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Interactions with Offenders Post-Assault and Their Impacts on Recovery: A Qualitative Study of Sexual Assault Survivors and Support Providers

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Abstract

It is well established in the literature that the majority of sexual assault offenders are known to their victims. Given this reality, survivors of sexual assault and their support providers (SP; e.g., family, friends, romantic partners) may interact with the offenders post-assault within various contexts including social, community, and familial settings, though little research exists that explores this possibility. This study begins to address this gap through interviews with survivors and their SPs about disclosure, recovery, and help-seeking following interactions with their offender post-assault. Twenty-eight survivors mentioned interactions or appraisals of the offender, as did 12 SPs. Qualitative analysis revealed several themes including: a) various outcomes of interactions with the offender post-assault, b) emotions felt toward offender, c) gaining of perspective and/or forgiveness, d) interactions with the offender as a catalyst for disclosure, and e) importance of the offender's actual or perceived death. Results show some anecdotal support for restorative justice practices with sexual assault victims in the criminal-legal system. Clinical implications include treatment plans for survivors to prepare for the possibility of seeing their offenders post-assault.

Keywords

Sexual Assault; Offender/Perpetrator; Intimate Partner Violence; recovery impact; support provider; Family/Domestic Violence; child sexual assault

Introduction

Sexual assault survivors experience victimization by various types of offenders, including strangers, acquaintances, friends, and family members. While most assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances (Breiding, Smith, Basile, Walters, Chen, & Merrick, 2014), those by close others (e.g. family or intimate partners) may be more traumatic given the likelihood of more chronic abuse and the complex web of other relationships that may be impacted in survivors'

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social networks. Familial abuse may also be more traumatic due to the phenomenon of family betrayal that recent research has found to be related to worse trauma symptoms. Specifically, more severe trauma symptoms have been found in women and child abuse survivors, that go beyond the effects of recent victimization (Delker, Smith, Rosenthal, Bernstein, & Freyd, 2018). Few women (5–20%) report rape to police (Lonsway & Archambault, 2012), but family abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) may be that much harder for survivors to report to authorities given the pressure to keep such abuse a secret and the possible loss of one's family more broadly that such reporting may bring. Given that most survivors know their perpetrators (two-thirds of assaults; Breiding et al., 2014); this context makes it likely they will have to interact with their offenders again following assault.

Sexual assault impacts survivors' relationships, particularly in the form of survivor and supporters of the survivors' interactions with the offender post-assault (after a sexual assault perpetrated by the offender has taken place). Recently Sorenson, Joshi, and Sivitz (2014) reported that in a large sample of undergraduates, nearly two-thirds reported knowing one or more women who were a victim of sexual assault, and just over half reported knowing one or more men who perpetrated sexual assault. Understanding the connections survivors still have to their perpetrators post-assault and how that impacts their social networks is also important in understanding recovery, social support, and/or behavioral changes post-assault. In a study of adolescent female rape victims, Tomlinson, Mears, Turanovic, and Stewart (2018) found that forcible-rape victims' popularity and centrality significantly decreased within their adolescent friendship networks. These effects were partially mediated by levels of depression and social attachments and illustrate how sexual assault can impact not only the survivor, but the survivor's social networks and possible supports (Tomlinson et al., 2018). Another study comparing acknowledged (n=125) and unacknowledged rapes (n=194) in college victims of alcohol-facilitated assaults found that almost 30% of their total sample (n=93) continued their relationship with the perpetrator post-assault (Littleton, Grills, Layh, & Rudolph, 2017). Not surprisingly, unacknowledged rape victims were more likely to continue a relationship with the perpetrator than those who acknowledged their rapes, although continuing this relationship did not significantly impact revictimization risk (Littleton et al., 2017). Recovery impacts of acknowledgement, however, were not assessed, and this study was limited by its quantitative nature and not assessing the quality of the relationship with the perpetrator post-assault. Thus, qualitative work on continuing a relationship and interactions with perpetrators post-assault is needed.

Offender-Survivor Interactions from Offender Perspective

Perpetrators of violence often use a strategy of Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO) to confuse and silence their victims (Harsey, Zurbriggen, & Freyd, 2017).

These tactics can silence victims and lead to confusion and self-blame, with perpetrators often deflecting responsibility for the assault onto the victim. Sexual assault victims often report that perpetrators and others minimize their assault and its effects (Harsey et al., 2017). It may not be just perpetrators who engage in denial/minimization/victim-blaming tactics, but also other family members and/or those who support and/or depend on the perpetrator.

In addition, some research has examined offenders' feelings regarding the assault (Brennan, Swartout, Cook, & Parrott, 2018). A study of anonymous posts on [Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com), showed that offenders often felt shame, guilt, depression, and/or anger toward victims. This suggests the usefulness of restorative justice models and equitable interaction with victims and offenders to provide a space for these thoughts and feelings to be expressed.

