Balancing Methodological Rigor and the Needs of Research Participants: A Debate on Alternative Approaches to Research Ethics

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Qs: Research Ethics

Under the context of interviewing male childhood sexual abuse survivors in focus group/individual interview

1. Is the presence of the responsible social worker important?
2. Should the responsible social worker be present?
3. If you were the researcher, would you invite the social worker to attend?
4. If you were the responsible social worker, would you prefer to attend?
I. Sensitive research – ethical concern

II. Respective positions of the two approaches

III. Protective approach - background

IV. Minimalist approach - background

V. Protective rejoinder

VI. Minimalist rejoinder

VII. Conclusion
I. Sensitive research

• I) Male childhood sexual abuse survivors
**Minimalist**

- without the presence of the social workers or other professionals
- clear boundaries between research and treatment
- Limiting the responsibility of researchers

**Protective**

- involving social workers, or other support workers in the research process
- Promotes the gradual progression of participants
- provided support to the participants, or the researcher assumed a dual role by providing this support
Caritas-Hong Kong: To identify the implications of masculinity for male survivors who had encountered traumatic childhood sexual abuse.

Twelve male Chinese sexual abuse survivors, 11 of whom were abused by male perpetrator(s)
III) The Case for a Protective Approach

3-phases study

Intervention program by Caritas -
**Six** group sessions for the male sexual abuse survivors
- to disclose and share their personal stories relating to the sexual abuse incidents; (Simon as observer)

**Three** focus groups, two researchers, one male and one female, led the interview in the presence of the social worker;

Individual interview with **eight** male sexual abuse survivors, in the presence of the social worker;
Rational for the presence of a social worker during the focus group and individual interviews:

Administrative:
A joint initiative by the researchers and the service provider to ensure the interviews ran smoothly and to safeguard the well-being of the participants.

Contextual consideration:
- Cultural and gender considerations in sensitive research.
- Dual role as part of the protective approach.
A) Cultural and gender considerations

Phase 1: real episode

• Participants were suspicious and strongly mistrusting of the male researcher (Simon).
• They were sensitive to and exhibited challenging attitudes towards his intentions, using phrases such as ‘you really cannot understand the situation,’ and ‘what do you want to know …?’
Phase 2: real episode

- Participants complained about the researcher’s body language, such as his upright sitting posture and serious, non-smiling face, which made them uneasy.

- The presence of the social worker facilitated the channeling of these emotional responses to the researchers and mediated the trust issues between the researchers and participants.
A) Cultural and gender considerations: focus group

• One of the participants felt emotionally upset and left the room.
• The responsible social worker responded promptly by following him to provide counselling;
• Both researchers stayed in the room and continued the focus group.
• The participant eventually decided to withdraw from the study, with the social worker’s support and assurance that there would be no consequences related to his withdrawal.
A) Cultural and gender considerations – ethical responsibility

- This illustrates the value of the protective approach for fulfilling the ethical responsibility of the researchers to protect the well-being of the participants in the research process,
- Without the necessity of delay and referral to service providers.
III) The Case for a Protective Approach

Arguments behind the Approach:

Considering the danger and risk to participants, methodological concerns should not override ethical protection!

A balance between ethical and methodological concerns should be maintained!
IV) Eli Teram: The Case for a Minimalist Approach to Supporting Research Participants

- Entails a clear separation between the support for research participants and the research process.
IV) The Case for a Minimalist Approach to Supporting Research Participants

The underlying assumption:
—Adult survivors could look after their psychological and emotional needs and manage the risks involved in research participation.
With a clear separation between the research process and the support process, participants understand that they are responsible for seeking assistance.

It can be confusing for the participants.

The presence of these professionals in research interviews might eliminate criticism about professional interventions;

It may shape the way survivors talk about their lives to fit the roles they assume as clients.
It can hamper the ability of the researcher to conduct interviews from the stance of “naïve ignorance”.

- This useful interviewing strategy requires both sides to assume that the researcher knows nothing about the subject matter or the interviewees.
V) Protective: Rejoinder

1) The need to avoid diffusing and confusing role boundaries
2) Derogating the strength and agency of participants
3) Compromising methodological rigor.
VI) Minimalist : Rejoinder

1) Research participants are required to shift quickly from the role of clients to that of research participants, and to be sociological informants in the presence of their clinicians. These requirements may cause more emotional distress to survivors than mere participation in research interviews.

2) Beyond muddling both research and therapeutic relationships, the researcher-social worker mix encountered by participants in protective studies, weakens participants’ ability to control the information they share with each group.

3) No certainty that all clients would consider the researchers independent of the organization.
Conclusion: Ethical concern

1) Ethical lens in research;
2) Ethics without respect is empty;
3) Ethical agency;
4) Contextualizing ethics;
5) Co-research: inclusion of clients in methodological discussions
1. **Ethical lens in research**

- Both concern for rigor and the well-being of research participants may serve some participants better than others;
- It may be possible that some of the participants in Chan’s study would have preferred the research relationships experienced by the participants in Teram’s study and vice versa.
VII) Conclusion

2. Ethics without respect is empty

Ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind;

– In Chan’s account, the research relationships were determined by an agreement between managers and researchers about the benefit of having a social worker in the room.

