"I'll be Okay": Survivors' Perspectives on Participation in Domestic Violence Research

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Abstract

Purpose This article investigates survivors' experiences participating in research interviews about technology-facilitated domestic violence. University research ethics committees often assume that participating in research on violence and abuse is distressing for survivors. Scholars have called for research testing this assumption. This article contributes to the evidence base on the benefits and risks of asking research participants about gender-based violence.

Methods This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 Australian domestic violence survivors. Template analysis was used to code the interviews and develop key themes.

Results The five themes derived from the interviews include reflection on recovery and personal growth; helping other women; rejecting victim-shaming; empowerment; and the importance of timing.

Conclusion All participants reported positive experiences taking part in the study. However, the authors noticed substantial differences in participant narratives across service cohorts. The implications of recruiting through channels associated with different points in trauma trajectories warrant attention.

Keywords Ethics · Violence · Research · Methodology · Domestic violence · Survivor

Introduction

Research ethics guidelines were initially created in response to concerns about human rights violations in medical experimentation by Nazis during World War II. International ethics frameworks such as the Nuremberg Code and

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Helsinki Declaration were designed to promote informed consent and protect participant safety and privacy in biomedical experimentation (Gorman, 2011; Reverby, 2000; van den Hoonaard, 2002). Numerous countries have established standardized administrative procedures for governing research ethics, beginning with the Belmont Report in the US (Office of the Secretary, 1979). While continuing to rely on biomedical models, University Research Ethics Committees (RECs) "have unintentionally expanded their mandate to include a host of groups and practices that were undoubtedly not anticipated in the original research ethics formulations" (Haggerty, 2004, p. 392). RECs have become increasingly interventionist over time, a phenomenon known as "ethics creep" (Haggerty, 2004, p. 391; Wynn, 2011, p. 95). RECs now make extensive demands concerning research design including the topics under investigation, participant pools, question item wording, theoretical frameworks, and research team composition that arguably extend beyond their mandates (Gorman, 2011; Haggerty, 2004). While a full discussion of the reasons for ethics creep are beyond the scope of this article (see Haggerty, 2004), these interventions have serious consequences, including preventing research with key populations on critical issues (De

Vries et al., 2004; Langlois, 2011; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Mathews et al., 2022; Wynn, 2011; Yeater et al., 2012).

Scholars devote significant time to the creation, submission, review, and revision of research ethics applications (Pearce, 2002). REC conditions for approval "increasingly complicate, hamper, or censor certain forms of nontraditional, qualitative, or critical social scientific research" (Haggerty, 2004, p. 393). Critiques include that RECs impose conditions based on assumptions about the likelihood of adverse participant experiences rather than evidence (Dazzi et al., 2014; Mathews et al., 2022; Yeater et al., 2012); are inappropriate to participants and study design (Schrag, 2011); and highly inconsistent across projects and institutions (Schrag, 2011; Wynn, 2011).

This study contributes to the growing body of research investigating the benefits and risks of participation in research on trauma, violence, and abuse. We present results from a thematic analysis of twenty Australian domestic violence survivors' comments on their participation in a study on technology-facilitated abuse. First, we review the literature on feminist research ethics and the ethics of research on trauma, violence and abuse. Then, we explain the research methods used in the larger study upon which this article is based. Next, we present the themes we developed using template analysis. Study participants described multiple rewards of research engagement, including reflection on recovery and personal growth, helping other women, rejecting victim-shaming, and empowerment. We also discuss participants' observations about the importance of the timing of participation in research. Finally, we conclude by presenting the implications of our findings, discussing study limitations, and presenting directions for future research and practice.

Literature Review

Feminist Research Ethics

Feminist research includes diverse methodologies and conflicting theoretical orientations (e.g. Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Harnois, 2013; Schwartz, 1997; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Reinharz, 1992). However, feminist researchers share core methodological, substantive, and political commitments (Westmarland & Bows, 2019). Feminist scholars take gender as a central category of analysis (Rhode, 1990), reflecting a foundational interest and investment in efforts to promote gender equality. Ethical approaches to research design are a central part of feminist methodologies and epistemologies. As Stanley & Wise (1993) put it, "feminist social sciences must acknowledge the ethical and political issues involved in what we do, how we do it, and claims we make for it"

(p. 7). Scholars who study violence against women have been at the forefront of efforts to attend to the well-being of research participants, linking ethics to the quality of knowledge produced (Reinharz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Research on men's violence against women is a key area of feminist scholarship. This research has played an important role in making the prevalence and social and structural contributing factors to gender-based violence visible, calling for action to change the conditions that produce violence, and securing resources for abused women and other survivors (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Kelly, 1988). Feminist scholars have made significant contributions to promoting ethical engagement with research participants, including people who have experienced gender-based violence and abuse. This body of work addresses the risks and benefits of research in this area (e.g. Campbell, 2002, Campbell et al., 2010; Downes et al., 2014; Schwartz, 1997; Westmarland & Bows, 2019).

