn those who carry a political and ethical commitment to social change. These commitments raise moral and ethical challenges because of the subjectification and subordination of women in a specific power hierarchies– including the subjectification and subordination of women researchers.

LIBERATING METHODOLOGIES FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFORMING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

- **One of the main dimensions that should be examined especially when studying marginalized and oppressed women, is the dimension of power difference.**
 - How do we conduct research and benefit those who are studied?
 - How do we conduct research with and for women?
 - Could we change at all the power differences during and after the process of data collection without radically changing the kind of research that is done and/or the method of research that is used?
 - Should we challenge the structure of academia, the process of theorizing, and the way it is judged?

So we were asking...

- How could we liberate both the researcher and the researched?
- And how does this politico-gender context and social consciousness influence GBV, impact researchers, affect our understanding of abuse, and raise questions about our methodologies.



Feminist Research

- Studying GBV is as much ethical and personal as academic and political.
- It carries a political and ethical commitment to social change.
- Challenges the objectivity/ subjectivity dichotomy

When questioned about qualitative research -- need to understand and eliminate the Subjectivity/ Objectivity dichotomy

- Point out that quantitative research is not *per se* objective. Research decisions and questions asked reflect researchers' values and beliefs in quantitative studies as well. Awareness of this is needed.
- Make sure we realize the need for rigorous methodologies and do not conduct “advocacy research” (to the extent that phrase refers to designing research to prove one’s strongly held belief or advocacy stance.)

So our methodology...

- Examines the dimension of power difference when studying marginalized and oppressed women.
- Is contextually sensitive.
- Offers innovative methods of inquiry.
- Gives the research participant more power.
- Benefits those who are studied as well as benefiting the researcher her/himself.
- Questions the politics of the process of knowledge production regarding colonized/oppressed people.
- Creates a politically conscious research method and a research setting that links activism and research and integrates findings into policy plans.

Qualitative Research Discussion Today

□ Challenging methodological issues which are all inter-related

1. Ethical conduct of interviews with vulnerable children and youth or with participants who have experienced significant trauma;
2. Recruitment strategies to maximize opportunities for interview and recontact success;
3. Interview approaches that maximize the participant involvement in and sharing of experiences that are highly personal and behaviors that are high risk;
4. Approaches that maximize safety for both the participant and the researcher;
5. Maintenance of confidentiality during the data collection, analysis and reporting.

A first, general step to address these issues is an approach to the research that is:

**Highly collaborative -- Integrates researchers, service providers, grassroots organizers and “participants” -
- either the actual participants or those who can represent them into the research... (in Pathways study we had a board of young women and men who escaped CSEC).**

This collaboration

- may occur when formulating the project, the approach (including ethical and safety issues), “data” collection, analysis and dissemination.**
- Is aware of and makes conscious -- power differentials, the impacts of oppression and the possible research biases.**

Interview Strategies in Qualitative Research

- Research interviews are different from other types of interviews.. We are not clinicians, journalists, investigators or others who have different aims and roles.
- Interview approaches designed to maximize the participant involvement and willingness to share experiences that are highly personal and behaviors that are high risk (of course need safety and confidentiality)
- When conducting research with hidden, on the run or oppressed persons strategies are needed to reduce challenges to the validity of the data.
 - Can we defend our interviewing strategies when our findings are not in line with common stereotypes?
 - Are we willing to conduct research that may challenge our own assumptions as well as reveal that the participants are not all from one homogeneous group? (e.g., survival and resilience/ any choice?)
 - Are participants telling us just what we want to hear?

Increasing Validity – (Useful suggestions from Thomas D. Lyon, J.D., Ph.D. 2005)

1. **DON'T KNOW** instruction --- If I ask you a question and you don't know the answer, then just say, "I don't know."
2. **DON'T UNDERSTAND** instruction If I ask you a question and you don't know what I mean or what I'm saying, you can say, "I don't know what you mean." I will ask it a different way.
3. **INTERVIEWER IS WRONG** instruction -- Sometimes I will make mistakes such as an mistaken fact or an assumption about something that happened or how you felt about something. When I do please tell me that I am wrong.
4. **IGNORANT INTERVIEWER** instruction -- Pretend I am from another world... (or whatever conveys point) I don't know what's happened to you (what your life is like). I won't be able to tell you the answers to my questions. Help educate me.
5. **PROMISE TO TELL THE TRUTH** I'd rather have you say you don't know or that you would rather not answer than I would have you make up an answer to please me or get me to stop asking questions...

