

Dreams Deferred: The Impact of Sexual Assault during Adolescence on the Educational Outcomes and Life Choices of Women

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of sexual assault on the educational outcomes and life choices of women. Findings indicate that sexual assault during adolescence negatively impacts movement through the life pipeline in adulthood. Best practices for addressing sexual violence in adult education are discussed, and recommendations for future research are offered.

Sexual violence is an epidemic. Millions of women in the United States have been or will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime. Nearly one in five (18.3%) women in the U.S. has been the victim (survivor) of a completed or attempted rape (Black, et. al, 2011). The majority of these survivors were assaulted as adolescents or young adults. “Most female victims of completed rape (79.6%) experienced their first rape before the age of 25; 42.2% experienced their first completed rape before the age of 18 years” (p. 2).

Myriad quantitative research exists illustrating the devastating impact that sexual assault can have on a survivor’s physical and mental health, including the development of major depression/suicidal ideation, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders and substance addiction/abuse (see Black, et. al, 2011; Koss, Heise, & Russo, 1997; Ullman & Najdowski, 2009; National Center for Victims of Crime & Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 1992). Albaugh & Nauta (2005) found that among adult women, the previous experience of “sexual coercion” is negatively associated with three aspects of career decision self-efficacy, even after controlling for symptoms of depression. “Sexual coercion was significantly negatively associated with participants’ confidence in their ability to engage in accurate self-appraisal, their ability to select goals, and their ability to problem solve when faced with career decision-making challenges” (p. 296).

Unfortunately, little qualitative research about sexual violence exists to uncover the deeper meaning behind the statistics. The work of Horsman (2000 & 2006) is a notable exception. In Too Scared to Learn (2000), Horsmon examines the perceptions of adult literacy educators. Her data illustrate that a history of interpersonal violence can negatively impact engagement with education and educational outcomes. In a later article, Horsman (2006) uses data from her previous study of literacy practitioners, and her previous research with adult literacy students, to uncover the ways that interpersonal violence can inhibit success in literacy programs. Ultimately, she argues that a history of violence can make students feel that they are “too stupid” to learn. In both pieces, Horsman stresses that there is a need to address interpersonal violence within adult education curricula.

The Research

This paper presents data from a qualitative study¹⁰ which builds on the previous body of related research. While nearly all research on the impact of sexual violence has been quantitative, this qualitative study privileges the voices of survivors of sexual assault. In-depth interviews with eight women¹¹ over the age of 21 who were sexual assaulted while under the age of 18 were conducted. Using an innovative interviewing technique, Ethnographic Longitudinal Reflection (ELR)¹², each participant was able to deeply reflect on the impact of sexual violence on their physical and emotional health, and on their personal choices, including those related to education and career. All interviews were transcribed and hand coded, and salient themes were identified from the data.

The Findings

In line with previous research on the impact of sexual violence, the survivors in this study shared details of struggles with alcohol and drug use and abuse, eating disorders, cutting and suicide ideation/attempts.

I knew at a certain point that I had lost a lot of weight. Not that I thought I looked very thin, because [after the assault] I thought I looked ugly and fat, but people, my parents started making comments here and there and they would force me to come down to family dinner and, which was a rule in our house, but also they would force me to eat. I think they were catching on that I had a severe problem.

AN: It sounds like you had an eating disorder?

Yes, yes, I was developing a major eating disorder [after the assault]. It was bulimia, with periods of anorexia. There were periods, I mean, it started off as anorexia where I was counting every single calorie and I was exercising in excessiveness. But then it changed to bulimia. This started almost directly after the assault and lasted for years.

Literally every day [after the assault] I thought of suicide. Every single day. I thought, in my mind, that's probably what will happen to me. I probably will end up killing myself.

I never saw a place where I was going to be ok again. I figured ok, this is my life now. This is my life. I'm going to be the survivor of incest. Like to me I just didn't see any kind of light at the end of the tunnel. There was just no hope...It wasn't about me not wanting to live anymore, I wanted to die. I feel there is a crossover in suicide. Not wanting to live- ok, that sucks. Wanting to die means consciously seeking death. Everything that I was about was about wanting to die...I had my method picked out. I was going to slash my wrists because I felt like that was the best way...bleeding to death seemed right.

The survivors in this study also spoke of extreme drops in grades during high school, and of failures in post-secondary degree programs. They attributed these failures in part to their

¹⁰ This study was approved by the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent for their participation.

¹¹ The eight women who participated in this study were white, between the ages of 23-38, and from lower-middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.

¹² ELR is a five-part qualitative interviewing technique designed to gather reflective longitudinal data from participate perceptions.

struggles with eating disorders, alcohol/drug use and depression and suicide ideation. In line with the findings of Horsman (2006), several survivors also related their difficulties with education to a lack of confidence in their abilities post-assault. Lastly, three survivors spoke about their feelings of fear while attending college. These survivors were literally too scared to learn.

It became a threatening place when I went to college, because I think it, State University, was such a large school, right away I became very anxious being there. I didn't know anybody there, my boyfriend was not there, and I didn't have any friends there. I was overwhelmed by the size of State U and I started being, started having severe panic attacks.