Some of the first major studies on violence against women were by feminists, such as Russell and Howell's interview study with 930 women about rape, conducted in part to counter efforts to discredit emerging research on rape prevalence. In Russell and Howell's (1983) project, interviewers received 65 hours of training on rape, incest, and how to discuss sexual abuse sensitively. This commitment to the safety of participants in violence against women research was adapted from the approaches used in direct service work with survivors in rape crisis centres and women's refuges (see also Kelly, 1988). While concerns for participants were central, Russell & Howell (1983) recognized that ethical approaches to research are linked to research quality. For example, their study was designed to remedy the under-reporting of rape endemic to previous surveys. More recently, UK Women's Aid organizations developed the *Research Integrity Framework for Domestic Violence and Abuse* (Women's Aid et al., 2020) to provide guidance on the full range of ethical considerations for research in this area. This work illustrates the broad range of ethical considerations involved in studying gender-based violence.

Research Ethics, Trauma, Violence, and Abuse

In Australia, research ethics guidelines are governed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) via The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2018), administered via a standardized Human Research Ethics Application. The National Statement (NHMRC, 2018) requires researchers and RECs to minimize the risks of "harms, discomforts and/or inconveniences for participants and/or others" and conduct a risk-benefit analysis of all research "conducted with or about people, or their

data or tissue" (p. 13). While the NHMRC (2018) requires researchers and ethics boards to base their risk-benefit analysis on "the available evidence" (p. 13), research indicates that REC demands are often based on commonly held assumptions about the harmfulness of talking about sensitive issues rather than evidence (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Blades et al., 2018; Dazzi et al., 2014; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Griffin et al., 2003; Mathews, 2022; Newman et al., 2006).

Ethics creep is a particular impediment to research on violence against women (Carter-Visscher et al., 2007; Jaffe et al., 2015; Yeater et al., 2012). RECs often approach research on gender-based violence as potentially traumatizing for participants. As a result, research on domestic and sexual violence is subject to obstructive intervention by RECs (Downes et al., 2014; Westmarland & Bows, 2019). For example, Jaffe et al.'s (2015) survey of 114 US-based researchers showed that 61.4% had RECs "raise concerns about asking participants questions about their prior trauma experiences" (p. 41). In addition, 13.3% said that RECs had "refused to approve a protocol due to concerns about the effects of asking participants about prior trauma experiences" (p.41). The most common concern expressed by RECs was that asking about prior trauma might cause harm by triggering negative emotions that could psychologically "shatter" participants (Jaffe et al., 2015, p.41). Downes et al. (2014) and Gustafson & Brunger (2014) argue that in recent years, RECs have become fixated on women's vulnerabilities when participating in violence research.

Although 51% of Australian women report sexual violence and 23% report domestic violence in their lifetime (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Townsend et al., 2022), survivors of violence and abuse are regularly presumed to be vulnerable subjects, similar to children and prisoners (Mulla & Hlavka, 2011). Westmarland and Bows (2019) remark that, "Paradoxically, excessive ethical scrutiny in this area can lead to greater harm, by limiting the amount of research that is carried out and making it more difficult for specialist abuse services to demonstrate the effectiveness of their services and approaches" (p. 23). The assumption that participating in research on sensitive issues is harmful is contradicted by extant research.

Downes et al. (2014) argue that RECs have an increasingly risk-averse approach to research with survivors of domestic violence. While careful considerations should be made when designing research on gender-based violence, framing survivors as uniquely vulnerable is problematic. Survivors of violence are the best source of information about their experiences. They can contribute valuable information about the dynamics and distribution of violence and abuse and how people and systems respond to reports. Downes et al. (2014) challenge the notion that research with

survivors of domestic violence involves uniquely vulnerable participants. They argue that, given the high prevalence of sexual assault and domestic violence against women and girls worldwide, many female participants in any research will be survivors. They caution that positioning survivors as vulnerable is paternalistic, suggesting incapacity to comprehend risks and consequences.

