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## Practicing ethical research to empower sexual assault survivors in higher education: An international perspective

Amber L. Giffin

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Mitsunori Misawa

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

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# **PRACTICING ETHICAL RESEARCH TO EMPOWER SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Amber Giffin, Mitsunori Misawa**

*(University of Tennessee, Knoxville, UNITED STATES)*

## **Abstract**

Sexual violence is a major global health concern and sociocultural issue (World Health Organization, 2021), with around one-third of sexual assault survivors developing mental health issues (Carey et al., 2018). However, there is a dearth in research about sexual assault survivors in higher education. Therefore, this paper will explore how researchers can ethically empower sexual assault survivors through research processes in higher education. The questions guiding this study are: 1) What are the current strategies used by researchers to ethically empower sexual assault survivors in higher education? 2) How do researchers employ these strategies in practice?

Keywords: Sexual assault, higher education, research practices, ethical research, empowerment

Sexual violence is a major global health concern and sociocultural issue (World Health Organization, 2021). In the United States alone, an estimated six million people over the age of 12 experienced sexual assault in 2018 (Department of Justice, 2018). Around one-third of sexual assault survivors develop mental health issues, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and substance abuse issues (Carey et al., 2018). Research initiatives, in addition to the crime's continued prevalence and long-lasting damage to the survivors, have led to a substantial amount of research being conducted on the topic (Backes, 2013). Furthermore, due to the significant and ongoing psychological harm endured by sexual assault survivors, they are perceived as a vulnerable research population (Campbell et al., 2010).

Conducting research with vulnerable populations comes with a unique set of ethical challenges and considerations. Like the United States, many countries require their post-secondary institutions to maintain institutional review boards to ensure that the research conducted is ethical and centred on the human subject's or participant's physical and psychological wellbeing (Roffee & Waling, 2017). However, when researching vulnerable populations, such as sexual assault survivors, investigators face unique ethical dilemmas regarding confidentiality, participant safety, community empowerment, and research authenticity. In addition to these ethical considerations, those who research sexual assault survivors in higher education also have further federal and institutional policies to follow, such as the Title IX guidelines that dictate how sexual assault is handled in institutions of higher education in the United States.

While research studies must focus on participant safety, many social justice researchers also strive to empower the communities with whom they work. Throughout the years some social science researchers have created and employed successful and empowering research designs when conducting research with vulnerable populations. For instance, when interviewing sexual assault survivors, the outcome for the participants can be unpredictable (Campbell, et. al, 2010). It is important for social science researchers to make

sure that the research process is ethical for sexual assault victims and that the research design, including data collection methods, is empowering.

Considering the prevalence of sexual assault and the unique and challenging nature of conducting research with sexual assault survivors, it is not surprising that there is a robust body of literature regarding this topic. However, there are significantly fewer articles that discuss the process of conducting research with sexual assault survivors in higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how researchers can ethically empower sexual assault survivors through research processes in higher education. The questions guiding this study are: 1) What are the current strategies used by researchers to ethically empower sexual assault survivors in higher education? 2) How do researchers employ these strategies in practice when studying sexual assault survivors in higher education?

### **Literature Review**

A literature review was conducted in order to provide context and to discover some of the ways that researchers empower sexual assault survivors in higher education. The first section of this literature review will discuss sexual assault as gender-based violence. Next, the argument will be made that, based on the definitions in the literature, sexual assault survivors are a vulnerable research population. The final section of this literature review will explore research practices that scholars have used to ethically empower their participants while still conducting rigorous and trustworthy research.

#### **Sexual Assault as Gender-Based Violence**

Violence against women is a global issue affecting most countries, and sexual assault is one of the main types of violence committed against women (UNESCO, 2019; World Health Organization, 2021). Sexual assault disproportionately affects women regardless of age, geographic location, education level, or socio-economic status and is rooted in gender-based social structures rather than random, individual acts (UNESCO, 2019). In the United States alone, a person is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds, and 90% of those assaulted are women (Department of Justice, 2019). While it is important to acknowledge that sexual assault is a form of gender-based violence, it is imperative to understand that sexual violence can happen to anyone, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Whether the survivor identifies as a woman or not does not negate the long-lasting physical and psychological effects of sexual assault, which can be devastating (UNESCO, 2019; World Health Organization, 2021).

