SURVIVOR-CENTRED RESEARCH

GUIDELINES, PRINCIPLES, AND RESOURCES

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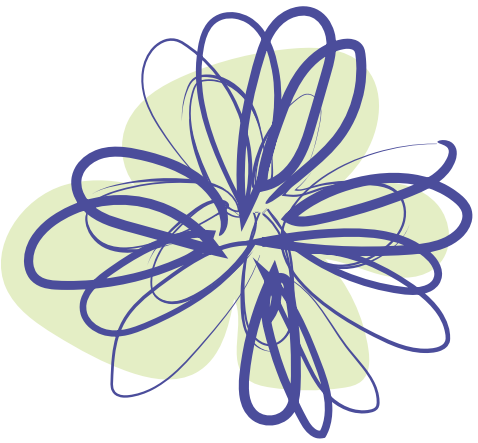

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A survivor-centered approach means that all those who are engaged in addressing sexual violence prioritize the rights, needs, and wishes of the survivor. This approach aims to create a supportive environment in which survivor's rights are respected and in which they are treated with dignity, respect, autonomy and self-determination. It also seeks to minimize the possibility of re-traumatization.

Adapted from the UN Women report "Survivor-centered Approach" (2011)

This toolkit presents a set of guidelines for researching the institutional and personal harms caused by sexual violence. We are a group of students and a professor who research how activists, students, teachers, and university staff address sexual violence and rape culture on university campuses. We work in Humanities and Social Science fields of research, and draw on a range of interdisciplinary research tools and texts to conduct our research. We began developing this toolkit as a way for our research team to think through and reflect on the ethics and practices of survivor-centered research. We now share this toolkit in order to start further conversations about what it means to do this research and do it well.

We believe that survivor-centered research practices are important because they actively center the perspectives and needs of survivors of sexual violence. As a feminist approach, this reframing critically addresses and dismantles the hierarchies of knowledge and truth that tend to structure how we think about and research sexual violence. During the research process, the needs of researchers can override the interests of survivors in ways that may be harmful. However, we believe that survivors are experts on what it is to know, experience, and live with the effects of sexual violence. We aim to respect and support survivors and their needs as best as possible and seek to reduce subsequent forms of harm that result from their encounters with educational and research institutions.

Our Process

This toolkit is a collaborative effort and emerges from a large SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) partnership grant to study responses to sexual violence on college and university campuses. This project is vast in its scope: our partners and colleagues are geographically distributed, and we come from different fields of study and community practice. Given all of this, we realize that there is a need to:

1. Have a common understanding of the problem of sexual violence, and a shared vocabulary for talking about it, analyzing it, and writing about it.
2. Commit to a shared set of values about why we are studying sexual violence (to end it!) and the feminist principles and practices of collaboration and survivor-centeredness that guide our research.
3. Develop a means of assessing how the structure of the research team, and our process of doing research, can best reflect the same principles and values of respect, diversity, and inclusion.

To write this toolkit, we have consulted a range of academic, NGO, and activist sources. We have also conducted guided self-reflections about our research on sexual violence to inform the toolkit's contents. While the toolkit was originally created to be a resource for us as a group, we realized it could be useful to others who work with and conduct research with, or about, survivors of sexual violence.

We see this toolkit not as a final statement on doing survivor-centered research, but as a way of opening up a conversation about it. If you have ideas about how we can improve this toolkit, we hope you will get in touch with us. We are open to your feedback and to conversations with those who are working to address sexual violence on other campuses and in other communities. We see these conversations as part of the active and ongoing processes that constitute feminist research.

Academic Researchers, Educators, and Students

There is a great deal of research being done around issues of sexual violence in academia. While university ethics boards govern some aspects of what we address here, they do not account for many of the questions and considerations that this toolkit discusses in detail. We hope this toolkit will inspire thoughtful reflection on what it means to do research on sexual violence in ways that are ethical, sustainable, and empowering for academic researchers, research participants and collaborators.

Students will find this toolkit useful for developing —and thinking through—their research methods for projects about sexual violence and how they write about the topic. Educators will find it a useful pedagogical tool for teaching about sexual violence from survivor-centered perspectives, and for training students in what to consider when one is researching and writing about sexual violence.

Advocates, Activists, and Community Organizations

Community organizations and activist groups conduct extensive research as well, and produce reports and guides that represent their research and their practices. We draw from the work of community organizations and advocates working to end sexual violence and amplify some of their own central principles for doing survivor-centered research. We hope this toolkit provides some additional ideas to aid activists and community groups in working with survivors and adopting survivor-centered approaches in their own research work.

