



# Interviewing Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse

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# Introductions – REPROVIDE and ADVANCE

# Outline

- Doing qualitative research
- Being aware of what participants (and you) might want
- Working with perpetrators
- Challenges you might face
- Researcher wellbeing and trauma
- Coping strategies

# Usual advice for doing qualitative research

Aim to explore participants' thoughts, views, feelings, experiences.

Use questions that are:

- open ended (“Tell me about...” “Why do you think...”)
- conversational in style - clear and simple.
- asking about one thing at a time.
- not ‘leading’ (where you subtly guide them to answer in a certain way (e.g., “Some men use abuse because they want power +control over women. Is this why you used abuse?”)).

Watch body language (yours and theirs), use neutral responses, don't interrupt or disagree.

# Usual advice for doing qualitative research

First maybe some small talk /chit chat

- Introductory questions (introduce topic, foster interaction).
- Transition questions (move from one topic to another).
- Key questions (more probing questions that drive the study, e.g. 2-5 questions).
- Save questions that are more sensitive towards the end once you've built trust and 'rapport'.
- Ending questions (bring closure, facilitate reflection).

# Skills you would usually use in an interview

Rapport, empathy, understanding without judgment, trust, acceptance, and mutual respect leads to rich data.

The researcher has power over the participant - to address this, interviewers must be ready to give over some control to participants, like letting them tell their own stories in their own ways.

# What do you want from the interviews?

- Think about why you are doing each particular interview. Being clear with yourself about why you are doing it can help inform the way you approach the interview.
  - Is it to hear a specific individual story?
  - To ask about a range of themes?
  - Because you need to recruit a certain number of participants?

Anything else?

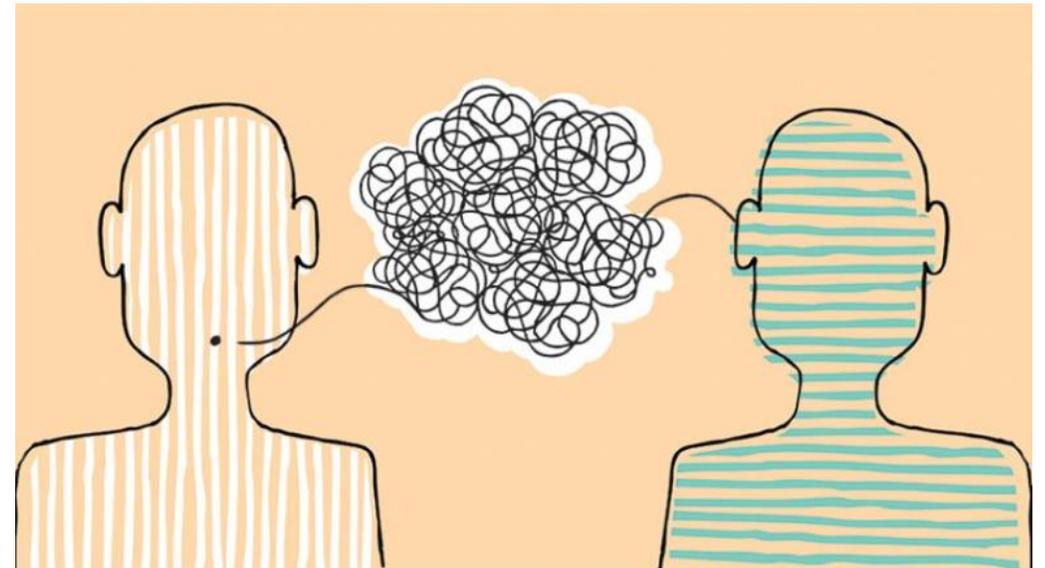
# What might participants want?

- Some of the things our participants seemed to want:
  - Recognition
  - Voice
  - Money
  - To help others
  - To help themselves

Anything else? What might your participants be looking for?