Survivor-Offender Interactions from Survivor Perspective

Few studies have examined and reported on survivors' interactions with offenders post sexual assault. Available research exists in the child sexual abuse (CSA) literature, and virtually nothing is known about support providers' (SPs) (family, friends, partners of survivors) interactions or feelings about the offender(s). Cameron (1994) conducted the first study on victims confronting their abusers with 72 sexual abuse victims recruited through therapy. A majority of victims (75%) whose perpetrators were still alive decided to confront their abuser. During confrontations with their perpetrators, 44% of victims received complete denial from their abusers, 22% were accused of misunderstanding the abuser's conduct, and 44% were told that they were crazy. Only 22% heard a partial admission of guilt from their perpetrators, only to have it later retracted and transformed into denial, minimization, or assertions of being misunderstood. After the confrontation, victims reported being disappointed with their abusers' reactions and even doubted their own memories of the abuse. According to the study authors, DARVO was clearly present in victims' accounts of confronting their perpetrators: through denying, minimizing, attacking the victim, and claiming to be misunderstood, perpetrators forced their victims to doubt their perceptions of abuse which led to confusion regarding its occurrence. Cameron (1994) suggested that a survivor's confrontation of their offender can put power into the survivors' hands, perhaps for the first time. The confrontation of the offender may also challenge the previous dynamics of helplessness and hopelessness often felt by survivors (Freshwater, Ainscough, & Toon, 2002). However, the confrontations described are often the result of a decision by the survivor to seek out the interaction, suggesting that the confrontation occurs by the survivor's choice. Given that studies have not examined victim-offender interactions post-assault and how this affects survivors' relationships with their informal supports; more work is needed to examine this aspect of post-assault survivors' experience, especially for survivors who live within the same communities as their offender or are forced to interact with them for other reasons.

From the limited available research, co-existing within the same spaces as the offender may be inevitable for survivors, given that most know the offender and survivors' formal reporting is either delayed or never occurs. In addition, confrontations with the offender may also be inevitable. Although confrontations with the offender may empower survivors, perpetrators are more likely to employ DARVO tactics, potentially retraumatizing survivors and making it even more difficult to co-exist in the same spaces as their offender. Restorative justice (RJ), or the movement toward therapeutic options either in conjunction with the criminal-legal system or as an alternative, could provide a mediated, safe way for survivors to confront their offenders while also giving offenders a chance to apologize for what they have done. RJ scholarship of victims and offenders within the context of gender-based violence has been explored (Miller & Iovanni, 2013). While most literature in the RJ field is

not specific to sexual assault victims and offenders, it provides some insights. One study of various types of victimization (including sexual assault) found that many survivors chose to interact with their offenders in a RJ framework in order to gain insight and justice for themselves, with the hope that the interaction would benefit and change the offender (Van Camp, 2017). Literature on apology, forgiveness, and healing in RJ settings, shows that the relationship between apology and forgiveness can be a particular challenge (Shapland, 2016; Leunissen, De Cremer, Reinders Folmer, van Dijke, 2013). One study from the United Kingdom found that apology during Victim Offender Mediation (VOM) was related to more satisfaction with the RJ process, and less commonly, forgiveness of the offender (Dhami, 2011). While the appropriateness of RJ approaches in gender-based violence settings is somewhat contested (see Busch, 2002; Strang & Braithwaite, 2002), the relevance of apology and forgiveness between victims and offenders may be salient for some survivors in moving forward and healing from trauma.

Current Study

The current study examines sexual assault survivors and their informal SPs to better understand the interactions survivors can have with their offenders post-assault, how they feel about these interactions, and how such interactions impact survivors' recovery in the short- and long-term following assault. We sought to identify themes in narratives of survivors and their informal SPs related to the perpetrators of the assaults from interviews with survivors and SPs regarding their experiences. Although results are organized by these themes, we also use the interview data to explore the following four research questions:

1. What kinds of interactions do survivors have with their offenders post-assault?
2. How do survivors feel about interactions with offenders post-assault?
3. How do interactions with the offender impact a survivor's recovery in the short-term?
4. How do interactions with the offender impact a survivor's recovery in the long term?

Method

Participants

The sample included adult female sexual assault survivors who disclosed their assault to an informal SP such as a friend, family member, or romantic partner. Survivors had previously participated in a 3-year longitudinal survey (N = 1,863) regarding unwanted sexual experiences and social reactions they received when disclosing these experiences (see Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2016, for study description). Survivors indicating interest in interviews were also asked to provide contact information for a friend, family member, or significant other they had told about an unwanted sexual experience. SPs were contacted later for a separate interview focusing on their experience helping the survivor. Separate interviews with survivors and SPs (N=90) took place over 2 years, from 2013–2015 resulting in 45 matched pairs of survivor and SP interviews. Written informed consent was obtained and the study approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board.

Sampling saturation was achieved by obtaining diverse participants in terms of relationship type, alcohol use at the time of assault, and race/ethnicity, to obtain a sample with diverse survivors and assault experiences for interviews.

Survivors were an average of 43-years-old, all female, and mostly mothers (65%, $n=29$). About 65% ($n=29$) had attended or graduated from college; 24% ($n=11$) were currently enrolled in school, and 60% ($n=27$) were currently employed. On average, participants were interviewed 12 years after their most recent unwanted sexual experience ($M=12.3$, $SD=11.7$). Most survivors were assaulted by one person ($n=34$, 77%) and 10 were assaulted by more than one person (23%). Most survivors described their relationship to the perpetrator as a stranger ($n=18$, 40%); however this is followed by various types of 'known' offenders that if combined comprise most of the sample (e.g., nonromantic acquaintance ($n=13$, 29%), casual or first date ($n=5$, 11%), romantic acquaintance ($n=5$, 11%), husband ($n=2$, 4%), relative ($n=2$, 4%). Victims were an average age of 24 ($SD=9.61$) at the time of assault. Survey data on survivors' perceptions of their perpetrators of their most serious assault indicated that perpetrators were an average of 28 years, ranging from 16 to 55, and primarily male ($n=43$, 95.6%). Approximately 42% ($n=19$) of survivors were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of the assault. Informal SPs were also an average of 43-years-old and 64% ($n=29$) had children. Most had attended or graduated from college (66%, $n=30$) and were currently employed (60%, $n=27$). For more demographic information for survivors and SPs, see Table 1.

Measures

The interview protocol for survivors and SPs focused on the survivor's disclosure of an unwanted sexual experience, social support provided/received, and appraisals of the survivor-SP relationship. Interview participants were also asked about the survivor's post-assault recovery and coping, and their appraisals of the survivor's recovery progress.