Journalists and Other Writers

Several guides already advise reporters and writers on how to best cover issues of sexual violence and intimate partner abuse. They compile quality information and accurate data from reputable sources, including feminist research and field-based expertise from those who work with survivors. This toolkit supplements this existing information and helps to clarify what it means to do research, write reports, and cover news events that center survivor experience and knowledge, and that of the advocates who serve them.

1. Survivors are experts in their own experiences of sexual violence. Listen to them and take their knowledge seriously.

2. Prioritize the emotional and psychological well-being of survivors.

3. Practice empathy with survivors and with others on the research team. This also helps prevent victim-blaming attitudes from forming.

4. Respect survivors' needs, their decisions about whether or not they participate, and how they are willing to participate.

5. Eliminate hierarchies between researchers and survivors: let survivors ask questions, shape the conversation, and encourage dialogue. Allow them to represent themselves as much as possible.

6. Build time into the research plan to account for breaks and interruptions to the research process, especially for interviews. Give survivors enough time to talk about their experience and their knowledge at their own pace.

7. Show compassion, care, warmth, and understanding toward survivors and the people that serve and help them.

8. Recognize that this research impacts how people feel and what their bodies need. Offer healthy snacks to research participants. Try to have gluten free and vegan options, where possible. Take breaks. Drink water. Stretch out. Ask people if they need anything. Know where water fountains and accessible bathrooms are located nearby.

9. Provide resources and information to assist survivors and their allies and advocates, and to affirm their experiences. Include community-based support options with the resources.

10. Prepare for disclosures and/or emotional difficulties in the process of conducting research. Someone on the research team, or another person, should be trained in receiving disclosures and active listening and be present or on-call during the research.

11. Never pressure a survivor to tell their story or discuss details of what they have experienced.

12. Hold regular de-briefing sessions with the research team to talk about the ongoing research and the emotional impact it may be having on the researchers.

13. Be flexible with scheduling for research participants and for members of your team. This will help alleviate potential stress on your fellow researchers, and on participants.

14. Talk to all members of your research team about the emotional and psychological impacts that conducting research on sexual violence can have. Prepare them for this early in the research training process and give these conversations the time they need and deserve.

15. Practice self-care and train others how to do so as well. Do not leave self-care to chance. Share strategies of self-care and support and talk with each other about how you deal with the emotional side of researching sexual violence.

16. Set up peer-based debriefing sessions with those working on the project or other people in your life; check-in regularly with others who are involved in the research process.

17. Hold exit interviews with researchers who leave the research project/team to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your project, the team structure, and the research process. Use the information they provide to reflect on the research project and processes and make changes where necessary.

18. You do not have to agree with everything survivors, their allies, and advocates say, but it is important to accurately represent their perspective and see its value in understanding the impacts of sexual violence, the different ways people respond, and the different modes of interpretation they bring to understanding and developing solutions for sexual violence.

19. Realize that survivor-centeredness can sometimes come into conflict with other ways of understanding and responding to sexual violence. Transformative justice and community accountability frameworks foreground the self-determination of survivors while criminal justice and punitive measures often do not. Survivors can want different things and have different senses of justice than your own. Just like with anyone else, expect that you will not always agree.

20. Recognize that while advocacy around the problem of sexual violence can inform research, research and advocacy are different things. Certainly, research can—and does—inform advocacy. If you are hoping that your research might inform the advocacy work people are doing, ask them about what kinds of research they need. Depending on your ability, consider doing a project in collaboration with advocates and/or community partners.

Overview

Survivor-centered research prioritizes the wishes and well-being of survivors of sexual violence and works above all to benefit survivors by producing collaborative research that truly serves their needs. If your research involves victims and survivors or those who work with them, it is best to follow survivor-centered principles. You never know who may have experienced sexual violence among your research participants or your research team; you might also be a survivor. In the context of research on campus-based sexual violence, sexual violence can affect anyone, including students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

Anyone doing research on sexual violence should familiarize themselves with the existing research literature. Pay particular attention to feminist scholarship on the topic, which has developed a robust survivor-centered approach to sexual violence that aims to both understand and remedy this social problem. We also encourage people, where possible, to spend time volunteering for an organization that serves victims and survivors of sexual violence, to better understand the range of victims' and survivors' needs and their experiences. Volunteering can also help you develop harm reductive approaches to working with survivors (for more on harm reduction, see the section "Values of Feminist Research" below).

Conducting research on sexual violence can bring up unexpected feelings and responses during the research process, especially for those who are

survivors themselves. We approached our own research interviews with advocates working on behalf of survivors as not simply "data collection" but as a "setting and a process that dynamically affects both the research participants and the researcher" (Campbell 2004, p. 258). That is, the research process must be thought of as a collaboration between researchers and research participants that is fostered through mutual care and reflection. Following principles that have been established in the field of sexual violence research can ensure that the research process avoids causing additional harm and creates an opportunity for survivors and researchers to participate as fully as they can.

