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Men's perspectives on participating in violence against women perpetration research

Yandisa Sikweyiya, Rachel Jewkes and Elizabeth Dartnall

abstract

This *Article* presents findings of a qualitative study conducted in Soshanguve Township in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The qualitative study had two purposes, first it was to assess men's willingness to participate in violence against women perpetration studies and, secondly it explored the views and experiences of Black African men on participating in a study asking about their perpetration of violence against women. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 adult Black African men. Seven of the interviews were done before, and 11 after the data collection was completed for a larger quantitative gender-based violence survey. Overall, men expressed positive feelings about participating in the survey, and displayed a degree of openness in disclosing violence perpetration experiences. Breach of confidentiality was however viewed as a major risk by men, with many fearing potential negative consequences of talking about their perpetration of violence against women, giving rise to feelings of anxiety and discomfort after having done so. A particular sub-group of men reported strong emotional reactions and distress when asked about their violent behaviour. This distress was not long-lasting and not perceived as deleterious by these men. We argue that asking men about their violence perpetration experiences, in a research context, is acceptable to men, not emotionally harmful, and does not place them at an elevated risk of harm when research is done ethically. We conclude that violence perpetration studies with men should be done with strict adherence to ethics codes guiding the conduct of research on violence perpetration.

keywords

Men, violence perpetration, research participation, risk, South Africa

Introduction

Population based studies conducted in South Africa reveal high levels of rape perpetration reported by men against women, with between 27.6% (Jewkes *et al*, 2009) to 37.4% (Machisa *et al*, 2011) of South African men reported having raped a woman. These statistics describe a concerning picture about the state of violence against women (VAW) in South Africa, and highlight an urgent need for evidence

based responses to inform interventions to prevent sexual violence (Redpath *et al*, 2008). To better understand men's violence against women, including the reasons and motives for perpetrating this violence, more empirical population based research with men is essential (Waldram, 2007; Jewkes *et al*, 2010). Asking men about perpetration of violence against women in research is viewed by many as a particularly sensitive and risky form of research (Jewkes *et al*, 2012), with the potential to harm participants

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in a way that is different from other areas of community-based studies (Sikweyiya and Jewkes, 2011). Very little research exists on men's perceptions and experiences of research participation, especially in the field of violence against women. This gap in the literature poses a challenge to both research ethics committees and researchers, in terms of understanding the risk-benefit ratios of such studies (Savell *et al*, 2006).

In terms of ethics, concerning issues highlighted in the literature include research participants having strong emotional (eg distress and sadness) responses to sensitive questions (Johnson and Benight, 2003), the potential for a breach of confidentiality and the resultant adverse consequences, and the legal implications of disclosing an illegal act (Jewkes *et al*, 2012). In violence against women perpetration research there is a particular risk of men being stigmatised and labelled as women abusers and rapists for participating in such studies, if for example, the focus of the research is known to others in the community (Hearn *et al*, 2007). This in turn could lead to shame and embarrassment and being ridiculed or harmed by others (Dickson-Swift *et al*, 2008: CIOMS, 2002 Guideline 21).

To date, limited studies have explored the reasons why men enroll in research and what their experiences are of participating in studies on sexual violence and intimate partner violence perpetration (Edwards *et al*, 2009). The lack of ethics research around this topic is worrisome given the amount of research that has been conducted in the area of violence against women over the years (Fontes, 2004), and an increasing focus of research on men's sexual violence perpetration behaviour.

Understanding what motivates men to participate in violence against women perpetration research, the barriers to participation and how they experience such research is important for strengthening the ethics of violence against women perpetration research, and for the protection of men as research participants (Johnson and Benight, 2003). In this *Article* we explore men's perceptions and reactions to participating in a study which included questions on men's violence perpetration, their perceived risks and benefits of participating in the study, and the emotional and psychological

impact of being asked to talk about perpetration experiences.

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Methodology

The qualitative data presented in this *Article* were derived from an ethnographic study that was conducted in 2010 in Soshanguve Township, North of Pretoria over six months. The main findings of the ethnographic study are presented by Sikweyiya and Jewkes (in press). Whereas in the ethnographic study, both women and men were interviewed about their experiences of participating in studies that included asking them about experiencing (for women) and perpetrating (for men) various forms of interpersonal violence, the analysis presented in this *Article* focuses only on men, exploring their perceptions and experiences of being research subjects in violence perpetration focused studies.

Participants and research questions

To obtain the data, a total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with adult Black African men in Soshanguve. Seven of the participants were interviewed prior to enrolling in a large population based gender-based violence survey (see Machisa *et al*, 2011). The other 11 men were interviewed after they had participated in the survey. The purpose of the pre- and post-qualitative interviews was formative, aimed to solicit men's thoughts of participating in violence perpetration focused studies, whether they found the survey participation helpful or harmful, whether there were any adverse experiences resulting from survey participation and whether they had at some point regretted participating and if so, why?

