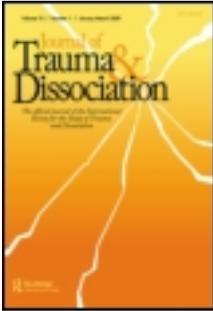


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EDITORIAL

Benefits and Barriers to Disclosing Sexual Trauma: A Contextual Approach

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In the past decade, public awareness of the high prevalence rates of sexual abuse and assault has increased. However, disclosing that these experiences have occurred remains a seemingly insurmountable barrier for many survivors. In fact, research demonstrates that many survivors of sexual abuse or assault either do not disclose these experiences (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; Kogan, 2004) or wait a long time to do so (e.g., Alaggia, 2004). Because the disclosure of trauma is often viewed in American culture as an important and beneficial step in trauma recovery, both delayed disclosure and nondisclosure may negatively impact the recovery process. However, recent research has elucidated some of the potential social costs and detrimental psychological effects of disclosure, particularly regarding the impact of negative responses to disclosure (e.g., Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Ullman, 2010). This research conflicts with historic tendencies in the mental health field to view disclosure as categorically beneficial. Given the complex nature of the disclosure of trauma, much remains to be learned regarding the process of trauma disclosure, including potential barriers to disclosure, ways of fostering a supportive climate in which disclosure can occur, the

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influence and interaction of multiple dimensions of diversity on disclosure, the identification of circumstances under which disclosure is helpful, and the integration of research and clinical practice to inform treatment of sexual traumas.

This special issue seeks to present new research that addresses these areas as well as reviews and extends our extant knowledge. Diverse studies are presented that include both experimental and nonexperimental studies, cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, and quantitative and qualitative methodologies; all of these studies address several important unanswered questions regarding the disclosure of sexual trauma and issues related to gender, diversity, and the unique nature of sexual assault as a traumatic experience.

WHAT BARRIERS NEED TO BE REMOVED AND WHAT SUPPORTIVE SERVICES NEED TO BE ADDED IN ORDER TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES DISCLOSURE?

Identifying barriers to disclosure and to the use of supportive services is important for understanding ways in which a more supportive environment for trauma survivors can be created. Although some research has focused on barriers to reporting incidents of sexual trauma to authorities (Menard, 2005), less research has examined barriers to service utilization; furthermore, even less research has been dedicated to understanding factors that may contribute to the underutilization of services on college campuses, even though college student samples are common subjects of study.

In order to address some of these limitations, Walsh, Banyard, Moynihan, Ward, and Cohn (this issue) surveyed more than 1,000 college students who were survivors of sexual assault or who were friends of survivors. Using two theoretical models of help-seeking behavior as a framework, they found that victimized students were reluctant to use services because of fear of not being believed or of being blamed for the assault. They also found that college men had less knowledge than college women of sexual assault issues in the campus community. Consistent with prior research, most of the survivors had been abused by individuals they knew and had disclosed to informal support networks (e.g., friends, family), if they had disclosed at all. Based on their findings, Walsh et al. offer specific suggestions for psychoeducation that may aid in debunking stereotypes about the nature of sexual assault and what constitutes a “serious” assault. This study underscores the need for education about sexual assault, disclosure of trauma, help-seeking behaviors, and support services on college campuses for both male and female college students.

HOW DO CULTURAL FACTORS AND DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY IMPACT THE DISCLOSURE PROCESS?

Although the influence of the social context on disclosure has been identified in prior research, limited research exists that has examined associations between and among cultural factors, dimensions of diversity, and disclosure. In particular, ethnic minority survivors of sexual trauma are not frequently the focus of trauma research (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman, 2009).

Glover and colleagues (this issue) present results from a community sample of female African American and Latina child sexual abuse survivors to examine correlates of posttraumatic stress symptoms in these understudied subgroups of survivors. Their analyses showed that, when adversity and life stress were controlled, severe child sexual abuse was related to overall posttraumatic stress symptoms, avoidance/numbing symptoms, and greater biomarker risk, and that these relationships were not mediated by post-trauma (e.g., disclosure, negative responses to disclosure, self-blame) or peri-trauma (e.g., age, duration, relationship to perpetrator) variables. Child sexual abuse of moderate severity was mediated by post-trauma disclosure and predicted reexperiencing symptoms but was unrelated to biomarker risk. It is interesting that for child sexual abuse of moderate severity, nondisclosers demonstrated the lowest level of posttraumatic stress symptoms, followed by disclosers who received a low negative response, followed by disclosers who received a high negative response; this is consistent with prior research suggesting that disclosing and receiving negative responses predicts worse psychological outcomes than not disclosing at all (Ullman, 2010). Of note is that no differences were found for African American and Latina survivors, although cultural variables beyond membership in the ethnic group were not examined. Taken together, the results suggest possibly unique treatment implications for victims of different forms of child sexual abuse, given that different abuse characteristics were differentially associated with disclosure, post-abuse adjustment, and biomarker risk.

Jacques-Tiura, Tkatch, Abbey, and Wegner (this issue) examined the effects of disclosure in a community sample of Caucasian and African American adult sexual assault survivors who completed computer-assisted self-interviews. Experiences of African American and Caucasian survivors were similar, with most women receiving more positive than negative responses from others. Only negative responses to disclosure were related to posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, especially for African American women. The possibility exists that in the context of other life experiences (e.g., racism/discrimination, violence, the historical treatment of African American women, negative experiences with societal systems), negative responses to disclosure are particularly salient for African American women. Regretting disclosure and disclosure to formal providers were also related to

posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. Generally, African American and Caucasian survivors disclosed to similar types of people and for similar reasons, although a few differences were found. These findings are important in suggesting that the impact of negative responses to disclosure may differ for different groups of victims and may vary as a function of the nature of one's social support network. Given the finding that disclosing to formal providers was associated with poorer outcomes, and because this type of disclosure has been acknowledged in prior research as a potential source of secondary victimization, Jacques-Tiura et al.'s study emphasizes the identification of ways of enhancing support provided by formal sources.