A growing body of research indicates that few participants report distress from taking part in trauma research (Carter-Visscher et al., 2007; DePrince & Chu, 2008; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Newman et al., 2001; Yeater et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis of trauma research, including studies with survivors of domestic violence, Jaffe et al. (2015) found that contrary to common REC concerns that "asking participants about prior traumatic experiences will induce extreme distress" (p. 40), the majority of research participants found the experience positive. The analysis, which included 70 studies with a total of 73,959 participants, showed that while some participants might have immediate psychological distress, this was not extreme. Participants also reported low levels of regret about being part of the research and low levels of concern about being coerced or that the research questions were too personal (Jaffe et al., 2015).

Significantly, emerging research evidence indicates that participation in research on traumatic experiences is usually experienced as less stressful than everyday events. Yeater et al. (2012) reported that all 504 participants in their study comparing student responses to surveys on trauma and sex and measures of cognitive ability rated each normal life stressor, such as getting a paper cut or taking a difficult math test, as more distressing than participating in a survey on topics commonly viewed as sensitive (Yeater et al., 2012). In a study comparing students' reactions to completing a survey on trauma (N=240) to other personal questions (N=277), Cromer et al. (2006) found that "trauma questions cause relatively minimal distress and perceived greater importance and greater cost–benefit ratings compared to other kinds of psychological research in a human subjects pool population" (p. 359). Even the 24 of Cromer et al.'s 517 participants who reported the trauma research to be much more distressing than everyday life saw it as valuable (p. 360). Similarly, in a study of 899 students' experiences completing a survey on gender-based sexual violence on campus, Gómez et al. (2015) found that "the majority of students (72.3%) rated the survey as neutral (56.7%), somewhat less distressing (6.5%), or much less distressing (9.1%) compared to day-to-day experiences" (p. 42). In addition, Legerski and Bunnell's (2010) review of the risks and benefits of participating in trauma research notes that the small minority of participants who report distress indicate it dissipates quickly.

In addition to the low risk of harm from participating in research, there is growing evidence that participating in research on traumatic material is experienced as beneficial to participants and others. Most participants report benefits from participating in research on traumatic experiences and indicate that these outweigh the costs (Campbell et al., 2010; DePrince & Chu, 2008; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Hamberger et al., 2020; Jaffe et al., 2015; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Newman et al., 2006; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). In contrast to what RECS might assume, DePrince and Chu (2008) found that participants who took part in interviews rated the benefits of research participation even more highly than those who completed surveys.

Qualitative research provides insight into some of the reasons this might be and enumerates key benefits of research participation. Campbell et al. (2010) interviewed 92 rape survivors about their experiences participating in research. They found that 70 participants discussed only positive aspects of participation, 18 noted it was positive but difficult, and 4 discussed the negative aspects of thinking about traumatic experiences without discussing any benefits of participation (pp. 69–70). Participants valued talking about their experiences with a supportive, engaged listener who normalized their experiences and reactions, having control over what questions they answered, receiving referrals to support services, and reflecting on their past experiences. Hamberger et al. (2020) reported similar findings from interviews with 24 domestic violence survivors as part of a longitudinal study of screening and intervention in a healthcare setting. Participants described a range of benefits including making positive life changes, which the women attributed partly to participating in the research. Participants in this study expressed the value of discussing difficult experiences with non-judgemental listeners, understanding that they are not alone in experiencing abuse, and learning from being asked questions about different types of abuse and their use of safety strategies and support resources (pp.47–48).

In addition to the personal benefits of research participation outweighing costs, most research participants indicate that asking about issues like violence and abuse is important because it offers significant benefits to society. Frequently mentioned benefits include preventing future abuse and improving support services and researcher training (Campbell et al., 2010; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Jaffe et al., 2015; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Newman et al., 2006). Overall, the research suggests that participation in research on trauma and abuse presents low risks, that the benefits outweigh the costs, and that participants perceive such research as personally and collectively important. The research consensus, then, indicates that REC assumptions that such research is exceptionally risky for participants are unfounded. In addition, the research indicates that the benefits of inviting survivors to participate in research on trauma and abuse are significant.