– In Teram’s case, they were determined by assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge.

– Is it possible to have participants’ preferences?
3. **Ethical agency:**

- Considering the relationship between agency and the context within which it is embedded, the same survivors may act differently in different research contexts.

- From this perspective, the disagreement between Chan and Teram is about the ability of clients to fully express who they are within the context of an organization on which they depend;

- it is about their conception of the power differentials between service providers and clients.
4. **Contextualizing ethics:**

– The model supported by Chan may be adjusted to meet these concerns by involving social workers who are unknown to the research participants, and

– by reducing the amount of time researchers spend in the intervention phase.
5) **Co-research: the inclusion of clients in methodological discussions:**

- Integrate knowledge related to methodological rigor with information about the way different research forms affect participants.
- Lead to creative research approaches, and
- The possibility of offering research participants choices of different levels of separation-integration between research and intervention processes.
Research Ethics

• The Issues:
  • Whether a responsible social work should be present in the data collection process
  • Are relevant for a broad range of sensitive topics, e.g. suicide risk, domestic violence and abortion, and;
  • Still debatable;
Thank you

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Background: 1) The first phase entailed interviews with female survivors of childhood sexual abuse about their experiences;

- To participate in the study, survivors were required to have either formal or informal support around the issues of sexual abuse through, for example, counseling and/or self-help groups.
2) The second phase applied participatory action research methods, bringing together survivors who participated in the first phase and physical therapists.

- These mixed groups met monthly for six months to transform the summary and analysis of the first phase interviews into more concrete suggestions and guidelines for sensitive practice.
3) The third phase of the study involved a broad consultative process on successive drafts of the *Handbook*.

- Written comments regarding the first draft were solicited from all individuals who had participated in Phases 1 and 2.
IV) The Case for a Minimalist Approach to Supporting Research Participants

Following the positive reception of the *Handbook*, the same research methodology was applied in a study that included both men and women,

- Expanded the scope of the inquiry to the experience of survivors with all health professionals, culminating in the publication of a second *Handbook*. 
1. **Minimalist approach:** individual or focus group interviews were conducted by the researcher(s), **without** the presence of the social workers or other professionals responsible for their well-being.

   — Argue for clear boundaries between research and treatment processes,

   — **Limiting the responsibility of researchers** to ensuring that professional support is available to participants who experience emotional difficulties.
2. **Protective approach:** involving social workers, or other support workers in the research process.

- Promotes the gradual progression of participants from a treatment phase into a research phase, with the ongoing presence of a researcher and a social worker in both phases.
- In a few of the studies (e.g. Durham, 2002) the researchers were accompanied by helping professionals who provided support to the participants, or the researcher assumed a dual role by providing this support.
III) The Case for a Protective Approach

There were reasons for this protective approach.

A) *Cultural and gender considerations in sensitive research.*

- In the Chinese cultural context, survivors feel shame and vulnerable when expressing their views within the inquiry process.
- As male victims of sexual abuse, their vulnerability differs from that of other respondents disclosing sensitive issues.
III) The Case for a Protective Approach

B) *Dual role as part of the protective approach.*

- Durham (2002), acting as both practitioner and researcher, outlined the significance of holding a ‘dual role’ when conducting a life-story practitioner research study to explore the effect of child sexual abuse on the lives of seven young men aged between 15 and 24.
B) **Dual role as part of the protective approach.**

- Not only highlighted the importance of rapport building between the researcher and the participants, but also concluded that, ‘research has the potential to become a difficult and possibly traumatic experience for participants’
1) It can be confusing for the participants:
   • With a clear separation between the research process and the support process, participants understand that they are responsible for seeking assistance.
   • The presence of these professionals in research interviews might eliminate criticism about professional interventions;
   • It may shape the way survivors talk about their lives to fit the roles they assume as clients.
The central contentions of the minimalist approach can briefly be summarized into three aspects:

1. **The need to avoid diffusing and confusing role boundaries**
   - Growing body of research on the potential harm or negative consequences of insensitive inquiries;
   - Participants found the interviews to be overwhelming or depressing.
   - Although researchers are supposed to be able to offer referrals for support, and depressed informants are able to look after themselves, the effectiveness of post-incident assistance in comparison with concurrent support remains questionable.
2. Derogating the strength and agency of participants

- Teram is keen to stress that survivors are able to look after their psychological or emotional well-being, and manage the risks involved in research participation.

- On the other hand, he questions the ability of survivors to differentiate between the roles of the researchers, clinicians, and participants, and their capacity to distinguish between the research process and service intervention.
V) Protective: Rejoinder

2. Derogating the strength and agency of participants

- If a coherent and holistic view of the survivors’ personal strength and agency is taken,
- Survivors are capable of telling the difference between the role of a social worker and the role of a researcher, with respect to their entailed duties, responsibilities, and functions.
V) Protective: Rejoinder

3. Compromising methodological rigor.

• Minimalist approach neglects the dynamic interplay between sensitive research and service intervention, and contextual factors such as culture and gender;

• Survivors in Chinese societies are more reluctant to disclose their sexual victimization than their Western counterpart.