Interview questions were open-ended with follow-up probes. Interviews with survivors started with a question about their sexual assault experience(s) if they wished to discuss it, followed by a question asking about their experiences telling an informal support person and how they reacted to the disclosure. Then parallel questions were asked if they had an alcohol-related assault. We then asked about what their relationship was like with the person they told currently, when they first disclosed the assault, and how they felt the assault disclosure had affected the relationship. Then we asked if the other person had ever told them about a stressful life experience and how satisfied they are with the relationship currently. We then had a section on other disclosures to other people with parallel sets of questions regarding those disclosures. Interviews with SPs began by asking them to tell about the first time the survivor told them about their sexual assault experience, what they said to the survivor and did to try to help. The same questions were asked if they had an alcohol-related assault experience. We then asked if the SPs knew if the survivors had told others about their experience and if those disclosures had impacted her life and if alcohol was involved how that impacted those disclosures. We asked if the SPs thought the experience had affected survivors' lives and if they thought anything could be done now to help them now with their recovery. Then, the same questions were asked of SPs that we had

asked survivors about their relationship with survivors as described above. We also asked how the disclosure had affected the SP's life, whether they had told anyone else about the disclosure, and whether anyone else had disclosed a similar stressful life experience to them, and if SPs had anything else to add regarding how to help women or any other questions to ask us.

Procedure

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by one of three trained interviewers on the research team. Initial mock interviews, reading about interviewing, and feedback from the research team's faculty supervisor was provided to train interviewers on the protocol and on interviewing sexual assault survivors. Interviews lasted an average of one hour but ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to provide survivors and their SPs a confidential open-ended safe space to talk about their experiences related to sexual assault, psychosocial impacts, and survivors' recovery process.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings based on convenience and feasibility of participants including survivors' homes, coffee shops, libraries, or the university, to name a few. Participants were compensated \$30USD for the interview portion of the study.

Data Analysis

After each interview, interviewers created "summary" documents, which included interesting points, questions raised, final thoughts, and unanticipated feelings emerging from the interview. The research team followed the same semi-structured interview protocols yet were also flexible if participants raised specific issues they wished to talk about. If participants diverted from the protocol, interviewers would return to the protocol after allowing them space to diverge as they wished as a way to respect their needs to express material we may not have asked about. Saturation was considered to be achieved once new topics were no longer raised by participants in response to the interview protocol questions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked by other members of the research team.

Data analysis of the interviews began following the transcription process. Brief summaries and identified patterns were added by research team members during this process. Interviewers conducted a final review of their transcripts for accuracy. Interviewers and research team members met to discuss emerging themes and patterns following transcription, as an initial stage in developing the codebook. These emerging themes and patterns were later discussed among the research team in a process similar to that of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team conducted several trials of interview coding and refinement to develop a codebook that covered the content of individual interviews and themes reflecting the matched pair relationships. Codes were descriptive and used to summarize and describe the primary topic of the excerpt (Saldana, 2012). We examined the context of the codes by reviewing transcripts and interviewer summaries when identifying relevant interview excerpts (i.e., quotes).

Atlas.ti Version 7 qualitative analysis software was used for coding and analysis. We identified codes that made the most analytic sense of the data (termed “focused” coding; Charmaz, 2006) and used identified codes to pair with segments of the transcript. Specifically, we selected codes that best represented what was happening in the interview text. We coded the data separately and compared our interpretations of the content with other research team members to achieve consensus (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). This process took place in several stages. First, pairs of coders separately coded each interview matched pair using the codebook. Second, one coder in the pair then reviewed both coded transcripts to identify any inconsistencies in the assigned codes. Third, the coders discussed these disagreements until reaching a joint consensed version by both parties (Patton, 2009). In cases where agreement was not obtained, double coding (i.e., simultaneous coding; Saldana, 2009) was used as a compromise between the two codes. Fourth, the original interviewer reviewed the coded transcript for agreement with the assigned codes. The coders and interviewer discussed any disagreements and corrected the coded transcripts until consensus was reached between the three parties.

Analysis took place using an iterative process in several stages after coding was completed. We analyzed the interview at both the individual level and at the level of the matched pair. First, we conducted queries in Atlas.ti software to identify the number of times each interviewee endorsed a particular code related to specific topics (e.g., survivor-SP relationship, coping). Second, like in thematic analysis, research team members individually reviewed quotes for each query in search of patterns and noteworthy findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, the team met several times to review the identified themes and patterns. During this process, we looked for similarities and contrasts within and between the 45 matched pairs in response to the present study research questions. Data saturation was ensured through these several meetings by making sure every instance of a theme was identified in interviews, and by looking through other codes to make sure that nothing relevant was missed. Overall, there were 4 codes under the umbrella of “offender” used in this study that covered both post-assault interactions with and appraisals of the offender’s character from the survivors and SPs.

Results

Of the 45 matched pairs, a subsample of interviewed survivors ($N = 28$) had discussed interactions with their offender, and several SPs ($N = 12$) also discussed the survivor’s interactions with the offender or their own personal experiences. Results from this subsample are organized by themes.

Interactions with Offender Post-Assault

Survivors ($n=9$) reported their experience meeting with the offender as either a positive, negative experience, or feeling mixed about the interaction. When defining ‘positive,’ we suggest that the survivor may not have necessarily found the interaction itself positive; but may have contextualized the interaction as one that resulted in some sort of healing or closure.

Positive.—One survivor shared that after seeing the perpetrator on the streets years after the incident, she decided to seek counseling for the trauma which allowed her to let go of anger:

“I actually ran across him um maybe five years down the line. It was just something that I wasn’t gonna forget about his face. I saw him on a bicycle just like he was when he rolled up to me and I remember saying that’s that man that raped me. After that I start trying to go to support groups ‘cause I was having dreams about it.”