Methods

Our previous experiences with RECs provided the impetus to investigate participants' experiences with domestic violence research. All of the authors have experienced RECS assuming that survivors are an exceptionally vulnerable population of research participants who may be traumatized by talking about their experiences. Authors one and three interviewed twenty women who identified as domestic violence survivors as part of a larger qualitative study on technology-facilitated domestic violence in Australia. All of their abusers were men (for full details see Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2021, 2022; Woodlock et al., 2023). A convenience sample was used to recruit participants from Queensland (10) and New South Wales (10). Participants ranged from 21 to 65 years old, with an average age of 39. Half of the participants identified as Australian (9) or Aboriginal (1) and half reported being born overseas in Canada (1), China (2), India (2), Italy (1), Japan (1), New Zealand (1), Northern Ireland (1), and South Africa (1). The final segment of the interview schedule included questions about the women's experiences participating in the study. Questions included: "How did you find the experience of talking with me today?" And "Would you recommend participating in research to other women who had experiences similar to yours?"

We employed what Downes et al. (2014) describe as a "positive empowerment" approach to this study. In this approach, researchers are "invested in both protecting and safeguarding survivors of domestic violence and maximizing their capacity for self-determination and autonomy within the research process" (p. 7). The positive empowerment approach balances efforts to ensure that the research process is not re-traumatizing for survivors with commitments to provide participants opportunities to tell their stories and share knowledge.

One of the critical steps we took was partnering with specialist domestic violence organizations. This collaboration allowed us to compensate the organizations for their assistance with the study and take advantage of the safety protocols they use when working with survivors. Our community partners assisted with the research design by providing feedback on the interview protocol and information and consent forms. They also played an essential role in the recruitment process, which is common and effective in domestic violence research (Bender, 2017). The partner organizations identified potential participants, contacted them to assess interest, reviewed informed consent materials with them to gauge whether they wanted to take part,

screened for eligibility, and scheduled the interviews. The services also provided safe, private locations to conduct interviews and a safe, blocked phone number to conduct calls for participants who preferred to speak by phone. This approach offered multiple benefits. In addition to the partner organizations completing a substantial portion of the time-consuming recruitment, screening, and scheduling work, it ensured that support systems and safety were built into the process. We knew that participants were being supported by experienced professionals throughout the research process. This approach to recruitment also meant that participants had experience with technology-facilitated domestic violence so that they could make meaningful contributions to the study.

While both partner organizations offer specialist domestic violence services, one is a women's legal service. The other is a women's health service that runs a domestic violence court support program. The services recruited women at different stages of their recovery journeys. The court support program provides assistance to survivors at court. These survivors were in the early stages of seeking domestic violence orders, dealing with criminal charges, or leaving abusers. The legal service recruited women who were further along on pathways of separation.

The interview process included a preamble that explained why we were conducting the research, what the findings would be used for, and a discussion about participants' preferences about what to do if they became upset during the interview. As is common in violence against women research, we compensated participants with $50 gift cards and transportation vouchers. Downes et al. (2014) state that compensation should be high enough to show respect for the participants' contributions but not high enough to be coercive.

We used template analysis in this study (King, 1998, 2012). Template analysis involves developing a coding template that can include themes identified prior to coding and accommodate new themes developed during coding (Woodlock et al., 2023). We re-coded all interviews to gain insight into participants' experiences with the research. We developed five themes using template analysis: reflection on recovery and personal growth; helping other women; rejecting victim-shaming; empowerment; and the importance of timing.

Anecdotally, we noticed differences between the interviews across the services. Interviews with women recruited via the court support program had more fragmented narrative structures than those from the legal service. This is consistent with research on how trauma narratives cohere over time with recovery (Booker et al., 2020; Brosi & Rolling, 2010; Herman, 1998; van der Kolk, 1998). Despite these differences, all 20 participants described participation in the study as positive, which we discuss in more detail below.

Results

We developed five themes based on our template coding of 20 interviews with women who were survivors of technology-facilitated domestic violence. The five themes centred on participants' perceptions of the benefits of participation and their consideration of other survivors' place in recovery. The first four themes reflect positive experiences participating in domestic violence research. The final theme highlights care and respect for other survivors whose needs and situations might differ from their own. All 20 participants reported that they found the interviews to be a positive experience overall and that they would recommend participating in similar research to other women. This aligns with the extant research on participation in studies on violence, abuse, and trauma, indicating that negative experiences are uncommon and that the benefits outweigh the costs (Carter-Visscher et al., 2007; DePrince & Chu, 2008; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Jaffe et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2006; Yeater et al., 2012).