UNDER WHICH CIRCUMSTANCES IS DISCLOSURE BENEFICIAL AND WHICH HARMFUL?

Prior research indicates that disclosure in and of itself may not necessarily be sufficient to produce positive psychological outcomes (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell, Ahrens, Wasco, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000). Thus, understanding the circumstances in which disclosure is beneficial and those in which it is harmful is important for facilitating the creation of a more supportive environment for trauma disclosure. This is particularly relevant for identifying therapeutic interventions and techniques that encourage disclosure and have a positive impact on trauma recovery.

One intervention that has been viewed as promising given its cost-effectiveness and ease of administration is Pennebaker's emotional disclosure paradigm (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Prior research on this and other written disclosure paradigms has generated inconsistent findings regarding the effectiveness of such interventions as well as the people for whom these interventions may be most effective (Frattaroli, 2006; Smyth, 1998). In addition, applications of such paradigms to sexual trauma specifically are limited. Research by Kearns, Edwards, Calhoun, and Gidycz (this issue) addresses the question of whether Pennebaker's emotional disclosure paradigm is effective for college women who are sexual assault survivors. Using an experimental design, these authors compared women with a history of sexual assault who wrote about either their most severe victimization (experimental group) or how they spend their time (control group); participants also completed a 1-month follow-up assessment. Results indicated that across writing sessions, the experimental group reported greater reductions in negative mood immediately post-writing compared to the control group. However, both groups showed significant reductions in physical complaints, psychological distress, and traumatic stress symptoms at the 1-month follow-up, suggesting no added benefit of disclosure of a sexual assault. However, participants in the experimental group described the experience as more meaningful and valuable than

participants in the control group, raising the possibility that outcomes other than those studied may be positively affected by participation in this kind of intervention and emphasizing the importance of future research. Along with the limited number of other studies in this area (Antal & Range, 2005; Batten, Follette, Hall, & Palm, 2002; Brown & Heimberg, 2001), the findings support the notion that using a written paradigm to disclose details of victimization may not result in added benefit, reinforcing the need to explore further when, why, and under what circumstances such writing interventions can be beneficial and therapeutic for survivors of sexual trauma.

Investigating survivors' perceptions of social support and negative reactions to disclosure may also enhance our understanding of circumstances in which trauma disclosure results in beneficial effects. Littleton (this issue) presents results from a longitudinal study of college women that examined the impact of helpful and harmful aspects of support on victims' post-assault adjustment (e.g., forms of coping, cognitions about the self and world) and relationships among these variables over time. Cross-sectional analyses indicated that both social support and negative reactions to disclosure predicted symptoms of posttraumatic stress and depression, whereas longitudinal analyses indicated that only negative reactions to disclosure predicted symptoms of posttraumatic stress. Thus, these analyses show that perceived support and negative reactions to disclosure appear to play unique roles in adjustment. Given that relationships among these variables may change over time, this study highlights the need for more longitudinal research examining the role of different aspects of support in post-trauma recovery.

HOW DO WE APPLY WHAT WE KNOW TO THE CLINICAL SETTING?

One important direction for current and future research is the integration of clinical and research practice. Furthermore, it is essential to continue considering ways in which research on disclosure can inform and be translated into clinical practice. In order to make important steps toward this aim, Follette, La Bash, and Sewell (this issue) emphasize that understanding the purpose and function of disclosure or nondisclosure in managing distress is essential for developing both a deeper understanding of the client and an appropriate treatment plan. That is, depending on the function of disclosure or nondisclosure, different treatment interventions may be warranted. Follette et al. further explain how using a functional analytic approach can elucidate behavioral difficulties related to disclosure (e.g., disclosing too soon or refraining from disclosing as a way of avoiding feelings of vulnerability). Creating opportunities for disclosure within a therapeutic context and identifying the needs of the discloser are both discussed. Lastly, the application

of this information in the context of two “third-wave” clinical treatments, acceptance and commitment therapy and functional analytic psychotherapy is reviewed.

Roberts, Watlington, Nett, and Batten (this issue) highlight the need for a culturally sensitive and culturally competent approach to facilitating disclosure of sexual trauma, given the lack of empirical research in this area. In reviewing the limited literature that exists in this area, the authors discuss ways in which several dimensions of diversity (i.e., sexual orientation, age, gender, and race) may influence disclosure processes. With respect to each of these dimensions, the authors offer practical suggestions to help guide clinicians in assessing sexual trauma and facilitating disclosure in a culturally competent manner. This article underscores the importance not only of further exploring the impact of these variables on disclosure in future research but also of identifying ways in which other dimensions of diversity (e.g., religiosity, disability, socioeconomic status, indigenous heritage, nationality) may influence—and interact with one another to influence—disclosure processes.

In summary, it is our intention that the information in this special issue be useful in guiding both researchers and clinicians working to assist survivors of sexual trauma to recover. By including articles that represent a variety of perspectives, methodologies, and emphases, we hope to offer insight into a multitude of complex and understudied phenomena that relate to the disclosure of sexual trauma and disclosure processes themselves. Furthermore, we hope that this special issue will help identify current gaps in the literature and in this way serve as both a foundation and catalyst for much-needed further investigation of a spectrum of issues related to disclosure.

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