



Conducting Virtual Interviews with Sexual Assault Survivors

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Background

- Little work on researchers' experiences conducting interviews with sexual assault survivors during COVID-19 pandemic (but see Keen et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021).
- Research shows survivors of sexual assault (SA) experience loss of control when victimized (Frazier, 2003), so restoring control and safety is important for researchers to build into all aspects of their research methods (see Brzuzy et al., 1997; Campbell, 2022).



Background

- Potential benefits of virtual interviews
 - enhance participation
 - allay confidentiality concerns
 - improve access for underserved survivors
 - lower cost – time, travel, money
- Potential costs of virtual interviews
 - difficulty establishing rapport
 - less interview depth, disclosure, length
 - limited nonverbal cues
 - tech issues



My Past Experience & Role

- Mixed-methods psychology researcher
- Wrote chapter on interviewing SA victims
 - In Ullman, S.E. (2023) 2nd Ed., *Talking about Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Interviewed survivors, informal supports, therapists, and advocates in past work (Ullman, 2005).
- Developed, conducted, & transcribed interviews, did case summaries, field notes, and a research log about my experiences.
- Content analysis, thematic analysis, multiple case study methods.



My experience with virtual interviews

- Large NIH grant project pivoted to virtual surveys and interviews in Fall 2020.
- Recruitment via phone and/or email, no face-to-face (F2F) contact during the interview phase.
- Consents & surveys conducted via Qualtrics with SA survivors and informal support (family/friend/partner) told about their assault.
- Survivors and supporters indicating interest emailed consents for interviews via Qualtrics.
- Zoom interviews done as convenient for participants (paid via Venmo or Amazon GC).



Methodology

- Study goal: To understand SA survivors' experiences disclosing assault to informal supports.
- Dyadic mixed methods study - recruitment of SA survivors and supporters they told
- Dyads each complete online surveys about disclosing/hearing about survivor's SA.
- Following surveys, dyads interviewed, survivor & supporter re their experiences.



Themes explored in interviews

- Disclosure experiences and social reactions
- Relationship of survivor and supporter
- Impact of the disclosure on each person and relationship
- Supporter efforts to encourage survivor help seeking
- Impacts on the supporter and their support seeking
- Role of alcohol in these experiences



Strategies for managing virtual interviews

- Consent was obtained via Qualtrics link in email to participant.
- Interview scheduled by email with both survivor and supporter after both consented.
- Zoom links sent and reminders the day before interview to each dyad member.



Day of zoom interview process

- Day of interview – describe interview's focus linking back to survey they already completed
- Explain confidentiality re interview content and their identity, including confidentiality of survivor and SP dyad information.
- Explain download/deidentifying of names/places in audio zoom transcript
- Check again if okay to record and their preference re video.
- Review logistics, including if any disruption.



Logistical issues

- Interviewer stated: Let me know and I'll let you know also if can't hear each other anytime, use chat as needed.
- If disconnected, try to log back into zoom or use study email if needed.
- I will check in, but let me know anytime if you need a break.
- Ask if any questions, and to ask at any time if they have a question or concern.



Experience with zoom interviews

- Most interviewees showed up, some had to be rescheduled
- Some had bandwidth problems, network instability so phone dial-in was used as a backup to the zoom as needed
- Interviews averaged 45 minutes (range 30 min – 1 hour+)
- Some interviews were shorter
- Harder to tell how they were doing, so I asked periodically if they are okay as with F2F



Experiential comments

- Most seemed comfortable talking on zoom, some were briefer or did not wish to talk about the SA in detail.
- Compared to one past dyadic F2F interview study with survivors and SP's, these were more focused, somewhat shorter, and in some cases less detailed.
- As with F2F interviews, survivor is given the choice whether she wants to talk about the SA and how much at start of interview.



Conclusions

- Few problems arose with conducting individual interviews of SA survivors and informal supports.
- Use of email, Qualtrics, and zoom for doing consent forms and interviews worked fine.
- Participants had access to referral resources via an online link in Qualtrics when doing survey/interview consent, but these were also offered as appropriate at end of interviews.



Rapport and perceptions of comfort

- Survivors and their informal supports seemed comfortable.
- We did not ask them about how the interview experience on zoom was for them, including how they felt about it.
- Meta-studies are needed to obtain feedback from participants ideally soon after the interview.



Conclusion

- Virtual zoom interviews are feasible for SA survivors and their informal supports.
- Fewer no-shows, lower cost, and easier access to participate are benefits compared with face-to-face interviews.
- Building rapport and connecting with participants especially on a sensitive interview topic is more challenging.
- Doing mock interviews and having past experience working with survivors is helpful.



Recommended Reading

- Brzuzy, S., Ault, A., & Segal, E. A. (1997). Conducting qualitative interviews with women survivors of trauma. *Affilia, 12*, 76-83.
- Campbell, R. M. (2002). *Emotionally-involved: The impact of researching rape*. NY: Routledge.
- Frazier, P. A. (2003). Perceived control and distress following sexual assault: A longitudinal test of a new model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 1257-1269.
- Keen, S., Lomeli-Rodriguez, M., & Joffe, H. (2022). From challenge to opportunity: Virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 21*, 1-11.
- Roberts, J., Pavlakis, A., & Richards, M. (2021). It's more complicated than it seems: Virtual qualitative research in the COVID-19 era. *International Journal of Qualitative Research, 20*, 1-13.
- Ullman, S.E. (2005). Interviewing clinicians and advocates who work with sexual assault survivors: A personal perspective on moving from quantitative to qualitative methods. *Violence Against Women, 11*, 1-27.
- Ullman, S. E. (2023). 2nd Edition. Conducting interviews with sexual assault survivors. In *Talking about Sexual assault: Society's response to survivors*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.



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