Reflection on Recovery and Personal Growth – "It was my Past"

Several participants in this study noted that the interview provided an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and how far they had come. Ajinder and Julia indicated that the interview enabled them to reflect on how much they had grown. Both noted that talking about their abuse experiences did not affect them as much as it would have in the past. Julia also remarked that participating in the interview helped build knowledge of how domestic violence perpetrators can use technology. Julia said:

> It was like bringing up the past, but actually, it's made me think how far I've grown as a person and how [much] stronger I am - leaving domestic violence and giving me some insight into this technology stuff as well.

Julia appears to be reflecting on her own recovery in the aftermath of abuse. Survivors describe this process as a spiral including "ups and downs," "back and forth," which is "never-ending" (Murphy et al., 2009, p. 160). By answering the interview questions, Julia could trace her development through this process and also learn new information through the interview. Similarly, Ajinder noted how much she had grown over time. She said:

Now I'm okay with that, like, it was my past, so now I'm living happily. So, some things, so like women get very easily, you know, get emotional, or something like that. But I'm - now I'm a strong person, so it doesn't impact me that much.

Developing a clear sense of what is past and what life is like now is a key part of trauma recovery (Herman, 1998). Ajinder and Julia distance themselves from who they were before, associating weakness with their experiences of domestic violence and reflecting that they are stronger now. These quotes support Hamberger et al. (2020) and Campbell et al. (2010)'s earlier findings that interviews provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on their past experiences and glean new knowledge from the questions asked. These quotes also highlight how emotional reactions to discussing abuse are not necessarily negative and may simply be part of the recovery process. This may help to explain why surveys on trauma research find some participants report that it is challenging to discuss trauma but still worth it (Cromer et al., 2006; Jaffe et al., 2015).

Michelle also expressed that participating in the interview enabled her to see how much better she could cope with her experiences now. Michelle felt that participation brought up upsetting emotions, but being part of the interview gave those feelings a purpose. She said:

Yeah, look, it does bring up some emotions that are upsetting, but it's okay because it is going to help other women. So doing this stuff is helping other women - because it's awful. I would never wish it on anybody. Yeah, so but it's much better now. So I know even though it's hard bringing it up, I'll be okay.

This comment illuminates the extant research showing that most participants in research on traumatic experiences indicate that the benefits outweigh the costs (Campbell et al., 2010; DePrince & Chu, 2008; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Hamberger et al., 2020; Jaffe et al., 2015; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Newman et al., 2006; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). Michelle's comment above also aligns with the majority of participants' experiences in another way. Being able to help other women by using their knowledge to create change was the most common benefit mentioned for participats in the study. We explore this next.

Helping Other Women – "I am Doing this for the Coming Generations"

Several survivors reported that contributing to the greater good was a reason that the benefits of research participation outweighed the costs. These women hoped they could

use their experiences to help other women. Jessica said it was hard to talk about what happened to her, but she was motivated to help others, "It was tough to bring up stuff, you know? But at the same time, if it can help people in the future, to make it easier, I think that's important." Similarly, Anaya expressed that it was difficult to talk about her experiences of domestic violence, but she wanted to do this to benefit future generations of girls. She said:

Of course, it's a big emotional - like overwhelming for me when you put your heart out and all those things, and it gives me an impact, but on the other hand that's okay. I am doing this for the coming generations. I really wanted that kind of society when children, they don't even imagine that okay, somebody can slap someone. I know it's not possible in these coming years - five or ten years - but still, a time is coming when a male can't stop a girl talking by just slapping her. Yeah, I really pray for that. I don't want any girl, whatever I have been going through, I say that no girl should go through all this - whatever I have been.

Amahle discussed a similar motive for participating in the research. Empathizing with other survivors, Amahle reflected that having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder might make it difficult for some women to participate in research. Even then, feeling that they are preventing violence might make it worth the upset. She said:

It depends on the person and the level of like PTSD they may have. In my case, I don't, and I just want to make it better for other people in the future. So I think that people who have been kind of abused actually are very supportive of each other, and so we would generally want to do something to help other people not have to go through these things. So even if someone does have PTSD or something it might, they might be able to get some value from feeling like they're actually in some way contributing to someone else not having, or having it in the same way.

