

A quarterly newsletter for our community partners

Research Notes



The Ethics of Including Older Adults in Trauma Research

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More than one in 10 older adults reported experiencing some type of abuse (e.g., emotional, physical, sexual) or potential neglect in the previous year in a randomly-selected, national sample (Acierno et al., 2010). The need for rigorous research on the risk and consequences of older adult abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation has become more imperative as the population in the United States rapidly ages. Conducting research to gather the perceptions of older adults themselves is essential to identifying points of prevention as well as mediators of outcomes; however, questions are likely to emerge about the ethics of conducting such research with older adults. Researchers have previously demonstrated that trauma-focused research can be conducted ethically with other groups; yet, researchers have not directly assessed perceived benefits and costs of trauma-focused research among older adult participants.

Using data collected from the **Study of Older Adult Resources and Stress (SOARS)**, we addressed this gap in the literature to examine older adults' perceptions of the benefits and costs in participating in trauma-focused research. A collaboration with Denver's **Justice Program for Older Adults (JPOA)**, SOARS engaged 99 ethnically-diverse older adults (age 60 and older) who heard about the study through community organizations. Older adults involved in SOARS participated in an in-person interview during which they were asked questions related to trauma exposure and health, as well as services that they use and need in the Denver metro area.

At the end of each interview, we had participants complete the Response to Research Participation Questionnaire (RRPQ; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004), a self-report questionnaire that measures both positive and negative aspects of participating in research. The three positive scales include: Personal Benefit (e.g., gains in individual insight and meaning by participating), Participation (e.g., perceptions of the value of trauma-related research and beliefs about being able to stop the research at anytime), and Global Evaluation (e.g., beliefs about the importance of research and the integrity of the research process). The two negative scales include: Drawbacks (e.g., regret and negative perceptions about the research procedures) and Emotional Reactions (e.g., unexpected and negative emotions

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experienced during participation). To understand whether participants see the benefits of research as outweighing the costs, we compared the positive scales to the negative scales of the RRPQ.

Results from the RRPQ indicated that older adults participating in SOARS reported, on average, that the benefits of participating in the research significantly outweighed the costs. Ethical decision making often involves weighing potential benefits against costs. The results offer important implications for both research and practice. In regards to research, findings suggest that trauma-focused research protocols with older adults can be designed in ways that maximize benefits while minimizing costs. There are several procedures used in SOARS that are worth noting for future studies with older adult populations, such as the use of well-trained research interviewers who were prepared to be responsive to older adults (including making referrals as needed), as well as the use of well-established standardized measures related to trauma. Participants were also made aware of the trauma-focus of the research at multiple points (e.g., at first contact, in the consent form and discussion, and through confirmation of consent), and given autonomy to either skip questions or stop the interview at any point. Additionally, we directly assessed and consistently monitored participants' perceptions about research activities using the RRPQ to ensure that our research protocol was being conducted in a way that fostered greater benefits than costs for older adult participants. By directly assessing participants' perceptions about the research, we also communicated to participants that we as researchers care about their experience during the research process.

In terms of practice, the findings offer a potentially useful lens for practitioners seeking to understand and think through the ethical dimensions of asking about trauma and maltreatment with older adults. Findings suggest that, in the context of careful and compassionate interview and screening procedures, asking older adults about trauma and maltreatment may be conducted ethically.

Overall, the findings of SOARS demonstrate that asking older adults about trauma and maltreatment can be such that the benefits outweigh the costs. This finding is consistent with research on the ethics of trauma research in other age groups, including children and adults. These findings underscore the importance of engaging older adults in research so that their voices are included in the body of knowledge used to guide policy and practice.

References

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TSS Group Accomplishments

Jenna Lee Matthews (TSS Group Alum, BS '11), upon completing her Masters of Social Work at Simmons College, has joined the clinical staff at [The Blue Bench](#). Welcome back to Denver, Jenna!

Thanks to our friends at [SafeHouse Denver](#) for this exciting news:

*"We're pleased to announce that **Anne DePrince**, Professor of Psychology at the University of Denver, will receive SafeHouse Denver's 2015 Carolyn Hamil-Henderson Memorial Award. This annual award is presented at our [Hope Gala](#) in recognition of the recipient's outstanding efforts in providing inspiration and leadership to end domestic violence in our community. A longtime friend to SafeHouse Denver and champion for victim services, Anne's research has included an in-depth study of the Triage Team Project, as well as interpersonal violence across the lifespan. Anne's thorough and well-respected research has been a guiding and validating force for our service delivery at SafeHouse Denver. Her passion for improving victim services has directly benefited the adults, children and youth that we serve."*

Director's Notes

Anne P. DePrince, PhD

Thanks to your collaboration, our work on three main projects continues. Below please find a few updates:

Women's Health Project. To date, we have enrolled 193 women into this research project, which focuses on understanding more about the impact of different social reactions women receive from community-based and criminal justice responders. The women who have generously shared their stories and perspectives with us are diverse in terms of age (ranging from 18 to early 60's), ethnicity, educational background, and sexual orientation. More than 90% of the women interviewed disclosed the assault to someone in a community-based organization, including 68% of women who disclosed to someone working in a community-based agency that participates in the [Sexual Assault Interagency Council](#) (SAIC). Well more than half the women we've talked with have disclosed to someone in the criminal justice system. Nearly one-third of women report that the offender was someone very close (such as an intimate partner). We hope to reach the study goal of interviewing 225 women by the end of this year (please see the study flyer at the end of this newsletter to help get the word out). With the information that women have generously shared, this research is well-poised to provide critically important information that can inform best practices for working with women who have been sexually assaulted.

Legal Wrap Around Project. We are delighted to continue work with our collaborators at [Rocky Mountain Victim Law Center](#) (RMVlc) and the Steering Committee for the Denver Legal Wrap Around Project to research the impact of LINC, the Legal Information Network of Colorado. Using an action research approach, our team is working closely with the Steering Committee to collect data that can support their ongoing problem-solving and data-informed decision-making as they create and refine the LINC program to address the legal needs of crime victims. Action research comprises an approach that involves the active, ongoing collaboration of researchers with community agencies to use data in the development and evaluation of approaches to solving community problems (e.g., Mock, 2010; Stringer, 1999). Increasingly, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) as well as criminal justice scholars and practitioners have called for the use of action research to address pressing and complex criminal justice problems with a focus on documenting emerging practice and its impact (Campbell, 2014; Frabutt et al., 2010; Mock, 2010; NIJ, 2012).

Denver Older Adult Research (OAR) Project. Working closely with colleagues from the Denver Forensic Collaborative – particularly in the City Attorney's Office, District Attorney's Office, Denver Police Department, and Adult Protective Services – we continue to invite older adults at risk for abuse, neglect, and/or exploitation to participate in the OAR Project. To date, we have interviewed 21 older adults who reported a broad range of stressful experiences. For example, approximately 33% of older adults interviewed reported experience emotional mistreatment (e.g., being verbally attacked, scolded, or yelled at), in many cases quite recently. Approximately 24% reported physical mistreatment. More than half of these incidents occurred within the last year. Approximately 38% of older adults reported experiences of neglect while approximately 43% of older adults reported financial exploitation, often by close friends or family members. We hope this research will help identify resources and support that can help older adults.

We look forward to updating you on new findings in the next issue of this newsletter! As always, thank you for all you do to service victims and survivors as well as for the opportunity to collaborate.

References

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- Frabutt, J.M., Gathings, M.J., Harvey, L.K., & DiLuca, K.L. (2010). Added value through a partnership model of action research: A case example from a Project Safe Neighborhoods research partner. In J. Klofas, N.K. Hipple, & E. McGarrell (Eds.) *New Criminal Justice: American Communities and the Changing World of Crime Control* (pp. 103-113).
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Women's Health Project Information

Sure, we know lots of facts and figures about unwanted sexual experiences.



But, facts and figures don't tell the whole story.
Each woman's story is unique.

- ✓ Have you had an unwanted sexual experience in the last year?
- ✓ Did you tell someone (such as a counselor, advocate, police officer, health provider) about that experience?
- ✓ Are you 18 years of age or older?
- ✓

Women who answer yes to these questions are invited to participate in the Women's Health Project.

WHAT DOES THE PROJECT INVOLVE?

- 4 interviews over 9 months with a female interviewer.
- The first interview takes 3 hours; the others each take 2 hours.
- Everything in the interview is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
- We are trying to learn:
 - ... what can people say and do to help after an unwanted sexual experience?
 - ... what is it like to talk to counselors, health providers, advocates, lawyers, or the police?
 - ... what makes it easier or harder to cope?
 - ... what is it like to try to find services that can help?
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WILL MY COUNSELOR OR THE POLICE KNOW THAT I AM IN THE STUDY?

No. We will not tell anyone you are in the study. We keep everything you tell us about your experiences private.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY TIME?

Yes! To thank you for your time, you can receive up to \$230 total, as follows: \$50 for the first interview, \$55 for the second interview, \$60 for the third interview, \$65 for the fourth interview.

WHAT ABOUT GETTING TO THE INTERVIEW?

We can help with cab fare, bus tokens, or \$10 cash for transportation costs. You tell us which you prefer.

CONTACTING US

For more information, please contact us:

Private email: healthstudy@du.edu

Private phone: 303.871.4103

The Denver Women's Project is paid for by a grant from the National Institute of Justice. The research was approved by the University of Denver Institutional Review Board. Project Director: Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

Agency information for the project is available at <http://www.du.edu/tssgroup/womenshealth/agencyinfo>.