Narrative Accounts – as used in the Pathways Study

- We sought the voices of those who have been sexually abused-- their narrative accounts of their lives and experiences.
- Questions were allowed to evolve as we conducted more interviews.
- Suggestions:
 - Pare down questions for the interviews given best fit with the essence of your inquiry, and the constraints on it
 - Think in terms of questions that can **best** be answered with this method (In other words, don't ask questions that need a more representative sample.)
 - Your goal is: To understand a phenomenon, not to represent a population.
 - The selection of information-rich cases for intensive study. Commonly used in qualitative research.

Introduction to Pathways Study Interview

We are talking to young people to learn about their experiences in their own words. This is a time when you can talk about your life--- the good and bad and what you want for the future. Your life story and your thoughts and suggestions will be confidential but your experiences and ideas will help others learn from you so kids growing up today can have a better life—especially when they are trying to survive life (on the streets). I have some questions I plan to ask but mostly want to hear your story the way you want to tell it.

Interview questions-- Rubric

- Followed general guidelines for interviews but focus was on the teens' accounts the way they wanted to tell it... recent good day, recent bad day, 3 important things for them in their lives... etc.
- In most interviews the first 20 minutes focused on rapport building, the early questions did a good job eliciting information on what the teen viewed as most important in her life and her identification of the most important factors that shaped her into who she is now. In this part of the interview the participants frequently volunteered extensive information on family, peer, and community interactions and supports.

Rapport: Start the interview by “Practicing Narratives”

- The start of the interview gave opportunity to PRACTICE NARRATIVES
 - Tell me about a recent good day.. a recent bad day.. Top 3 most important things.
- Followed up with TELL ME MORE questions.
 - e.g., “You said xxxx, tell me more about xxx”
- Followed up with WHAT HAPPENED NEXT questions. What? How? Tell me more.. e.g., “ What did you do next?” this helps in several ways...
 1. gets into the narrative
 2. shows you will listen
 3. shows you will pay attention to what the participant says
- Avoid questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no.”

Discussion of examples of feedback to interviewers about “narrative practice”

- *Get details on everything possible*—Ask, “(When you say this) what do you mean? WHY is it important to you? “
- So here you would follow up the response, “Find a steady place to live,” with “So what’s important to you about that? Why? What are you looking for?” The interviewer should not assume to know why.
- Also remember some of this time spent on these questions is about rapport building and so participant feels comfortable with the back-and-forth of the interview and sees that you are genuinely interested.

Discussion of Interviewer errors, assumptions, talking too much about themselves or being driven by their own perceptions..

- You said, “So then you went home?” (Do you even know if he has a home?) Instead ask , “What happened next?”
- You sound too happy she has a boyfriend.
- A happy day was the “Cinnamon buns”—Ask “what was so good about that, about that day?” Don’t assume you know.
- Bad day in court— don’t answer for her--ask more neutrally—”so what was bad about that?”
- You said, “I am happy you are focusing on finding place for the winter.” But this is not your job and can cause confusion. You told him—”I think most people are like that.” No need to editorialize. Don’t say “that can be scary and overwhelming” let her tell you how it made her feel.
- I never heard her say that as a girl she needed someone to take care of her on the streets – only that YOU voiced that idea.

Interviewer errors, assumptions, too much about themselves or driven by their own perceptions..

- Curb disgust in reaction to eating from garbage ...
- Strategies for interrupting his story when he goes on way too long :
 - I am very interested in your story and I don't want to stop you a lot but I need to ask a few questions as we go along.
 - May I ask you a question now? (By going back and forth you are “training the participant “ that this is what happens and that you will ask respectful questions. Hopefully this will set a good pattern of give and take for the interview.)

Interview content – More from the Pathways Study

- The interviewer asked about experiences with leaving home and running away followed by questions about experiences with trading sex for money, goods or a place to stay. These experiences were then probed in detail.
- The latter parts of the interview generally revealed information on risk/protective/resiliency factors; health, medical and other self-described needs; service access and impediments to access; juvenile/ criminal justice history and perceptions of interaction with juvenile justice systems; and recommendations for changes in systems.

Interview content – Pathways closing

- **WHAT ELSE DO YOU FEEL IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO KNOW ABOUT? ANYTHING TO ADD?**

I wanna...make a statement. Something that can be remembered.

Somebody's gotta hear my story.

- **Another suggestion before the wrap up and debriefing is to say: "Tell me what I got wrong, is there something you want to add or correct? "**
- **At the end of the interview debriefing occurred and referral services were made available.**

Who to interview?