(FR, F, 46, B, S)¹

Another survivor expressed feelings of closure and relief after speaking with her offender:

“I contacted him and got to talk to him, and I felt it was a cathartic experience. Because I let it go. I saw him for what he was and wasn’t afraid anymore, I didn’t have those feelings of love anymore...”

(FR, F, 21, MR, S)

Lastly, another survivor shared her plan of taking a ‘vacation’ to find her offender and confront him, believing she will be relieved after telling him of the pain and suffering he has caused her:

“I’ll feel like I have a big load off my shoulders once I do confront him and let him know how I feel.”

(FR, F, 52, B, S)

Negative.—One survivor’s interactions occurred at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings where she recalled feeling sick at seeing him and was not interested in an apology from him:

“I also did see him in the rooms of AA and it made me want to throw up and then he was trying to apologize to me through a comment and I was like, you’ve got to be joking me.”

(FR, F, 51, B, S)

Another survivor recalled finding out she was pregnant weeks after her assault and said that her interaction with the offender was scary, so she changed her daily routine:

“I didn’t even know I was pregnant and saw him again. He pretended nothing happened and said, ‘I know you’re pregnant.’ It was the creepiest thing. I was so scared that I didn’t leave my house for five days afterwards. I was ditching school. I was so scared to see this guy again...because you never expect, number one to get raped, number two to get pregnant from the rape, and number three to see the rapist again.”

(FR, F, 30, B, S)

¹We use several abbreviations as noted here to indicate demographic characteristics and type of relationship in the following order: (S/SP Relationship, Gender, Age, Race/Ethnicity). SO = Significant Other, FA = Family, FR = Friend; M = Male, F = Female; B = African American, W = White, N = Native American, H = Hispanic, MR = Multi-Race, U = Unknown.

Another survivor shared that, even after almost two decades, just seeing the face of her offender was enough to make her fearful to be outside for the day:

“I told a girl about the guy that did that to me. They looked him up on the internet and brought a picture of him. I imagine I haven’t seen the guy for like 18, 19 years, and to see that picture, it took me back, and I couldn’t go nowhere. I had a date with my boyfriend at the time, and couldn’t go outside, I thought that he was gonna have somebody kill me, his family knew what he done, I was like a little kid all over again.”

(FA, F, 44, B, S)

Lastly, one survivor recalled interacting with her uncle offender at her grandmother’s funeral. At the funeral she avoided contact as much as possible, but felt judged by her family:

“And then when my grandmother passed and my uncle came to her funeral, I didn’t even know, something kept pushing me away from him. I was like don’t touch me, he wanted a hug. I hadn’t seen him since I was seven or eight I was like don’t touch me, I don’t want to hug you. He’s like I haven’t seen you. I’m like I don’t want to hug him, and all the family members are looking at me like, yeah, she is crazy.”

(FR, F, 41, B, S)

Mixed.—Some survivors had mixed feelings about the interaction with their offender. One survivor shared the challenges she faced interacting with her grandfather because she recognized the positive relationship they had while also recognizing the reality of the abuse she faced:

“There was time when we actually had a relationship. Every time I looked at him, I remembered that stuff and then I did start going into therapy and I think the therapy is what made me angry, and not wanting to have anything to do with him.”

(FA, F, 48, W, S)

Another survivor shared that she confronted her offender only after some time in therapy. Although the survivor was able to confront her offender and inform him of his wrongdoings, he was not receptive to her and stormed away:

“Right after this, I call him [the offender] the next day and I say we should meet after work. Why don’t we meet at the [store] parking lot which is where you work. We weren’t working together so I’m glad for that and he says okay. I go to the parking lot and he doesn’t even show. I’m calling him, texting him and he won’t show. I think I know the reason he won’t show ‘cause he know what he did was wrong. Then through a lot of coaching from my therapist, I met him and said, what you did was not consensual, I did not consent to that, you raped me, and he got angry and walked away.”

(FR, F, 24, W, S)

Perceptions of interactions between survivors and offenders are mixed. While some survivors shared somewhat positive experiences post-interaction, many shared negative

perceptions or confusing feelings toward offenders. Survivors with positive perceptions did not necessarily feel the interaction was positive, but that it led to a positive outcome.

Emotions towards Offender Post-Interaction

Survivors reported several emotions after interacting with offenders, no matter the context or details of the interaction. These emotions were complicated when the offender was related to the survivor, particularly if he was a family member.

Anger/Revenge.—First, some survivors (n=4) felt angry after their interaction with the offender. Not only did survivors express anger toward the offender, but many shared revenge fantasies that often helped channel their rage. One survivor imagined hurting the offender after she never received a call back or acknowledgement of the trauma he caused:

“He never tried to call me back, I guess he knew what he did was crazy. After some time went by...all sorts of thoughts went through my mind like, “I should call him up and get him over here, as soon as he walks in slam him in the head with a brick...All sorts of things went through my mind about revenge. Then I said to myself, ‘oh, you can’t spend a lot of time dwelling on this,’ but I dwelled on that for a long time”

(FR, F, 56, B, S)

Another survivor felt so much rage that she prayed for self-control when interacting with him during her AA meetings. According to the survivor, the man showed up to the meeting which “caught [her] off guard”. She stated that this rage and anger were not acceptable behavior based on her identity as a religious woman and therefore stayed silent:

“That man came in my meeting Monday and caught me off guard. He was talking to me and when I looked up in his face, I was like ‘God please don’t let me hit his man and go to jail.’ I was just so angry. I felt like that little girl again. I’m supposed to be Christian woman today, I’m chairing the AA meeting and I suppose to know to handle situations. So, it was like ok I’m six or seven and I didn’t say anything to him.”