The above quotations reiterate that being upset or emotional when discussing abuse is not necessarily harmful. As Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) argue, "Even if questions remind participants of upsetting events, the feelings that come up are not necessarily overwhelming or even completely undesirable" (p. 221). These women indicate that discussing abuse is worth it even if it is difficult or emotional. It is worth considering that REC and researchers' fears about upsetting participants mirror some participants' association of emotion with weakness. Perhaps normalising

distress and high emotion as normal responses to trauma can reduce the stigma of women's emotions.

Women who reported that the interviews did not upset them also expressed that helping others is empowering. Isabella explained:

> I'm actually happy because if it's going to help someone in future, I'm more than happy to speak up about it. Because I feel like I'm not a crying mess. It's kind of empowering.

Rebecca also indicated that taking part in an interview was a positive experience. She said:

> It's actually been a bit of a relief to talk about it and know that the information that I give you is going to help somebody else who might be in my situation. So turning a negative into a positive is great.

Like Rebecca, Catalina also wanted to turn what had happened to her into something positive that she could use to help others. She said:

> I feel as if my purpose in life, I've been looking to see how I can help others. That's just what I've always wanted to do. I want to help another human being who is helpless and doesn't know where to go for help... you know, or are scared. So I like the feeling of knowing that I can help someone in that situation.

Josie said that she did not feel upset by the interview. Like Catalina, she saw participating in research as a way to help others:

> I'm one of those people that I like to help others. I did lots of volunteer work in my life because it is good that - if I can help somebody with my experience, why not. Yeah, I think it's a great idea. I feel that this is a good cause and I think it's great that someone is really caring about stuff like this. Yes, I'm really glad actually and I think a lot of people should help. That's the only way that you can help others in the future.

The motivation to participate in research on violence against women to help other women has been connected to the feminist and anti-rape movements, where women sharing their individual experiences of male violence was used as part of consciousness-raising, building knowledge about the collective experiences of survivors and helping frame it as a social problem with structural roots (Downes et al., 2014). The interaction of survivors' helping and advocacy work with their own healing is a new contribution of our research to the literature on ethics and trauma research.

Rejecting Victim-Shaming – "I have Nothing to Hide"

Several women mentioned that participating in the research was consistent with their belief in being open and honest about their experiences. At the same time, they expressed empathy for other women whose experiences may differ and respect for their agency in making that choice. When asked if she would recommend other survivors participate in research, Charlotte said:

> It depends on their experience, I guess, and their tolerance for talking about it. I just talk about it to everyone and I'm just like, yeah, this is what's happening. So yeah, it all just depends. I mean, if you're a secret - if you're like a secretive sort of quiet person, then maybe talking to someone is good and if you're used to talking to people then do it, but if you don't want to, then don't.

Elizabeth and Georgia felt that participating in the interviews was about getting things out in the open. Elizabeth said, "I believe I'm quite an open person, I have nothing to hide and if it's going to help anybody…." Georgia said, "I think it's a good idea for them to be able to speak about it if they need to. Get it off their chest." Research on disclosure of sexual abuse indicates that non-disclosure may have negative implications for victims. However, many survivors are afraid to disclose as they fear negative reactions (Gries et al., 2000; Morris et al., 2012; Ullman, 2002). Research can provide a safe opportunity to disclose abuse without judgment. We discuss this more in the next section.

Empowerment – "It's Very Empowering"

Jade, Nicole, and Sarah said participating in the research was a positive experience because they felt heard and that the interviewer did not judge them. All three women spoke about how being a survivor of domestic violence is a silencing experience, so being able to talk to someone and feel their stories mattered was empowering for them. For Jade, the experience of being interviewed was challenging, but that was outweighed by having her story heard. She said:

> I think talking about it is always - it's hard to talk about but it's kind of good to talk about it too because it's nice to be able to tell my story and feel like somebody is not judging me.

Likewise, Nicole said that being a domestic abuse survivor was isolating, particularly the lack of understanding of technology-facilitated abuse, so being believed and heard as part of the interview process was important to her. Nicole explained:

> It's okay with me to talk about it. It's nice to be heard about it. I think, like I said to you before, that I sometimes feel alone in the emotional abuse side of it and that nobody recognizes that they - very few people seem to recognize the abuse you can get still over your phone.

Sarah described her experience participating in the research as empowering. She also clarified that the abusers' actions are what is upsetting rather than research about it. Sarah said:

> It's very empowering because when you're a survivor of domestic violence, we're silenced all the time, and a lot of the times you're not believed, you have to constantly prove your story, give evidence. So it's so important that survivors are given the opportunity to tell their stories, because it just keeps happening otherwise if we're not given an opportunity to speak. So research like this is extremely important. And it certainly is not upsetting because asking these questions, if it's upsetting, it's because we're living with it not the questions - it's the situation again from the perpetrator, it's not asking questions that I think would be ever upsetting.