#### **Sexual Assault Survivors as a Vulnerable Population**

Before beginning the discussion about ways to empower sexual assault survivors through research, it is important to first understand how and why, in this paper, sexual assault survivors are classified as members of a vulnerable population. This classification is not done with the intent to make their inclusion in research more difficult (Glesne, 2016), but rather to acknowledge the fact that discussing traumatic memories during a research interview comes with increased risks. While the qualifications for being considered a member of a vulnerable population differ from country to country, in general, research participants are thought of as members of a vulnerable population if they are at increased risk for adverse reactions from participating in the research project and require a higher level of monitoring throughout the research process to ensure their safety (Alexander et al., 2018). Those who do not meet the qualifications for vulnerable research populations are considered vulnerable if they are involved in research about their experiences regarding a sensitive topic (Alexander et al., 2018). Therefore, conducting interviews with sexual assault survivors regarding their assault and the aftermath of that assault would be considered researching a sensitive topic, and thus would classify the sexual assault survivors participating in the research as a vulnerable population. While conducting research with sexual assault survivors

about their experiences comes with higher risks, if the research is conducted in an empathetic and empowering manner, then the survivors who participate are likely to be satisfied with their research experience. Alexander et al. (2018) found that most participants from vulnerable populations who participate in research are generally pleased that they participated, even if they did have some adverse reactions due to the research topic. This is also true of sexual assault survivors. Campbell and colleagues (2010) found that the majority of their research participants found the interview process to be a "helpful, supportive, and insightful experience" (p. 60).

### **Empowering Research Methods**

While there are many ways to ethically empower research participants while conducting research, this paper focuses mainly on research concepts and methods that are rooted in feminist theory, a branch of critical theory, due to the fact that critical researchers engage in research as a political act that uncovers and challenges dominant value systems that oppress various identities and groups (Glesne, 2016). Furthermore, critical researchers often "advocate understanding from the perspective of the exploited and oppressed" (Glesne, 2016, p. 11). Foster-Fishman et al. (2005) state that what makes research empowering is its ability to offer opportunities to engage in the construction of knowledge and knowledge reflection in order to deepen political understandings. Lather (1988) highlights the importance of producing knowledge that is both emancipatory and empowering for the research participants. Since sexual assault is considered a gender-based crime, this paper focuses on feminist research practices. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of these techniques, this section discusses the concepts and components of feminist research and explores how photovoice, a method based on feminist theory (Wang & Burris, 1997), may be used as a method to empower sexual assault survivors through research.

Feminist research is often connected with critical research due to the oppression and exploitation that women experience (Glesne, 2016). Many feminists critique positivist and postpositivist research due to its focus on objective truth, which inherently privileges masculine ways of knowing; therefore, feminist research is mostly conducted in qualitative research methodologies. However, some feminist researchers do engage in quantitative and mixed methods research (Cokley & Awad, 2013; Krause et al., 2017; O'Rielly & Kiyimba, 2015). According to O'Rielly and Kiyimba (2015), feminist research has three defining characteristics: 1) feminist research should be conducted for women, not on women; 2) feminist research often uses innovative methodologies through feminists' challenge of conventional ways of collecting and analysing data; and 3) feminist research is focused on issues that are related to social justice and broader social change. Glesne (2016) adds that feminist researchers are aware of the power dynamics between the researcher and researched and advocate for critical self-reflection throughout the research process.