(FA, F, 57, B, S)

Another survivor shared that the anger she felt was not reserved for the offender alone, but could apply to any person who “crosses” her. She described an incident, separate from the assault, where she was attacked on the street and how her anger was channeled through violence:

“I have fantasies of going over there and finding them and blowing their head off in broad daylight. I just have those fantasies all the time, like when somebody crosses me I just wanna kill em.

(FA, F, 49, B, S)

In addition to survivors expressing feelings of anger and rage, SPs (n=3) expressed similar emotions towards the survivor’s offender. One SP, the survivor’s significant other, felt rage and anger toward the offender:

“The first thing in my mind was, ‘get up and stab this dude in his neck’”

(SO, M, 49, B, SP)

Another SP shared a desire to seek revenge against the offender to “get even”:

“Like a childish way, whether it be wanting to do something violent or you want to do a prank, you know, in that mindset you really just want to get even, you don’t really think about anything else, and you factor in the law a little bit.”

(FA, M, 31, W, SP)

Another SP felt frustrated by the decision of the survivor to only verbally confront the offender and move on. The SP felt that she should have done more to seek justice. In addition, the SP felt as if the survivor ‘let him go,’ implying that by only verbally confronting the offender she allowed for the offender to move on without proper consequences:

“It’s over, I don’t want to think about it, like a coping mechanism. But like if that’s what she needed then, I don’t know, I didn’t know if I like that. Even though it’s not for me to like or dislike it. You know, it was like, you let him get away with it.... You know, like, by saying that ‘You know, I’m upset with you, that was bad’ I mean okay, we’re done with it, it’s over with. It’s like, why did you kind of let him go.”

(FR, M, 26, MR, SP)

Both survivors and SPs alike shared feelings of anger and rage toward offenders for their past behavior. These feelings echo prior literature and speak to the complex emotions and methods of channeling anger toward the offender (Lorenz et al., 2018). Although some survivors and SPs did mention violent fantasies, all who shared these feelings never externalized them.

Empathy/Sympathy.—In addition to/ instead of anger, survivors (n=5) expressed feelings of empathy or sympathy toward offenders. In particular, survivors often offered explanations for the behavior or for how the offender “used to be.” One survivor shared an instance where her mom told her that her offender (ex-romantic partner) wanted to take them (survivor, survivor’s mom, and survivor’s son) out to dinner. During dinner, the offender offered to “do anything for [her]” Instead of anger or frustration, this survivor expressed sympathy for the offender and his actions:

“I said, ‘I feel sorry for you. I’m sorry you can’t seem to see what you was doing was wrong, and I just feel sorry for you as a person. You need to ask God for forgiveness.’ I didn’t say nothing else to him.”

(FA, F, 46, B, S)

Other survivors expressed empathy and understanding for the offender in terms of who he is “now” versus who he was “then.” One survivor used the phrase “at the time” to indicate that the person who assaulted her was fundamentally different from the person she knows now:

“My rapist at the time, I was not positive cause he was like a totally different person when the incident happened.”

(FA, F, 30, MR, S)

Another survivor shared that she believed her offender had been harmed by someone as a child and that may be the explanation for his violence toward her:

“Somebody told me, I don’t know if this is true or not, maybe in his life somebody did something bad to him growing up and maybe that’s why he took it out on me. I don’t know what it is.”

(FR, F, 52, B, S)

One survivor shared challenges she faced reconciling who the offender was in their social circles with him as her rapist. She explained that the offender had written her kind words in a letter, but she struggled with accepting the pain he caused:

“B (offender) was a really good friend of mine. I have these high school Catholic retreats, you get these letters and B (offender) wrote me this beautiful letter about his affection and love for me and his admiration, all through like this catholic lens which now is funny to think about but I think it was hard for both of us to tolerate like are we going to say B (offender) is a rapist now? You know what I mean? So, I think that’s one of the things I think was really hard.”

(FR, F, 24, W, S)

Another survivor shared that she felt sorry for the offender (her grandfather) because he did not understand why the survivor had ceased contact and effectively ended their relationship:

“I feel like it was kind of unfair because I know he was like ‘Why won’t you talk to me?’ I’m sure he knew what he did was wrong, but I think what was more confusing is we had a decent relationship for that time when I put it out of my head and then all of a sudden, you know, cut him off. So strangely, I felt sorry for him because I know he was really confused and sad”

(FA, F, 48, W, S)

Some SPs (n=3) also shared empathy and understanding regarding offenders and their behaviors, such as matched SP of the above survivor who stated that she believed the offender may have experienced his own trauma and externalized his pain toward the survivor:

“So I’m like ‘where did he..?’, where did that come out? Cause usually those things don’t just happen later in life, and so I’m just like, ‘What happened to him?’ and wondering ‘Why did he like that?’ Maybe it was due to the trauma of his wife dying, my mom’s mom. You know, but I just wonder what else did he do or who did he do it to? Cause I just think that there’s more to that, and I’ll never know.”

(FA, F, 53, W, SP)

SPs also struggled with expressing empathy while also recognizing the offender’s violent behavior. One SP shared the challenge of reconciling who the offender “was” to her (“an old friend”) with who they are now:

“That was hard too, that perception of what, like, someone like a perpetrator does... like, you picture it one way and then now it’s an old friend of mine is now considered that [a perpetrator]... It just makes me wonder...I don’t think it was premeditated...I never really talked to him about it beyond that first conversation and after she talked to him. So parts of me still kind of wonder like...I mean it was so long ago, I don’t know that he would remember, but like what happened in his mind that night?”