All I can say about it is it is very difficult to study when you are pushing a dresser in front of your door because you are so afraid. So I was completely alone in the house at night, which is my scariest time, so every night would be me pushing my dresser in front of the door to make sure. Here was my thought process: if someone breaks into the house and wants to rape me, they are going to have to get through the dresser and at that point I'll be awake and it won't be a surprise attack and I can do something about it. The hell was when I had to go to the bathroom. So I had to get the dresser away and do the whole thing over again. So I found it very difficult to study.

The challenges the survivors in this study faced in K-12 and higher education caused a ripple effect pulling them off course from their initial career and life goals. Sexual assault impacted all aspects of their life pipeline.¹³ Although most of the women interviewed for this study were 10-20 years out of high school, seven out of eight expressed that they were just starting to get back onto a solid education and career path.

Importantly, data in this study go beyond previous research findings by providing recommendations *in the survivors own words* for the addition of sexual violence programming to schools and educational settings. All eight participants in this study believe that their schools (K-12 and college/university) should have, and could have, provided educational programming on sexual assault. None of the participants recall receiving any such education.

I think I definitely want to give a recommendation for sexual assault education becoming, especially I'd say date rape, becoming more integrated in schools... These kids need to be aware of what could happen, and what to do in those situations. ...[Sobbing] I think if I had had that then those kinds of things [the sexual assault] never would have happened... And if it had happened maybe I would have gotten help, been able to go to a hospital and get checked out. I would have known it wasn't my fault. Definitely if programs had been put in place, it would have been a lot easier.

The women in this study believe such educational programming would have helped them to understand that the sexual assault was not their fault, would have given them information about

¹³ I use the term "life pipeline" to include all aspects of a person's life- education, career, relationships, hobbies, etc. It goes beyond an education or career pipeline to include personal relationships, experiences and choices.

how and where to seek help, and in some cases, may have helped them to avoid becoming a victim.

I think schools have got to be the ones to educate the kids, at least to some degree, about sexual abuse. They have to and who is to say how young is too young to start that, because it needs to be at any age and so, yeah I probably would have sought somebody out to help stop it, if I knew that I could... If there was somebody at school who had come in and educated us and said, "If this kind of thing is happening, then you need to do this." And I think kids might have a tendency to go to a neutral party for help... that if you had somebody to go to at school that you would. You would go for help.

Beyond educational programs related specifically to sexual assault, many of the women in this study related that they would have benefitted from education on sex, sexuality and healthy sexual behaviors.

I think there should have been classes about it before, about sexual violence, what's appropriate and what's not. Really learning about sex, people's control and what is ok and what's not. What is stepping over boundaries and what's not. What are, you know, things you can say and don't say and things you should look for and listen for. Like someone saying no...

These women perceive that their education about sex was lacking, and in some cases actually harmful to their health and well-being. Their beliefs are supported by Elia (2000), who makes the case for comprehensive sexuality education.

...sexuality education could be expected to help reduce the incidence of sexual harassment, sexual coercion and rape... Sexuality education could be enormously helpful in making clear the issues associated with sexual consent and in teaching rape prevention (p. 343).

Best Practices for Adult Education

The survivors interviewed for this research study generously volunteered to share the intimate details of the most painful parts of their life. Why? These women wanted to use their voice to help. They hoped their experiences would shed new light on the long-term impact of sexual violence, and further, they hoped that their recommendations would be heard by policymakers, social workers, and educators across the country (and around the globe). These women believe that K-12 schools, colleges/universities and adult education programs have an ethical responsibility to assist survivors of sexual violence. Based on their recommendations, K-12 schools, colleges/universities and adult education programs, including those available within work settings, must actively address sexual and interpersonal violence, and healthy sexual relationships. Educational programming and counseling/support services related to sexual violence should be available and well-publicized, for students, program participants and employees.

Ignoring sexual violence because it is a difficult or sensitive topic is simply not in the best interest of students and program participants. Adults entering education programs bring with them all of the experiences they have had in their lives to date. It is impossible to separate the adult student from their past, and in fact, it is poor practice to try to do so. Adult educators must become knowledgeable about the potential impacts of sexual violence on the lives of their students, so that they may be prepared to identify students struggling with the aftermath of sexual

assault/abuse, and further, so that they may be able to incorporate previous experiences with violence into course work in appropriate, safe and meaningful ways. A wide variety of materials on sexual assault and abuse are available from government and non-profit organizations via the Internet (for example see Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN); Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) Program (CDC); National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC). In addition, Horsman (2000) provides extensive information about educational activities used with survivors in adult literacy programs. Additional models for working with survivors of sexual violence in educational programs should be developed and shared with the adult education community.

Future Research

While this research study offers compelling data about the impact of sexual violence on movement through the life pipeline, the sample was small and limited. Additional qualitative research studies examining the impact of sexual violence on movement through the life pipeline should be conducted with female survivors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and with boys and men. Research on adult education programs and practices that address sexual violence would also be highly valuable.

Final Thoughts

Sexual violence during adolescence has the power to radically alter a person's movement through the life pipeline, impacting educational outcomes, career choices, and personal relationships and behaviors. Surviving sexual violence caused most of the women in this study to defer their dreams for education and career. Adult educators in a variety of different roles have the ability to positively impact the lives of such survivors, to help them get back on to a positive life course. It is critical that adult educators understand the ways in which sexual assault and abuse can impact a person's life, including their engagement with education and career. Beyond helping individual survivors, adult educators have the power to create meaningful changes in society related to sexual violence policies, programs and services. Ultimately, addressing sexual violence should become a priority in the adult education field.

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