The data were collected using in-depth semi-structured and unstructured conversational interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the

participants. Additional to this, during the first three months of the ethnographic study, the first author lived fulltime in the community. This enabled him to conduct participant observation on the lives of the people in the community and other issues of interest to the study, and he documented his observations as notes in his diary. His field notes were used as data in this analysis and also aided in interpreting the findings.

Analysis

The data were analysed inductively following a grounded theory approach (Hennink *et al*, 2011). The first author led the data analysis. He began by reading the transcripts familiarising himself with the content. Thereafter, he organised the text from the transcripts by grouping it according to themes. He then went through the data identifying open codes. He did this by breaking the sentences into small parts identifying several codes within the same sentence. At this early stage, he attempted to move up from the informants' words to label the codes (Dahlgren *et al*, 2004). He maintained consistency in labelling the codes so that it would be easy at the end to group similar codes together and produce categories (*ibid*). At this advanced stage of the analysis, authors came together and discussed the codes until we agreed about which codes seemed to fit together to form categories (Hennink *et al*, 2011). We then constructed concepts and the theory by finding connections between the codes and categories and, thereafter, identified the main category (Dahlgren *et al*, 2004; Hennink *et al*, 2011). The concepts and categories that emerged were discussed, debated and interpreted for meaning. Lastly, we compared our findings with existing literature and made the conclusions presented in this *Article* (Dahlgren *et al*, 2004).

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Medical Research Council's Ethics Committee, and the University of Witwatersrand's Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participants signed an informed consent document. The interviews were

conducted in the household in spaces that provided the most privacy as possible. To protect men's identities, the names of the participants used are pseudonyms, and all identifying information has been removed. No incentive was given to participants to partake in this study. We are not aware of any adverse events reported by participants as a result of their participation in this study.

Findings

Overall experience of being asked about violence

In the survey, men were asked if the experience of being asked about their health and behaviour was positive or negative. All 18 men described the experience of being asked about their health and behaviour, including perpetrating gender-based violence, as positive. For example, Mobutho, who had participated in the gender-based violence survey, reported feeling positive about his experience with the survey, saying that the topics discussed in the survey mattered to him and were relevant to his life. In his words:

"So my opinion is that, that research was good. I would give him [survey interviewer] 100% for doing that kind of research in order to help men...to improve their behaviours. So I was very happy with that research and I don't have a problem with it" (Mobutho).

Similarly, Rorisang and Thato in comments to follow show that they value research on social problems and experienced no issue in participating in the survey:

"I think it [the research] is needed...I mean that research talked about beating up women, doing drugs which are bad things" (Rorisang).

"I had no problem with it [survey] because they were mainly asking questions about domestic violence and stuff of which I felt was right to ask about" (Thato).

When asked how participation in this form of research was beneficial or positive, Vuyile said that it afforded him a chance to

talk about issues he does not normally talk about in his everyday life. In his own words:

“The good thing about it [survey], for me... was that I got this opportunity to express things that I never expressed because no one has ever asked me those questions before. But because of that survey I got that chance” (Vuyile).

A similar view was shared by Piet, he posited:

“With us black people we don’t have someone to just sit and talk to, so when things like this [research] comes you talk freely and just talk” (Piet).

Reactions to sensitive questions

While all men said that, overall, participating in research studies was a positive experience, some, albeit few, expressed discomfort with some of the actual questions asked in the survey. When asked what items caused them discomfort and why, Thabo said that the personal nature of the questions created anxiety for him.

“Ey I was scared, there he was asking me about personal things” (Thabo).

The response to questions asking whether men had ever perpetrated partner violence, the nature of their intimate relationships, and their criminal behaviour was, however, mixed. Some respondents felt discomfort with these questions, whilst others said they could talk about perpetrating violence against their partners, and found the topic important to discuss in research interviews. For example, Manqoba and Edwin explained that:

“Uhm, no it’s [intimate partner violence] not a problem and it’s not sensitive...; I’m okay to speak about it, like if there is a problem at home, let’s talk about it... If I was beating my wife, I won’t think of anything, I’ll tell you straight. I’d tell what happened, and how I did it” (Manqoba).

“It [partner violence]... , I would tell you the truth, like be open and tell what is happening and there is nothing else but to tell the truth” (Edwin).

This reported ease of discussing intimate partner violence perpetration is further highlighted in Kabelo’s response in which he shared stories of beating his girlfriend:

“I used to beat that woman a lot, I used to beat her severely, my brother; I would even beat her with a car antenna... even now I’m saying, I used to beat her” (Kabelo).