(FR, F, 28, W, SP)

Lastly, while this SP did not excuse the behavior of the offender, she offered an explanation and understanding of the survivor’s trauma. This SP said the offender did not understand the severity of his behavior and became angry when the survivor left the situation:

“He doesn’t want to admit it but I’m sure that’s what he’s angry about. He felt she should have stayed with him and let him continue to abuse her because I really don’t think that he realizes what kind of a person he really is. He is a very angry person and he left the children, all three, but he just has an anger problem.

(FA, F, U, B, SP)

Motivation to Disclose

For some survivors (n=6), seeing or interacting with the offender post-assault meant they felt a duty to disclose their trauma to prevent future harm to others. One survivor decided to disclose her trauma once she saw him in her neighborhood:

“When I saw him that second time it just basically let me know that this bad man is still around and that’s when I decided to share it with somebody. Okay, he’s still around and then to still be in that area because I’ve basically been born and raised in that area and have been there all my life and still there. So, I was like, ‘Okay, I better tell somebody because he might do this to somebody else’.”

(FR, F, 46, B, S)

One survivor expressed that she had wished she reported her incident because it may have prevented the harm that resulted in the offender’s eventual arrest:

“I wanna say maybe a year later I read that him and his girlfriend got arrested for trying to solicit a minor into prostitution. So, on one hand I was happy about that he finally got caught, but on the other I was like I could have put him in jail earlier.”

(FA, F, 22, B, S)

While some survivors shared that they disclosed their trauma to prevent future perpetration, others simply shared that they were relieved to hear of the offender’s eventual arrest because it meant that he would be prevented from harming others altogether:

“The police took that motherfucker to jail, he raped another girl. I was like, ‘for real?’ He’s like, ‘yeah’. His brother name was M (offender’s brother). M (offender’s brother) up there at the basketball court just told us. They came and got him from the house. I’m like, ‘for real?’ He’s like, ‘yeah’. And in my mind they finally caught him because there’s no telling how many more people he done that

to. I never seen him since.... For real, I felt happy. Because he was off the streets, he wouldn't do nobody else like that."

(FR, F, 41, B, S)

Another survivor felt the victimization of others was inevitable and hoped that the offender had been located so he could be held accountable:

"They couldn't find anything, so nothing ever happened. I hope they were found eventually! Because I'm sure they did it again and they deserve not to be in society"

(FR, F, 20, W, S)

Another survivor recognized the need to tell the offender's current partner of the violence he had perpetrated in the past, but ultimately decided not to tell her. The survivor seemed to regret this decision because she realized that his current partner should have known:

"I remember he and his friend were walking with his fiancé, she just joined him, she had no idea, some white girl, and I remember seeing him walking and I remember telling her and she was like, 'you gonna call the police you gonna say something?' I mean he fucking... Are you gonna tell the girl? I mean she needs to know, she's about to marry him and I was just like, I didn't say anything..."

(SO, F, 45, U, S)

Lastly, one survivor expressed concern for other potential victims in the family. This survivor explained that he (survivor's brother) will probably try to harm another family member who is not as directly related as the survivor because he thinks "he could get away with it":

"You know, if he think he could get away with it he'll probably do that to her. I'm his sister so what's a granddaughter... I think a sister is closer... well that's still part of his blood. It's just sick."

(FR, F, 52, B, S)

For many survivors, disclosing personal trauma and the offenders' perpetration of violence was often motivated by the desire to prevent future harm. In addition, survivors internalized the responsibility to warn other women of offender behavior and subsequently felt guilty if they did not disclose. These feelings of guilt and worry were also complicated by familial relationships and risk of revictimization within a family network.

Gaining Perspective/Forgiveness

In our sample, the average length of time that had passed between survey completion and the assault was 12 years, which allowed survivors to talk about their assaults from a retrospective point of view, articulating how their perspectives have changed since the assault, or even soon post-assault. Survivors expressed changes in perspective in relation to the offender, assault, or both after interacting with offenders. Survivors (n=6) expressed varying perspectives on offenders, but interactions were often a catalyst to new realizations or behavioral changes related to recovery, as described in the previous section (e.g. disclosing after offender interaction). One survivor stated that enough time had passed for her to be able to forgive her offender:

“I didn’t speak to him for many years, but my little niece just had a baby that was christened at that church and he actually showed up to church and spoke to me. I spoke to him and was able to even let him give me a hug and I didn’t feel bad about it because I had to forgive him...otherwise I was gunna stay in the same spot that I was in.”

(SO, F, 54, B, S)

Another survivor shared that it was only when she could tell her offender “I forgive you” to his face that she was able to let go of the past and move forward with her life.

“We ran around the same circles for about nine years. I saw him four years ago and walked up to him. I looked him in the face and said, ‘I forgive you for what you’ve done to me,’ because I couldn’t do it anymore. You just have to sometimes let it go. I think that was the most powerful thing. That was transformational.”

(FA, F, 30, MR, S)

Similarly, another survivor was able to let go of the past and her affection for the offender once she contacted him, as speaking to him made her feel in control and powerful in contrast with how she felt during the assault:

“I felt great afterwards, because I felt I had let it go, I felt in control. Whatever image I had of him before, he was puny to me (laughs). I felt like, powerful.”

(FR, F, 21, MR, S)

Understanding their trauma that had occurred “in the past” was particularly relevant for survivors. One survivor shared that she no longer gives much thought or holds any resentment toward the offender because she has since moved on with her life:

“The guy had my number and even tried to call me after, ‘Yeah, like let me take you out.’ And I’m just like, ‘I don’t want anything to do with you’ I didn’t want anything to do with him. I mean I don’t really think about him. What he did was wrong, but I don’t feel the need to seek revenge or anything.”