A few words on ongoing nature of “sampling” decisions

- Sampling is part of the detailed design that you develop before you begin your study.
- However– in qualitative research you also make sampling decisions during data collection based on what you find in your data.
- As you interview keep asking the following questions about the participants you are getting:
 - Why is this or that category or group relevant?
 - In what ways would including it or them in my study help me in developing the overall kind of explanation I wish to develop, or in understanding the process I wish to understand?
 - Do you need a strategy to increase the potential for revealing diversity

Key Design and Ethical Issues

- **Recruitment and Interview Safety (Participant and Interviewer)**
- **Informed consent for and waiver of documentation of Informed Consent to protect Confidentiality**
- **Confidentiality**
- **Youth in Danger Protocol– suicidality, homicidality and imminent risk of severe harm**
- **Debriefing and availability of resources– need for bill boards, multi-lingual radio broadcasts, web site**
- **Snowball sample and confidentiality and safety issues**

Challenging Ethical Issues in Research on Sexual Violence (but that does not mean we stop all research)

- The researcher must make a serious on-going time commitment to address ethical issues— critical for protection of participants and for findings.
- While the need for this commitment is true for all research involving human participants... there is changing risk that needs continuing assessment in qualitative research –especially with evolving interviews, privacy issues, confidentiality, and safety.

Research Challenges -- Safety

- **Recruitment of youth participants—**
 - Pathways study recruits teens living on the streets and involved in prostitution. They are living in dangerous situations by definition.
 - **Safety and Confidentiality—**
 - All contacts with potential participants are made in ways that ensure confidentiality
 - The nature of the research is discussed only with the participant when the researcher is confident that privacy is assured.
 - Interviews take place in a location that would not arouse suspicion.

Take seriously the standard of no harm to participants and clear notion we are researchers not “rescuers.”

Research Challenges -- Consent

- **Issues around obtaining Teen Consent/ Assent**
Interviewing Young Adults (18 & 19 years old) and
Teens (14-17 years old) who:
 1. are not in physical custody of the state;
 2. do not at the time of the interview have a stable residence or a viable home to which they could return;
 3. have been on the streets for more than a week; and
 4. are not financially dependent on their parents.

Research Challenges— Confidentiality and Consent/ Assent

**Waiver of Documentation of Consent/ Assent protocol for
Teens (14-19) (No signature required).**

- Recognize that it is not always possible or desirable to obtain participant written informed consent.**
- The consent/ assent form is read and reviewed. Participants are allowed to orally waive written documentation of their informed consent/assent to participation in interviews.**
 - This is done when the main threat to their confidential participation would be the existence of written documentation of their participation in the study, such as would be created by their signing a traditional informed consent/assent form.**
- Interviewer signs ascertaining that informed consent (verbal) has been obtained.**

Research Challenges– youth in danger

Debriefing and Youth in Danger

- Regardless of whether the teens explicitly seek assistance, the researchers provide the participants (and those who are not able to be recruited) with an opportunity to seek help or get help from local youth serving agencies.
- Youth in danger protocol– suicidality, homicidality and imminent risk of severe life-threatening harm lead to additional steps for linking with services. Key issues here:
 - Do not have name of participant and often do not know where or how to find them again
 - Clear, easy and efficient linkage to immediately available services are necessary

From SVRI draft ethical guidelines

1. Researchers have a duty of care towards research participants
2. The duty of care of researchers towards research participants is limited
3. Informed consent procedures must be adequate and it should be regarded as a process, not an event
4. Researchers must recognize that perpetrators may also be victims (and that victims may also be perpetrators)
6. Researchers have a duty of care of the research team
7. The best interests of a rape survivor may sometimes be to ensure the rape is not reported to the authorities
8. Researchers should ensure the quality of their research and have appropriate training and mentorship

Conclusions

- Protection of human participants is an on-going process to be monitored throughout the research
- Overcoming the challenges and learning how best to do this work is part of the benefit of doing this work and our experiences need to be shared

From F.M. Shaver (Journal Of Interpersonal Violence / March 2005) A note on Leave Taking

- *It is important to leave the field in guest mode, taking the time to say good-bye and thank everyone, whether they were interviewed or not. This provides the researchers with an opportunity to ensure that people know where to call if they have further questions or wish to see the final results. This ritualized leave-taking also provides additional protection for both the participant and researcher. It acknowledges the essential contribution made by the participants in a respectful and courteous manner. It legitimates the withdrawal anxieties experienced by the researchers, who in spite of the attachments that develop on both sides, generally find it a more difficult process than the participants do. (page 304).*

Challenges of Data analysis

- Time needed to properly analyze and for themes to emerge
- Software, grounded methods, time time time
- Funding for collaborator involvement– analysis , did we get it right? and implications or recommendation.

Next steps and discuss other approaches (and challenges) for qualitative research

- **story-telling groups,**
- **focus groups,**
- **social networking sites or other youth-friendly or culturally appropriate media.**

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