The comments above support the extant research on the benefits of disclosing abuse to a supportive and non-judgmental listener (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2010; Gries et al., 2000; Lutgendorf & Antoni, 1999; Hamberger et al., 2020; Ullman & Filipas, 2005). Sarah's comment refocusing our attention on the abusers as the source of distress is a useful reminder. There is a tendency of even well-meaning researchers and RECs to problematize survivors' normal reactions to abuse rather than abusers' behavior. The themes discussed above reveal survivors' perceptions of the benefits of participating in research. The next section addresses the issue of research timing.

Importance of Timing "I Think the Timing's Really Important"

Due to the nature of the services that assisted with recruitment, the two cohorts of participants were at different stages of their journeys. Participants reflected that timing and agency were critical to the decision to participate in research. Two women recruited via the women's legal service thought that they might have felt it was too upsetting to be part of a research study if they had been asked earlier. For example, Jessica explained that while the interview brought up difficult things, she was ready to talk about these issues as she had had time to process these experiences. She explained:

> I think something like this is important, as difficult as it is to talk about it. I think, you know, and people need to be encouraged, even if it is tough and brings some stuff up. I mean, obviously, I've been going through this for some time. If you were to contact me six months ago, eight months ago, it might have been a different situation, because I think I wouldn't have dealt with certain stuff up until that point.

Jia agreed that timing was important. However, she was much closer to the period of separation than Jessica. It had only been about two months since leaving the man who abused her. She indicated that talking about her experiences with services had made her feel better. Jia said:

> I think the timing's really important. I think at the moment's a good timing, because I cannot put this thing down, because it - it happened in September, so it's already roughly about two months, so I get off - get out from this terrible thing, so I can sit down and to share my experience. Before, before I came today, and I have been to, like, several lawyers in the service here, and it's another voluntary service, so I talk to them. So, it made me feel better. The more I talk, I feel okay. It's like, get out of it.

These quotations point to the need to consider the timing of engaging in research. Survivors' agency in determining whether or not to participate in research should be respected, as it is an individual decision and preference which may vary from woman to woman. While the available research indicates that even participating in trauma-related research immediately after an event carries a low risk of distress and primarily positive appraisal of research participation (Griffin et al., 1997, 2003; Kassam-Adams & Newman, 2002; Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000), approaching survivors during a crisis or the immediate aftermath may be less fruitful for participants and researchers. As we noted earlier, the court support program participants produced shorter and more fragmented interviews. From a practical standpoint, this made it more difficult for the research team to code the interviews and identify example quotations to use in publications.

Discussion

We contend that RECs' focus on the potential harms of asking research participants about life experiences shared by a significant portion of the population, such as domestic violence, incorrectly assume that gender-based abuse is rare. This reinforces harmful stereotypes about abuse by suggesting that survivors (and perpetrators) are somehow unusual or different from the rest of the population. The prevalence of gender-based violence and other adverse life experiences should raise the question of whether research on these issues is more traumatic than participants' everyday experiences.

Research on the implications of asking about violence and abuse raises questions about the costs of *not* asking about it (DePrince & Freyd, 2006). Failing to ask about violence and abuse in research where it is very likely to be relevant, such as studies that investigate outcomes of divorce, violence prevention, or mental health, omits valuable information that can help us understand sociological and psychological phenomena (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Mathews et al., 2022). As our findings show, asking participants about violence and abuse can significantly benefit them and the broader public. These findings can be used to inform future research and inform REC policy and practice.

Implications for Practice

Our findings have direct implications for RECs and researchers. As Newman et al. (2006) put it, "Ethical decision-making about trauma-related studies requires a flexible approach that counters assumptions and biases about victims, assures a favorable ethical cost-benefit ratio, and promotes advancement of knowledge that can benefit survivors of traumatic stress" (p. 29). We argue that research ethics committees should not presume that research on violence, abuse, or trauma is inherently risky for participants. Our findings indicate that treating survivors as a uniquely vulnerable population is unwarranted and may harm the very groups they're intended to protect. Survivors are, as Sarah emphasizes, "silenced all the time." As Jade remarked, being able to "tell my story" without judgement and "be heard" by researchers is important. REC recommendations that seek to protect survivors based on assumptions about their vulnerability rather than evidence can unintentionally replicate the silencing they encounter in other contexts.