(FR, F, 23, W, S)

Another survivor shared her perspective regarding the night she was harmed by her uncle’s friend, saying that the two of them had been drinking and smoking and she does not believe he would have harmed her if they had not both been under the influence:

“I call him a friend to this day for whatever reason. I guess I forgiven him, and I do take into account that we were under the influence because I don’t think he would harm me in his right frame of mind” (SO, F, 42, B, S)

While comparing herself to other possible victims, one survivor described the different way she viewed her assault and the offender. For other victims, he “got away with it” and, in contrast, this survivor does not believe that he “got away with it” with her:

“That’s all they gave him was 13 months and there ain’t no tellin’ what he done did to other women. You know, he was a scum. I believe he did that to many other women...and got away with it. But he didn’t get away with it with me.

(FR, F, 56, B, S)

Gaining perspective and/or forgiveness of the offender was necessary for many survivors to move on with their lives and heal. While not stated by survivors, this shift in perspective from assault until our interviews changed in stages. Gaining perspective allowed them to share their stories and re-tell a narrative of their trauma and healing. Confronting offenders in person or in the survivor's mind was often a catalyst for moving on and redefining what was needed to heal.

Offender's Death and its Impact on Survivors

Given the length of time since the initial assault, many survivors spoke of their offenders' death and how it impacted their recovery. For sexual trauma survivors, the offenders' death may create a sense of relief in terms of safety (Freshwater et al., 2002). Survivors (n=6) spoke about death in varied ways with some happy to move forward after learning of the death. One survivor was bothered by the offender in the past and did not express concern when she learned he died:

"He said 'Oh girl, you need my help. You know I still love you. You know you need me.' And I'm like, 'I don't need you, I don't need you.' I never seen him no more after that day. Maybe about a year or so after, my mother got a call that they found him dead. He had been dead for 3 days in his apartment, and I'm like, 'oh well.'"

(FA, F, 46, B, S)

Some survivors victimized by family members shared about being asked to attend the abuser's funeral. For one survivor, this was an opportunity to tell other family about her trauma, but she also wanted to avoid attending the funeral. She attended the funeral for her aunt's benefit, but "cursed him out in [her] mind" in an attempt to both heal and appease her aunt's wishes:

"She said, 'you know he dead, he can't harm us anymore. Let's go, aint mad at him.' You know go in there for my aunt's sake, but as I passed that casket and I stood above him, I cursed him out in my mind. I told him just what I thought about him and how bad he had hurt me."

(FA, F, 57, B, S)

Another survivor also attended the funeral of her offender because she felt obligated by her family. His death reminded her of his manipulation and ability to fool others into thinking he was a safe person. This survivor expressed anger at attending his funeral for all of the trauma and abuses that he was able to perpetrate until he was well into his 90s:

"I remember when he finally died, he was in his 90s and I was obligated to go to the funeral. I remember looking at him in his casket and I found out some things about him in his later years. He always put on a good show of being really wonderful, friendly, old home-town-neighborhood-doctor kinda guy and he was so abusive to his wife and so cruel to her and played all kinds of mind games with her and would fight every night. He wasn't this friendly guy that he would be around my family. I just remember looking at him in his casket and thinking, 'you son of a bitch, you know' ..."

(FR, F, 49, W, S)

While some survivors explicitly knew about the offenders' death, others speculated that they may have died either due to illness or homicide. One survivor said the offender could not possibly continue to behave the way he always had and that maybe he was killed because of it:

"I said, 'I drag it up again, if I'm lucky, maybe he's dead somewhere, maybe somebody killed him'... Cuz he can't just keep going around doing that"

(FR, F, 56, B, S)

Another survivor, unsure of the offender's status, last heard he was debilitated by a stroke:

"The last I've heard is that he had a stroke or something and he's in a wheelchair in some nursing home and nobody knows where."

(FR, F, 51, MR, S)

Survivors sometimes had to navigate the grief of others who did not know about the abuse while also managing their own healing after the death. One survivor, while empathizing with her mother's grief, recalled how challenging dealing with the abuse was for her in therapy:

"It's weird because I remember when he died, we felt bad for my mom, but we didn't feel bad that he died, and it's weird...It must've come up way before he died because that's when we went into family therapy."

(FA, F, 48, W, S)

Both survivors and SPs (n=2) shared stories regarding the offenders' deaths. The above survivor's matched SP shared her disappointment in not confronting the offender (grandfather) before his death. This matched pair both experienced abuse from the same grandfather. For this SP, death provided an opportunity to "make peace" with the offender and move on:

"Well S (survivor) saw my mom still had a relationship with him so I think that was our conflict, as we were protecting her relationship with our grandfather. So, we didn't go to him. When he passed away, I remember going into the room with his coffin and that's when I made my peace with it, well with him, because I didn't confront him and I know S (survivor) regrets not confronting him, we had talked about that."

(FA, F, 53, W, SP)

Although the offender had not died, one SP understood the offender's death would provide needed closure for the survivor in moving on with her life. This SP understood that the permanence of the survivor never having to interact with her offender again would be healing:

"She wish they was dead, don't wanna see them anymore, that's all."

(FR, F, 47, B, SP)

For both survivors and SPs, the offender's death was relevant to their lives in terms of healing, interactions and relationships with family members, and feeling safe. While this

phenomenon is not well documented in the literature, the actual or perceived death of the offender may play an important role in recovery beyond feelings of safety post-assault.