However, Kabelo was quick to note that this behaviour was in the past and not something that is happening currently. Further, whilst there was some openness in disclosing perpetration experiences, as already noted, participants said it was difficult to discuss experiences they deemed painful, degrading and traumatic. They expressed that their discomfort with selected questions, was brought about by the fear of being judged harshly or labelled negatively by the fieldworkers who were interviewing them in the survey.

Men with problematic histories and talking about violence

The analysis further explored the issue of which questions were sensitive and why, and which men perceived certain questions to be sensitive and embarrassing to discuss in research interviews. Analysis shows that those men who reported discomfort with certain violence related questions also reported perpetrating intimate partner violence. For example, Thabo, who said he had beaten his girlfriend when he suspected her of cheating on him, said he felt angry when asked about partner beatings in the survey as he thought it was a private matter. He explained:

“No it [survey] was okay, there was no problem. But you know where the problem was? When I started talking about uhm [partner violence], you see at that time? Yes I was a bit angry, but you would not notice that I’m angry” (Thabo).

This sub-group of men mentioned that the survey had made them reflect on these negative experiences, and this worried them. For example, Njabulo explained the difficulty he had in discussing his past criminal behaviour in the survey:

“Yes it was the questions about crime, do you understand me? I was very delinquent the time I was young, now I am 38 years old. I was very delinquent, and when he [survey interviewer] asked about delinquency in the community, it made me feel bad” (Njabulo).

However, the anxiety reported by these men seems to have been short lived. During the post-survey qualitative interviews, none of the men said they were currently worried or were still emotionally affected as a result of survey participation. Additional to this, when we asked them what form of help they needed to deal with survey related anxiety, they said that the negative emotions they had quickly faded after completing the survey. As such, they perceived no need for professional help. Mobutho’s narrative below is illustrative:

“Some of his questions had made me feel bad, at the end something that made me feel comfortable was to get that understanding that that guy who was here had a purpose and his purpose was to do research in order to compile something. So he was not here for nothing or he was not here as a spy, but he was here in order to get information for his job. So that realisation was the one that at least made me feel comfortable, even if some of his questions made me feel bad and so on” (Mobutho).

Perceived risks and concerns: Breach of confidentiality

The sub-group of men who reported discomfort with sensitive questions also said they were not candid in answering questions on their violence against women perpetration in the survey. Reasons given by these respondents for their lack of candidness included a perception that they might be judged harshly by the researcher and the possible negative ramifications if a breach of confidentiality occurred. This is illustrated in the quote below:

“It happens sometimes that people would be uncomfortable with it [reporting sexual or intimate partner violence to a researcher] because if he gives information to a researcher, when you take it

forward, it will be known that he is the one who gave that information. So I’d just tell him certain things, but not say those I’m not comfortable to share” (James).

This fear of potential negative consequences if confidentiality was breached, and the lack of trust in the research process, has potential consequences for how truthful respondents are when asked about such questions. For example, Thabo, who reported in the qualitative interviews to have beaten his girlfriend, told us that he did not report this in the survey as he feared that his information may reach authorities leading to criminal charges being laid against him. He discussed his fears with the interviewer below:

“Interviewer: At the time you told that man [survey fieldworker] that you have never beaten a woman, but you told me you have, why did you decide to do that at that time?”

Thabo: Eish, I thought of many things, I thought of police, . . . yes, maybe he is a private investigator using new techniques to get information from me, they are not asking me straight as ordinary policeman would do, rather they are using fresh techniques; do you understand me?”

Alternatively, Thabo’s narrative above may be demonstrating that men as research participants have agency and are able to protect themselves when they anticipate a risk. Supporting this interpretation, a number of men indicated that if they found a question uncomfortable they informed the researcher, whilst some chose not to answer certain questions, others said they concealed the information they were uncomfortable to discuss. Siphso explained:

“I was not sure how you are going to think of certain things I would tell you. In the first interview, I had concealed some of the things, but today I am open” (Siphso).

Siphso was interviewed twice by the first author. It was during the second interview, which he requested himself, that he disclosed that he was HIV positive. He had

concealed this information in the survey as well, as he feared negative judgement by the researchers and because of his mistrust of the researchers, at the time.

The respondents' agency to protect themselves in a research context is further demonstrated in Thato's narrative below:

"There were questions that impacted me like that [badly], but with some of them, there were times when I paused for a moment and then told him [survey interviewer] that 'you know what let's rather not go there' and it kept me thinking the whole day after he had left. I mean it would be something I had forgotten and it came back again" (Thato).

These narratives highlight the agency of research participants, and perhaps, run counter to the popular notion that research participants are powerless to protect themselves during research.

Discussion

Findings presented in this *Article* demonstrate the acceptability of and willingness by men to participate in research on perpetration of violence against women. This finding is consistent with the view of Waldram (2007: 964) that all humans "crave" for an opportunity to share their stories including problematic experiences. Our findings do however also show that certain items or topics do cause some men discomfort and unease, and particularly breach of confidentiality is a major concern for men participating in such studies. This finding supports findings reported by Sikweyiya *et al* (2007) where adult men demonstrated willingness to participate in a study which asked them about sexual violence perpetration, but also reported anxiety about their participation.