Asking research participants about their experience with the study is good practice. It can provide valuable opportunities to improve research practice by identifying key skills and strategies for researchers and RECs (see for example Campbell et al., 2009). Researchers can take advantage of existing tools, such as Kassam-Adams and Newman's (2002) Response to Research Participation Questionnaire,"

to collect data about participant experiences and build on current knowledge. Qualitative research is also important to building an understanding of what survivors find beneficial and challenging about research participation and why. This is essential information to guide appropriate measures to minimize the risk of negative experiences with research while maximizing the benefits.

Despite requirements to meet REC conditions to receive institutional approval, researchers can push back against arbitrary and inappropriate demands when conducting research with survivors. It may be ethically necessary to do so. For example, some Australian RECs demand that interview transcripts be sent to participants for verification. In addition to adding to the labour burden imposed on participants, this practice introduces unnecessary safety and privacy risks that would not otherwise exist. Requiring the collection of identifying and correspondence information precludes anonymity and introduces an unnecessary risk of interception of sensitive communication. Researchers can refuse recommendations by explaining why they are inappropriate, asking for the research evidence that is the basis for the recommendation, or requesting the location of specific requirements in their national research ethics policies. We recommend that researchers who study gender-based violence share information and seek advice from their peers about ethics processes and challenges in order to learn from one another. In addition, we encourage others to incorporate questions about research participation in their studies and publish about their experiences with RECs.

Conclusion

This article investigated survivors' perspectives on participating in an interview as part of a study about technology-facilitated domestic violence. In line with the prior research, some of the women reported feeling emotional when thinking and talking about the abuse they had experienced in a research interview yet experienced participation as positive. Participants described beneficial outcomes including having the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, help other women avoid violence and abuse, and have their experiences validated by a non-judgmental listener. Our findings align with the previous research and provide new insights about the importance of helping others to survivors. It is worth noting that while the research process itself may not be re-traumatizing, and participants perceive it as beneficial, participation in research may be more productive for all involved if survivors have more distance from the immediate crisis.

Limitations

Like all research, this study has limitations. The sample size for this study was small, so a limited number of responses were gathered, limiting the diversity of opinions represented. However, it is necessary to ask these questions in a range of research studies to understand participants' needs and experiences. While recruitment in partnership with community organizations had many benefits, this approach excluded those who had not accessed formal support services and may have different experiences. As the interviewer asked the questions about participation, it is possible that participant responses were shaped by their desire to please the researcher. However, participants were quite open about the negative and positive implications of research participation for themselves and reflected on what others' experiences might be. Several women discussed their experiences and mentioned that other women's needs and perceptions might differ. As these participants observed, survivors' autonomy and judgment about participation are paramount.

Future Research

This study suggests directions for additional research. Academics could build on this research by working collaboratively with survivors to design survivor-centered research topics, informed consent documents, research methods, and approaches to safely sharing findings. Future scholarship might investigate the content of REC guidance for research on violence and abuse to see whether it aligns with the *Research Integrity Framework for Domestic Violence and Abuse* (Women's Aid et al., 2020) guidelines for best practice. Additionally, documentation of actual adverse effects (which is already collected by RECs in annual reviews and on project completion) could provide an evidence base to guide practice instead of relying on stereotypes about what effects might befall victims of violence who engage in research. Following Campbell et al. (2010), more research could investigate how intentionally adopting trauma-informed research methods can enhance the benefits of research participation for survivors and avoid harm. Finally, as Alaggia et al. (2012) argue, disclosure of domestic violence is an essential step in getting help, yet it is under-studied. Scholars could use longitudinal approaches to study survivors' experiences participating in research and other disclosure sites to understand how survivor experiences and narratives change over time.

Given the substantial effects of domestic violence and abuse in women's lives, failing to ask about abuse might be a more significant risk than asking about it, causing researchers to misinterpret or miss information directly pertinent to the phenomena under investigation (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Edwards et al., 2007). Thoughtfully developed and executed research on domestic violence can provide opportunities for survivors to share their insights about their life experiences. These insights are valuable to researchers and policymakers and can contribute to improved responses to domestic violence and abuse. Asking participants about experiences that might otherwise be hidden, and valuing survivors' contribution to knowledge, can potentially promote positive outcomes for research, survivors, and women's lives.

Declarations

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