Discussion

The current study of survivors and SPs examined the nature of survivors' experiences of post-assault contact with their offenders and how it impacted them and their informal support networks. We sought to understand how such contacts impacted survivors' emotional well-being, how these effects motivated survivors to disclose or seek help, and the short and long-term effects on their recovery (e.g., impact on forgiveness, effects of offenders' death). We found several themes including: effects of offender contact (positive, negative, mixed), survivors' disclosure of assault or seeking further help due to these emotional impacts, and longer-term impacts such as forgiveness, and effects of the offender's death. SP's generally viewed survivors' offenders similarly to survivors, but had unique perspectives based on their personal knowledge of and relationship to offenders. Most interactions with offenders characterized as positive were voluntary on part of survivors. We do not suggest every survivor speak with their offender after assault. Effective RJ approaches are voluntary, making them safe for victims (Van Camp, 2017). In our view, survivors should have a choice in whether and how they have contact with their offenders post-assault if possible. This study was the first to present survivor data gauging views from both survivors and their informal SPs of the survivors' offender.

Implications for Clinical Practice and the Legal System

We provide several implications for clinical practice based on our results coupled with the fact that most sexual assault victims are assaulted by someone they know (Breiding et al., 2014). Our results indicate that some interactions with the offender post-assault led to positive behavioral changes, while others said these interactions negatively impacted their recovery. Further research on how to facilitate those behavioral changes through clinical treatment rather than interacting with the perpetrator post-assault are needed. Clinical interventions should prepare victims for the possibility of seeing their perpetrator again as they work to recover from their assault, and how to cope with that possibility in order to reduce potential harm. Similar to methods used by advocates to create safety plans for victims of IPV, clinicians may also provide plans for sexual assault victims, given the safety concerns and negative responses identified in this study. Although broadly most victims know their offender, a large proportion of victims reported stranger assault, which may benefit from clinical interventions such as safety plans and victim-offender interaction preparation. Giving victims tools to deal with unavoidable offender contacts may help create interactions that are more healing and less harmful for victims.

Most survivors who interacted with their offenders post-assault reported justifiable anger, but did not necessarily want perpetrators jailed or harmed. Similar to previous research, survivors mentioned wanting their perpetrator to admit what they did or wanted some accountability and recognition from the perpetrator in order to move on (Dhami, 2011; Van Camp, 2017). This challenges stereotypes that most survivors only want to severely punish their perpetrators or ruin their reputations, and while some may want this during their

complex healing process, these results also support more RJ policies in criminal-legal responses to sexual assault.

For survivors and SPs in our study, the actual or assumed death of the offender was particularly salient. Some survivors experienced additional layers of trauma and stress due to the familial obligations to attend the offender's funeral. In addition, survivors also reported feeling conflicts between their familial obligations and internal needs for healing. Perhaps most novel, these interactions showcase the challenging contexts survivors face when navigating social and familial networks post-assault, especially when the offender is a part of the network. More research is needed to understand survivors' needs in navigating social and family networks, and how clinical and legal systems should respond to these concerns. Quantitative data are needed to investigate the prevalence of interactions with offenders post-assault and impacts on survivors.

Although limited in sample size, SPs' opinions of the offender can impact the survivor, especially when both are located within the same social or familial network. Additionally, these results may also indicate the importance of incorporating SP healing within therapeutic settings with survivors. Given the intimacy of disclosure and the importance of the support provided by SPs, clinical settings with services for SPs that encourage their healing alongside survivors may be useful. While some literature may speak to SPs seeking help post-disclosure, more work should examine benefits of integrating SPs into clinical treatment settings (Kirkner, Lorenz, Ullman, & Mandala, 2018). More research is also needed on how continued relationships with offenders post-assault impacts a SP, their ability to support survivors, and their social networks.

Limitations

This study used a small, volunteer sample of survivors and informal support providers who were more positive in their relationships by virtue of still being in them and willing to do interviews on this topic. Interviews of SPs were primarily about their experience of disclosure and relationships with survivors, as they were recruited via survivors, so less focus was on SPs and future studies should ask SPs more about their own experiences. Only one SP was interviewed for each survivor, but survivors often told multiple sources, so broader social networks warrant future study. The retrospective design meant 12 years on average had elapsed since assaults ($M=12.3$, $SD=11.7$), which may have influenced accounts by survivors and SPs. Due to this large gap in time, survivors or SPs could have experienced more adverse effects more immediately post-assault that they were unable to recall later, or their opinion on the effects in the present may have differed from their previous appraisals closer to the assault experience. This is particularly the case for appraisals of offenders which are likely to change significantly over time and future research should ask about this to give a more complete picture of trauma and healing. SPs may have been cautious in what they said about survivors, despite promised confidentiality.

Offender themes were not based on questions asked, so more survivors and SPs could have mentioned interactions with offenders had they been directly asked. Future interview research should address this directly by asking about interactions with and appraisals of offenders over time. Despite these limitations, this study provides a rich understanding of

offenders' impact on survivors' disclosure, help-seeking, and recovery process in the context of other relationships over time by examining recovery and informal relationships.

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Table 1.**Demographic Information of Survivors and Support Providers**

	Significant Other (n = 7)	Family (n = 15)	Friends (n = 23)
Survivor			
Race			
African American	4 (57%)	12 (80%)	12 (52%)
White	1 (14%)	2 (13%)	5 (22%)
American Indian	1 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Multiracial	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	4 (17%)
Unknown	1 (14%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)
Support Provider			
Race			
African American	3 (43%)	11 (73%)	7 (30%)
White	3 (43%)	2 (13%)	6 (26%)
American Indian	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)
Multiracial	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	3 (13%)
Unknown	1 (14%)	1 (6%)	5 (22%)
Gender			
Male	7 (100%)	3 (20%)	7 (30%)
Female	0 (0%)	12 (80%)	16 (70%)
Relationship to Survivor			
Spouse	4 (57%)	-	-
Unmarried Partner	3 (43%)	-	-
Child	-	8 (53%)	-
Mother	-	3 (20%)	-
Sister	-	4 (27%)	-
Roommate	-	-	1 (4%)
Friend	-	-	21 (91%)
Sponsor	-	-	1 (4%)