

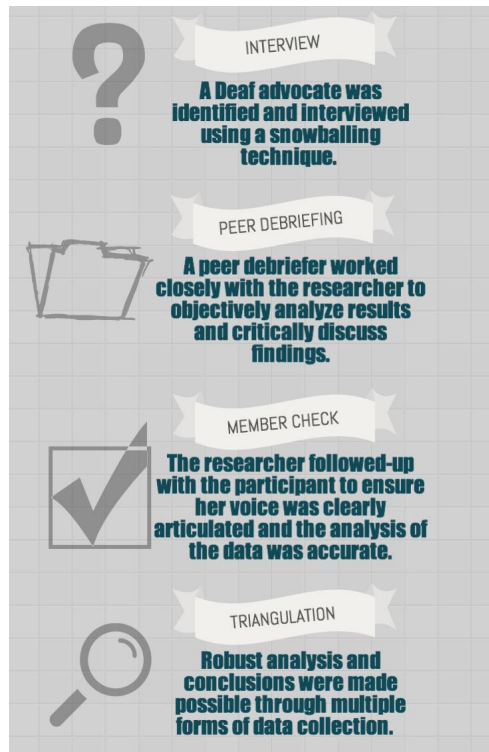
ABSTRACT

Deaf women experience sexual assault at alarmingly higher rates when compared to their hearing counterparts, but little is known about their disclosure trends (Anderson & Leigh, 2011; Elliott & Pick, 2015). It has been reported that nearly one in five women has experienced rape in her lifetime (NISVS, 2011). This number only reflects the number of women who have disclosed, or told another person or agency about their experience. Rape survivors are a hidden population where only the survivor and the perpetrator know this crime has occurred (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco, & Ahrens, 2004). Though there is a scarcity of information regarding the Deaf community and disclosure, it is clear that hearing survivors of sexual violence who are members of underserved communities and/or rely on non-English resources face significant challenges when seeking help or disclosing their experiences (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco, & Ahrens, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

The current work was a pilot study designed to explore a female Deaf advocate's understanding of Deaf women's sexual assault disclosure experiences. An advocate's role is crucial to consider when working with this marginalized population. The following questions were explored during this study: What are Deaf women's disclosure patterns and experiences to positive and negative reactions from others, what role does Deaf culture play in the disclosure process, and do power dynamics come into play when disclosing a sexual assault experience to others. Disclosure may be viewed as a first step towards recovery, but it may also significantly impede the healing process depending on the reactions of those around them (Ullman, 2010).

METHOD



RESULTS

Themes identified by advocate's statements about survivors' experiences of disclosure

ADVOCATE'S ROLE

- "Meet them [survivors] where they are in their healing process. Help them reclaim their power."
- "Minimize the re-victimization process as they work with hearing [people]."

SUPPORT PROVIDERS' REACTIONS

- "Encourage survivors to build their support system...you can't predict how the community is going to react."
- "Police officer stated: You waited 3 weeks, no one is going to believe you."
- "Well-known perpetrator in the Deaf community: People will believe him, not me."
- "Deaf female advocate can minimize judgement: To share with another Deaf woman is a huge deal, so the [survivor] is going to flood and get all of [her] emotions out."

DISCLOSURE IMPACT ON DEAF SURVIVORS

- "It's a no brainer. If the reaction is positive, I think the person will thrive better."
- "Never question...believe her from the beginning."
- "What constitutes a negative or positive reaction depends on the survivor."

POWER DYNAMICS WITH DEAF SURVIVORS

- "A hearing person who is in the position of power can have a negative impact [for survivors]."
- "A Deaf advocate: I can't [tell them what to do]. It's not my story, it's not my journey, it's [theirs]."
- "A hearing family member: The Deaf person can't make decisions...[hearing family member] think they need to baby or help their Deaf child [by making all the decisions]."

ASPECTS OF THE DEAF COMMUNITY

- "Some community members are great about supporting, believing, and keeping the info confidential."
- "Some [survivors] are financially dependent on the perp...by disclosing in a small community, this could increase the level of danger [for the survivor]."

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Performing research in cooperation with formal support providers is simply a first stride towards change. It is only by learning about the survivors' stories expressed in their own words, however, that we will truly glean accurate results regarding sexual assault disclosure by Deaf women. It was the Deaf advocate's opinion that Deaf women should be offered the opportunity to tell their stories and make their voices heard, and in the process, take back their power. The Deaf advocate believed that future research should include interviews with Deaf women about their personal experiences of telling others about their sexual assault. She stressed that each woman will have her own unique journey to express but other survivors and support providers have the potential to benefit from the positive and negative experiences narrated by the survivors themselves even when the stories are so unique that they may not necessarily be generalizable.

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