In this *Article* we have shown that sensitive questions can trigger strong emotional reaction, especially with men who have perpetrated violence against women or engaged in criminal behaviour. For example questions that concerned men's violent behaviours towards intimate partners were met with distress by men who report past intimate partner violence. It may be that asking these men about their perpetration behaviour indirectly invites them to reflect

on their own problematic experiences (Shaw, 2005). There is a body of research which discusses the potential impact of asking respondents about their perpetration behaviour. Thinkers like Dobash *et al* (2000) theorise that the act of asking men about their violent behaviours may be a critical intervention in itself, with men feeling shame about their behaviour and potentially acknowledging that their acts were wrong. Our findings support Dobash *et al's* view, in that the sub-group of men who were dishonest in answering the violence perpetration questions consciously did so to avoid confronting these realities about themselves and having to deal with their own violent behaviours. Shaw (2005) concurs that people with deviant behaviours may find it particularly difficult spiritually to deal with what they have done, and that the process of being asked about such experiences may trigger feelings of guilt and shame.

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While ethical concerns about sensitive research are warranted, the words of these men have also shown that they have agency and that the behaviours they decided to report protected them from emotional harm (Macklin, 2004). For example, when participants were confronted with questions they found disturbing and potentially stigmatising, they did not answer factually. The reasons for this include not trusting researchers, the need to self-protect and not self-incriminate. This finding is supported by the literature as Shaw (2005: 844) argues that participants with problematic experiences who are anxious and suspicious of the research, are more likely to reason suspiciously and view researchers as "undercover police officers, private detectives, or secret government agents who are here to monitor us, trick us, and get us?"

Adult men in the rural Eastern Cape, who were interviewed on sexual violence perpetration and who were also asked to share their thoughts and experiences on responding to such questions, reported that being judged negatively, labelled as perpetrators of violence, and stigmatised by the researchers, would be their major anxiety (Sikweyiya *et al*, 2007).

From the authors' experience, we recommend that researchers who study violence perpetration behaviour should carefully design their studies and employ data collection techniques that are suitable for investigating this topic. The one-on-one interviewing of the men in this qualitative study was undertaken by a seasoned Black African researcher who had spent an extended period of time living fulltime in the host community. Furthermore, in terms of gender, he was a man and had developed close relationships and rapport with most of the men he interviewed, and was able to engage in discussions in some of the languages spoken in the research site. However, in larger violence against women perpetration surveys where such bonds between the researcher and the participants cannot be developed, researchers have successfully used Audio Computer-Assisted Self interview (ACASI) to collect data. The use of ACASI eliminates the need for face-to-face disclosure of shameful acts, ensures anonymity of participants and their responses, and reduces the risk of others ever being able to connect the reported information to respondents. Congruent with this, Waldram (2007: 964) argues that for participants to be open and candid in their reports, they need to:

“feel safe and secure that what they say will not cause them harm, their crimes will not be exposed and that their comments will not be traced back to them.”

Findings presented in this *Article* suggest that strong emotional reactions or distress related to survey questions, by men who reported it, seem to be time-limited, and not overwhelming or harmful (Sikweyiya and Jewkes, 2012). Similar findings have been reported by authors in the field of psychology and psychiatry, presenting evidence showing that asking research participants, in particular those with traumatic and adversarial histories, about such experiences may cause them to have feelings of pain and distress at the time of interview (Johnson and Benight, 2003), but that such experiences are not deleterious in the long-term (Jorm *et al*, 2007).

Our finding adds to a growing body of knowledge that argues that asking men about their violence perpetration experi-

ences, in a research context, is acceptable to men and not emotionally harmful. Available research suggests that men may view research interviews as beneficial as it provides an opportunity for them to share their stories in a safe space (Waldram, 2007; Sikweyiya and Jewkes, 2012). In our study almost all men, including those who expressed emotional reaction to some survey questions, viewed research participation positively (see also Griffin *et al*, 2003; Jorm *et al*, 2007).

Conclusion

In a research context, emotional reactions to sensitive questions should not be equated with emotional or psychological harm. In this *Article*, we have shown that none of the men found the research questions psychologically damaging or had needed professional help to deal with research triggered emotions.

The findings presented highlight the importance of locating facts about the risks and the nature of such risks in asking men questions about violence perpetration histories. Furthermore, our findings suggest that violence perpetration research with men can be done ethically, and that men do not perceive it as having more than everyday risk. However, we argue that such studies should be done with strict adherence to ethics guidelines for conducting research on violence perpetration (Jewkes *et al*, 2012) as poorly planned studies may put men at increased risk of harm.

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article



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