Furthermore, feminist research is collaborative and participatory in nature, which allows participants to have an active role in the research and to be seen as experts rather than simply having research conducted on them (Krause et al., 2017). Campbell et al. (2010) advocate for providing information to their participants to help normalize their experiences. Allowing the participant to know that they are not alone and not the only person to have experienced something is an important feminist interviewing technique that provides comfort to the participants (Campbell et al., 2010). Some ethical research practices that are prominent in feminist research include minimizing power differentials between the researcher and researched, designing research to build on shared knowledge between participants and researchers, and centring participant experiences (Krause et al., 2017). Each of these components of feminist research make it an excellent choice for research conducted with sexual assault survivors.

The components of feminist research can be incorporated into a variety of methodologies. Additionally, feminist researchers have created data collection and analysis methods that empower research participants. One of the more popular methods is photovoice, which has been used as a therapeutic intervention as well as a tool of empowerment when conducting research with sexual assault survivors (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). Photovoice is based on Freire's critical pedagogical techniques and feminist theory (Wang & Burris, 1997) and has three goals: 1) "to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns" (p. 370), 2) to facilitate critical dialogue regarding community issues through small and large group discussions, and 3) "to reach policymakers" (p. 370). The photovoice process is similar to photo elicitation, but instead of the researcher showing participants photos in order to begin a conversation, the participants decide what photos they will take (Rolbiecki, 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). Therefore, the participants are empowered to choose what they discuss during their interview sessions, which minimizes the power differentials between the researcher and the researched. When Rolbiecki et al. (2016) used photovoice as a narrative intervention, they asked their participants to plan a private showing of their photos and invite people of their choosing to attend. Among the attendees were the participants' friends and family, as well as policymakers. After the private showing, the participants took the initiative to become even more engaged in the fight against sexual assault on university campuses and held a public viewing of their photos for sexual assault awareness month (Rolbiecki et al., 2016).

## **Discussion**

A review of the current literature showed that one of the more prevalent approaches to conducting empowering and ethical research with sexual assault is to incorporate components from feminist research into existing methodologies. Engaging in critical reflection, being aware of power dynamics between the researcher and researched, trying to equalize the power balance between researcher and researched, designing research built on shared knowledge, and ensuring that the participants understand that they are not alone in their experiences (Campbell et al., 2010; Glesne, 2016; Krause et al., 2017) are practices that can be incorporated into qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods studies. These practices will centre the survivors' experiences and empower them throughout the research process by encouraging them to be active participants in knowledge construction.

Feminist-based methods, such as photovoice, further empower research participants by allowing them to choose what they photograph and discuss throughout the interview process and by inviting them to become agents of change by providing them with methods to contact policymakers and stakeholders (Rolbiecki et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). This method allows participants to have complete control over what they discuss in their interviews due to the fact that they choose which images they are going to capture prior to the discussions (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). Thus, photovoice disrupts the researcher/researched hierarchy that is present in most research methods. Photovoice also includes a social action component that allows participants the opportunity to reach policymakers and other stakeholders regarding the issues they are being interviewed about (Rolbiecki et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). In fact, photovoice's goal of reaching policy makers helps marginalized groups, such as sexual assault survivors, reclaim their voices through the sharing of their photographs, not only with the researchers for interpretation, but also with the larger community through photo exhibits (Rolbiecki et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997).

## Implications and Conclusion

Sexual assault is a global health concern (World Health Organization, 2021), and due to the long-term physical and psychological impacts of sexual assault, survivors of the crime are considered a vulnerable research population. While there is a large amount of research regarding sexual assault and how it affects survivors, there are not many articles regarding how to conduct ethical research that empowers sexual assault survivors. Therefore, this paper explored relevant literature to gain a better understanding of how researchers can ethically empower sexual assault survivors through research processes in higher education, with the aim to contribute to the existing international scholarship regarding conducting ethical and empowering research with vulnerable populations. Additionally, this information will also be useful to researchers who work with adult sexual assault survivors outside of higher education, as well as to adult educators who engage the community in sexual assault education and research. Utilizing the practices discussed in this paper will lead to a more equitable power balance between the researcher and researched and empower sexual assault survivors to share their stories so that others from around the world can learn from their experiences.

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