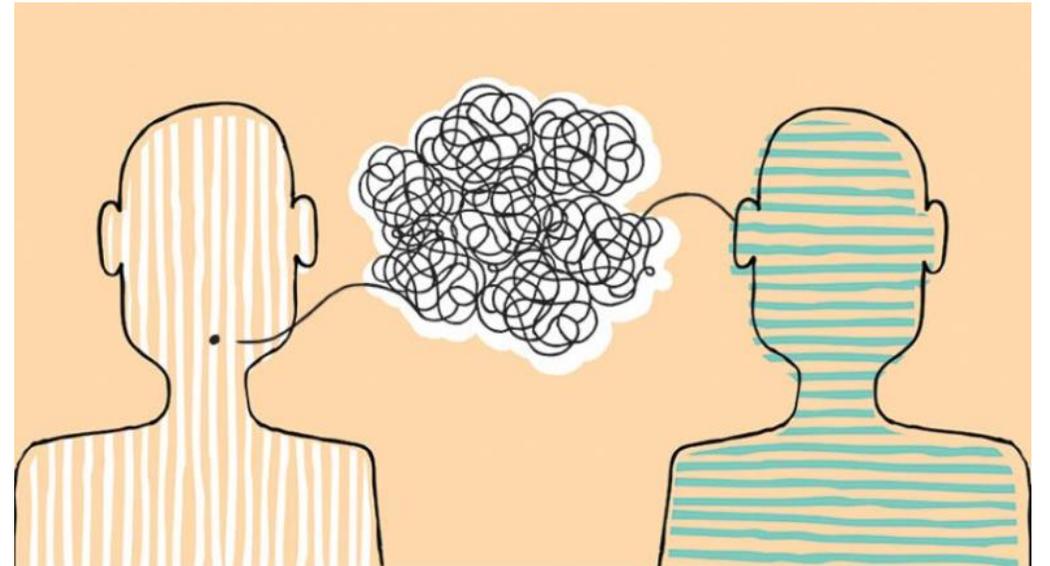
# Working with Perpetrators – starting the conversation

- If you are not confident, minimisation, denial, or blame is very high, or you don't have direct evidence of abuse, start light and become more direct:
- “Tell me about your relationship with...?”
- “Can you give an example of a stressful situation? Is there anything about the way you responded that you would like to differently?”
- “Are professionals concerned? Why do you think that's the case?”



# Working with Perpetrators – starting the conversation

- If you feel more confident - there is already some responsibility-taking, or they are in prison due to the abuse, you might be more direct – e.g. “So you’re here because you are using/have used abuse/violence in your relationship.
- Tell me a bit more about that, do you want help to stop? What would you like help with in particular?



# What the men say...

Interviewer: Have you found it useful hearing the experiences described by other men?

Respondent: Yes. Also, the reason it's useful is, I think is because it's me. It's a realisation of thinking about something that I've done. When you hear it and **you think, "Oh, you b\*\*\*\*\*d,"** and then think, **"Oh, that's me. I've done that."**

**Before** I even started this group, **I thought violence was just fighting.** I didn't really understand the word violence, or anything like that, or abusive. But by going to this group, obviously I am glad, because it explained everything to me. **It was quite a shocker, to be honest.**

So, **it was a whole bag of tools** that they could give you. I used to call them, "Nuggets." Every two-hour session, there would be just three or four little nuggets you'd take away with yourself. You didn't actually remember everything verbatim for two hours, but if you just took two or three little things every week, write them down.

# What the men say...

...even though I work with people every day, seeing people in the group did make me feel anxious but it got alright, like once you start going and seeing the same faces, talking to each other and stuff like that. **It was nice to know that I'm not the only person that's got issues.**

I would shout and argue – it wasn't a nice environment to be in for the kids and that was the turning point for me really – I've been in that situation before and it's not nice. My dad was violent and always drinking – seeing violence before school and after school was just a natural thing for us. **I just want my kids to have a better life than I did.**

**My wife's noticed how I've changed – I talk more now, try and meet in the middle, I'm not point scoring.** My colleagues and friends have noticed it too – they aren't seeing me upset and angry anymore, they're not seeing the stubborn side of me either and I've felt a lot happier. My mum's proud of me now too – she didn't want me to turn out like the man that brought me up.

# Challenges you might face

*She's  
worse than  
me*

**Identifying Responding to  
perpetrators presenting as  
victims...**

Victim Survivor	Perpetrator Presenting as a Victim
Minimises severity of incidents, although is likely to provide details and chronology	Minimises events, and is vague and unable to provide details
Takes responsibility , or excuses, the actions of the Perpetrator	Blames their partner for the incident
Empathy for partner, including difficult circumstances or childhood experiences	Focus on their experiences, little or no empathy for their partner
Feels remorse for fighting back or defending themselves.	Feels aggrieved
Can identify a very specific reason why they called, often abusive.	Less likely to identify a specific incident, instead focuses on general grievances
Ashamed of victimization	Assertively claims victim status
Fearful	Does not appear to be in any immediate risk, not fearful
Has tried unsuccessfully to leave or repair relationship	Overly confident
Confused	Claims not to be able to understand why previous relationships ended.
Feels a sense of obligation to abusive partner	May emphasise their role as a provider, or ‘saviour’
Focus on own responsibilities	Stereotyped view of roles in relationships

# Responding to Perpetrators Presenting as Victims..

- ▶ Remember, research shows women experience **higher frequency, severity and impact of abuse.**
- ▶ **Every case is different** – the list on the previous slide can help but will not map directly on to an individual – use it as a rough guide.
- ▶ **Try positive approaches that focus on them** – ‘where do you see yourself?’ ‘what kind of dad would you like to be?’
- ▶ **Try softer reflection on the past:** ‘Looking back, is there anything you would like to have done differently?’

