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Aspects of research ethics in studies involving women who are victims of domestic violence

Magdalena Roxana SIRITIAN (married NECULA)

PhD candidate - University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Doctoral School of Social Work;

Head of the Emergency Reception Center for Victims of Domestic Violence, General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection Iaşi;

President of the National College of Social Workers in Romania, Iaşi Territorial Branch;

Associate Doctoral University Lecturer - "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iaşi, Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, Social Work and Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Department of Sociology and Social Work.
necularoxy@gmail.com

Abstract: Even if research on women who experience acts of aggression within their home is mostly conducted similarly to other research involving human participants, a type of research that implies both respect for individual autonomy and other particular rights (like informed consent, or the protection of personal data, while avoiding to do unnecessary physical, patrimonial or psychological harm to those who take part in the research), the ones who fall victims acts of abuse in their household present a series of particularities that represent as many specific aspects of the research. The purpose of this paper is to identify these specific aspects and analyze the way to make sure that those particularities are the manner in which they must be taken into account in order to carry out ethical research.

Keywords: *Research Ethics, Vulnerable Groups, Victims of Domestic Violence, Qualitative Research*

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1. Introduction

Research focusing on women who are subjected to abuse in their households needs to be conducted according to an ethical framework, while not losing sight of the fact that it also implies some particular aspects concerning the safety of the victim (World Health Organization, 2001), so that, in addition to the ethical requirements of any research on human subjects, in research on women that have been abused by their spouses, some supplementary precautions should be added when conducting any research on such vulnerable types of people, in conclusion, several particularities of the research that aims to study violence, the way it manifests and the impact it has are superimposed (Alvarado et al ., 2019).

Because they went through a traumatic experience, for women who are victims of domestic violence, participation in research can be profoundly psychologically damaging to victims, especially if asked, in a qualitative research setting (Ellsberg et al., 2003), to provide answers to open questions, thus having an opportunity to remember the experiences they went through. For this reason, the reliving of those experiences is likely to put the research participant in an extremely fragile psychological position (Clark & Walker, 2011), and the subsequent manifestations of this reliving of the traumatic experience, generated by participating in the research, could be unfortunate.

2. Types of interviews that ensure the psychological protection of the victim

The research interview, in the case of a qualitative type of research, must be conducted not only with attention to the particularities of the victim, but also to all the non-verbal signs that the victim expresses in order to externalize the feelings of anguish that the memory of the traumatic experience causes them (Temmerman, 2015). A type of interview in which the victim could be protected with optimal chances of success could be the appreciative interview (Repede, 2011), because the woman is asked not only to narrate the experience she went through, but to narrate it from the perspective of the person who managed to successfully overcome the experience, with an emphasis on those strengths that helped the victim to save herself from the aggressor, to regain her balance, to become autonomous etc.

Another way of interviewing could be the narrative interview (Ballantine, 2022), which would take the story of the victim's personal experience beyond the concrete events that took place, and through retelling,

help the victim to give new meanings to the experience, new nuances and a better understanding of the positive acquisitions that the experience can bring to the victim's life, from the perspective of her ability to overcome difficult moments (Giacci & Straits, 2022), which could be of real use in the process of empowering the victim to take charge of her own life and heal (Poopuu, 2020).

Therefore, the interviewer must take special care to ensure that questions are not asked in an invasive, overly intrusive or inappropriate manner to avoid the victim withdrawing from the interview or, worse, re-enacting the memory with additional traumatic consequences, added to the initial ones (Pio & Singh, 2016). Any value judgment on the part of the interviewer should be avoided, as well as any negative comments regarding the aggressor or the people close to the victim (Fontes, 2004), because victims of domestic violence are often in positions of psychological vulnerability so intense that they have a high degree of suggestibility (Wemrell, 2023). The interviewer, due to the fact that they represent the scientific approach to the problem, could represent a person of authority for the victim, whose opinion can influence the research participant much more than a person who would not be part of such a vulnerable category of interviewees.