An example...

FIELDNOTE: “When screening Harold for eligibility, he disclosed an alleged ‘one-off incident’ of violence: he had grabbed his wife by the throat and shaken her. I asked for his wife’s phone number and saw her number was saved in his phone as ‘Bitch’. Two weeks later, during the structured baseline interview, Harold elaborated on the ‘incident’, claiming that he’d ‘lost it’ in a ‘moment of rage’ because she was ‘running a brothel’ from his house. He described that after the ‘incident’, he burst into tears, went into the garden, and his wife called the police. When the police officer arrived, he apparently looked around at the chaos Harold’s wife had caused, turned to Harold, and said ‘mate, get a divorce.’ On telling me this story, Harold seemingly started to sob, immediately covering his face (including his eyes) with a handkerchief...” **What did I do?**

***He stood  
close to me  
and raised  
his voice***

**Managing power dynamics**

# Managing power dynamics

FIELDNOTE: “Ash was curt with me from the interview’s outset and appeared agitated, so I felt pressured to hurry through. At the end, when we both stood up, his body language became aggressive: he stood close to me and raised his voice in an angry tone and said he blamed the intervention and me for social services intervening with his family. He said he felt this was unfair as he had only wanted to help me by taking part...I changed the topic of conversation to reimbursement and signing forms and focused on escorting him out of the room...

# Managing power dynamics

...On reflection, I felt ambushed by his behaviour. Until then, he had been amicable, and I had not anticipated having to experience his aggressive behaviour first-hand. I felt he was exercising an attempt to control a situation over which he had no control (social services intervening) by exerting anger towards me: a lone female, in a confined space where I had no choice but to hear him.”

## ► What we did

- Prioritised our safety: if we needed to, we ended interview early or skipped questions.
- Ensured we abided by a good safety protocol.

*Yes, I see...I  
understand*

**Using rapport without collusion**

# Using rapport without collusion

‘Rapport = making the interview comfortable, being friendly, showing **empathy and understanding** without judgment.

‘Collude’ = using informal responses that make life easier for the perpetrator, whether you intend to do this or not. Can seem like you are condoning the abuse, protecting him from being held accountable, dismissing the seriousness, or ‘staying out of it’ (being neutral).

Participant: “I mean it’s like, I trashed my room, it’s like...”

Interviewer: “yes, yes, what does it have to do with her?”

# Using rapport without collusion

Interviewer: “Was that the only time you've been violent to her?”

Participant: “Well I've slapped her & that's about it: she's slapped me, just a few slaps”

This question makes it easy for the man to minimise his violence.

Even with subtle gestures like nodding, saying ‘I understand’ or ‘yes, I see’, we might collude.

Male interviewers might be more like than women to accidentally collude with the perpetrators. Men can try to get you on their side – “you know what women are like.”

# Using rapport without collusion

## ► What we did

- We were careful about our responses in interviews
- Tried to “find a neutral stance in between a collusive and an accusatory one. In practice, this means empathising when the man feels bad about his abuse and refraining from overfriendliness or opposition—instead, building a connection with the side of him that wants to change.”
- Transcribed our interviews as soon as possible, reflected on them, especially ones that ‘went wrong’ in some way, and identify your influences on the interview.
- We made time to talk to colleagues about interviews and transcripts and what went well and what could be done better next time.

***She was  
flirting, my  
mind  
snapped***

**How to react when men talk  
about abuse or use common  
tactics**

# How to react when men talk about abuse or use common tactics

- Interviewers do not judge or interrupt what participants say and allow them to share their thoughts, views, feelings, and experiences.
- But you will hear men say horrible things (“I didn’t know she was pregnant when I kicked her.) As feminists, and as everyday people who think VAW is wrong, we want to challenge patriarchy and abuse.
- Not challenging men might leave them feeling their abuse is justified?

# How to react when men talk about abuse or use common tactics

Perpetrators will also minimise, deny, justify their actions and blame victims:

“Yeah, she was flirting with her ex and [...] my mind snapped.”

“[My current relationship isn't violent] because I'm with someone who wouldn't allow it to happen.”

These tactics can be barriers to collecting rich descriptive data. But maybe these are findings in themselves.

*I'd burst  
into tears*

**Dealing with emotions in the  
interview**

# Dealing with emotions in the interview

- Sometimes participants will get upset or angry or agitated. Some of the strategies we might use are to:
  - Acknowledge the emotion.
  - Offer to pause or stop the interview.
  - Offer a drink.
  - Ask the participant if they need anything else.
  - Follow up after the interview to check the participant is OK.

Doing interviews is prison in more difficult. What can you do in these circumstances?

# Dealing with YOUR emotions *in* the interview

- And what about your emotions? What if someone says something that really makes you angry?

Maybe she was just too weak. Obviously, she just let it happen. By that, it made me kind of worse, if you know what I mean? If she had said, “No more. No more”, or like, “I think you’ve got to get help” years ago, like maybe when it first started, then maybe it wouldn’t have got to physical. But yes, I think it was really advantage - if that is the right word - if I must. She basically let it happen.

- How would you cope with your feelings if someone is blaming victims or justifying their abuse?

# Dealing with YOUR emotions *after/before* the interview

When I heard stories about women being beaten and tied up, I would leave there feeling desperate... I would be a wreck, and my supervisor would tell me “get a hold of yourself, you cry for every little thing.” But how could I control myself? I couldn’t stand it... I would try, but sometimes it was impossible, and I would burst into tears during the next interview... (Ellsberg et al, 2005).

....you feel empathy, anger, a sense of injustice and helplessness ...having worked on the issue of sexual exploitation for several years, one particular trigger for me was when participants described this form of abuse. Specifically, a couple of women who had experienced brutal (physical and psychological) domestic violence described how their partners also advertised them online and forced them to have sex with other men (Williamson et al, 2020)

# Secondary Trauma Key Themes:

- Trigger points
- Cumulative impact
- Competing demands
- Coping mechanisms
- Potential to make a difference

# Competing demands

- Pressure to get the job done
- Boundaries of work/home
- Not wanting to look 'weak'
  
- Anything else?

# Coping strategies

- ▶ Think about what you would do to cope after a difficult interview

# Coping strategies

I found it very helpful to talk to colleagues. We could vent our frustration, anger and other emotions at yet another instance of someone (mainly women) experiencing violence and abuse

I found it helpful to talk in general terms about the interviews to friends and my partner, e.g. 'I spoke today to yet another woman who has been raped multiple times'. However, due to confidentiality it is very limited what we can say

# Coping strategies

Taking a walk / getting fresh air. I would find myself getting very caught up in some interviews and in somewhat of a depressed/anxious daze afterwards...I found that sometimes the best course of action was to stop doing work related to the interviews and to go outside for a walk. The fresh air, change of scenery and quiet of the park I would walk in always helped

Stand still and let it pass

# Coping strategies

Quotes from Williamson et al, 2020.

....wine, chocolate and binge TV watching....

I particularly like murder mysteries which might seem odd. But it makes a change when the baddy gets it!

I found that I drank more when I was doing interviews. Something I recognise from previous research. It is a way, unhealthy admittedly, of switching off and shutting down some of the emotions that come with carrying other people's trauma

# Coping strategies

- Healthy and unhealthy
- Proactive – what works for you?
- Proactive – what do you need from others?
- What safety protocols need to be put in place?

# Cumulative impact

You think it would get easier over the years, but it doesn't. The fact that we keep having to have these conversations is in itself depressing on top of the nature of the issues we are dealing with

...made me feel like nothing much has changed in terms of the extent that abuse still exists on a massive scale and is allowed to continue

# Rewards

...those same interviews gave me a real sense that this research could make a difference to real people and real lives. That was a privilege to be a part of, and although difficult, made coming into work worthwhile

Having participants thank me for listening, and thank our team for doing this research, was always massively rewarding

# Conclusions:

- Plan
- Understand what you want out of the interview and what the participant might want from you
- Be prepared for the unexpected
- Recognise the impact your work is having on you
- Seek out support
- Ask for support
- Support your peers
- Regular de-brief
- Keep a reflective diary for fieldnotes (including how use of different terms affects the interview, power dynamics, how you feel)
- Take time for yourself to reflect - individual
- Put it into context – structural
- Be prepared to walk away
- Take care of yourself