3. Informed consent and vulnerable persons

The stage of informed consent is an extremely important one, because by the way in which the purpose of the research will be explained to the victim, they can be psychologically prepared to face the memory of the traumatic experience, when the interview will reach the questions related to violence (Miller et al., 2012). Also, the emphasis that the interviewer might place on the importance of the victim's participation in the study can lead to the increase of the victim's self-respect, so necessary in the process of psychological recovery after abuse, as well as to infusing the participation in the research with a positive dimension, which will help her see the trauma she suffered in a new light, as an experience from which she herself can learn, but which could be useful to other people, who find themselves in similar situations.

Another important element is the place where the interview takes place, which must be a location that gives the certainty of safety, both for the victim and for the interviewer (Kelmendi, 2013). The interviewee must be convinced that no negative repercussions will occur by participating in the research, that the abuser will not be informed, that their personal data will not be disclosed, that their identity will be protected and that the data will only be used for research purposes. The protection of personal data takes on new

dimensions of strictness in researching vulnerable people who are victims of violence.

We believe that the interviewer must have special skills in interacting with people from vulnerable categories and it is necessary that the leading scientist coordinating the research carry out a special training of the interviewer. These people must be able to identify the psychological signals sent by the victim, categorize them correctly and know how to react to them, in order not to cause additional harm to the research participants, to know how to overcome moments of particular emotional intensity, as well as to complete the interview in an optimal manner if it provokes an excessive negative emotional response from the research participant. It is preferable, therefore, that these interviews are conducted by people with training in psychology or social work and, at the same time, in working with vulnerable people who are victims of violence.

4. Identification of other cases of abuse while conducting the research interview

Another aspect of research ethics concerns the manner in which the interviewer acts when, during the interview, they become aware of possible acts of violence against people other than the interviewee. For example, the woman who is interviewed tells about unreported abuse of children by her spouse in the family household. The question therefore arises whether the interviewer is obliged to report these abuses or to take any action by themselves (World Health Organization, 2016). The question is even more relevant when the interviewer or the person leading the research team are social workers, with regard to whom there is a professional obligation to take legal action when they learn about the commission of abuses on children.

In this situation, several aspects must be balanced: on the one hand, it must be taken into account that the research activity involves observation and data collection, not intervention on the case of abuse; on the other hand, it must be taken into account that the researcher has an obligation not to endanger the interviewed victim (Hine et al., 2022), through their actions during the interview or after it has ended, and a possible reporting of these new cases of abuse may alert the abuser that a family member has spoken to the authorities, with potentially extremely dangerous consequences for those family members.

However, the social worker has a legal and professional obligation to take legal action or report to the competent state bodies if they become aware of possible cases of abuse. The intervention in these situations must be done

subtly and in a manner that excludes endangering the physical and psychological safety of the victims as much as possible (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Naturally, the ideal is for the researcher to refer the victim to specialized counseling (Nistor, 2015; 2017a, b, c; 2020), to another social worker, in order not to enter into a conflict of interests that would call into question their axiological neutrality as a researcher. The latter person is required to discuss with the victim who is the research participant about the opportunity to report the cases of abuse regarding other family members, showing them the advantages of such reporting for their safety.

Of course, the spontaneous social investigation can be a means to start the institutional process of removing the other victims from the abusive environment, but every time the actions of the authorities must be subject to the (preeminent) principle of care, meaning not to reveal the victim's participation in the investigation and to the way in which they found out the information about the other cases of abuse, in order to respect the rule that participation in the research should be done in conditions of maximum safety for the victim.

5. Conclusions

Domestic violence against women is an aspect that does not singularly target only the woman who is the victim, but is a systemic way of life for that family. For this reason, data collection methods must be adapted to ensure the best balance between the risks and benefits of the research. Among the risks we can include the negative effects that remembering the traumatic experience can have on the psyche of the participants in research on family violence, and among the benefits are the therapeutic effect and increasing personal autonomy that participation in such research can have on the victims.

Informed consent, the setting in which the interview is taken, the experience of the interviewer, the processing of data in conditions of confidentiality, the securing of this data, the intervention in case the interview brings up other victims, not yet reported, all these make research on women who are victims of domestic violence a matter that raises specific ethical issues, which need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, depending on the specific needs of each research participant.

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