It is important to note the distinctions between the terms survivor and victim. 'Survivor' is commonly used to emphasize the agency and resilience of those who have experienced sexual violence. Shifting focus away from what has been done to someone, this term instead centers the humanity and self-determination of those impacted by sexual violence. However, some victims of sexual violence do not identify as survivors. Some people also use the term victim-centered instead of survivor-centered. We use the terminology of survivor-centered in our work which also serves as the preferred term of those with whom we work. We suggest you use the term that best reflects the terminology used by those with whom you are working.

Values of Feminist Research

Feminist research values include emotional engagement and empathy, collaboration and boundary setting, mutual respect, harm reductive frameworks, intersectional research approaches, and diverse research teams. To embed these values within your research practice, it is useful to regularly participate in moments of introspection and self-reflection, both individually and as a group, in order to check-in and reflect on how your social positions and individual identities inform how you are perceiving and conducting your research.

Emotional Engagement and Empathy

Feminist research on sexual violence recognizes emotion and feeling as key to both what we know and how we know it. Rebecca Campbell (2002) uses the term "emotional engagement" to describe feminist research practices that prioritize emotion as a useful and necessary tool that enables us to form closer connections to what and who we study. What we feel as researchers and how we respond to stories of sexual violence can inform our research, but it can also inform our relationships with other researchers and with research participants. Researchers' emotional engagements with the study of sexual violence becomes another source of knowledge and can be used to inform the analysis.

Empathy is important in conducting feminist and survivor-centered research. Striving to better understand the individual experiences and emotions of survivors enables you to become sensitive to the needs of research participants and your co-researchers. While it is never possible to fully know what a survivor has experienced first-hand, empathy generates a common understanding between researchers and research participants that results in knowledge formed through mutual trust. In this framework, empathy does not mean that researchers must imagine themselves in the survivor's position but rather that researchers have a responsibility to do what we can to better understand the survivor while respecting their right to self-determination. It is important to remember that a survivor's experiences are always their own and can never truly be shared by anyone but them.

While feminist research encourages you to empathize with research participants, it can also expose you to secondary trauma and compassion fatigue in the process. These consequences are often gendered and racialized in nature, as women and racialized individuals tend to be expected to perform the emotional labour of empathizing with others. Make time to reflect on how your research affects you, your team, and the people who are participating in the research. Build communities of support where you can talk about it together.

Collaboration and Boundary Setting

Collaboration is part of long-standing feminist efforts to challenge social hierarchies and help create social change. Even as more researchers embrace the idea of collaboration, hierarchies in the world of academic knowledge production and policy making persist, and they are hard to break down.

In recent years, "collaboration" has become something of a buzzword and is sometimes used simply to mean "working in a group," without necessarily recognizing

that working collaboratively fundamentally transforms the research process. Collaboration should aim to make research relationships less hierarchical. It should embrace more inclusive research practices for students and junior scholars, and share in the authorship of reports and publications. It also requires that researchers draw from and recognize the value of a range of diverse methods of analysis.

Research participants are also collaborators. Ask participants what they think about the research and the research process, and include their feedback in how you do your research and present the results. Share research findings with them. At the very least, check in with participants to see whether you have represented them and what they have said and done accurately. Provide opportunities for them to clarify their contribution and, if they want, to reconsider, revise or refuse the use of their information.

Collaborative relationships work best when there is a process for establishing and respecting everyone's boundaries and capacities. These boundaries can be professional: referring to workload, hours, and methods of contact, for example. They can also be emotional; sometimes this work is difficult to do. Due to the sensitive nature of research on sexual violence, setting emotional boundaries for yourself is not only beneficial, but necessary. Establish some limits for yourself over the kinds of work you are able to handle emotionally and psychologically. Set some boundaries over the hours you can work on such a project, in relationship to your other life and work obligations. Speak up when the boundaries you have set with others have been crossed or disrespected. If the work feels overwhelming, step back and create space for yourself. Reflect upon your needs and talk about your boundaries on a regular basis, because your needs can change over time.

Mutual Respect

Mutual respect for each other's limits, boundaries, and work contributions is essential. Respect includes, among other things, giving credit where credit is due and sharing the workload equitably. In addition to respecting your colleagues, you can show respect to your research participants by providing them with adequate information to help them make decisions about their participation in the research and respecting their desires to stop or interrupt participation as needed. It is important to build trust with people who are participating in your research, especially in relationship to how you will handle their data, the stories they tell you, and how you will represent them. Research participants have the right not only to set limits on how researchers use their information and data, but to also refuse uses with which they are uncomfortable.

Before interviews, tell research participants about the kinds of questions you will ask. Guarantee their privacy and anonymity, and try to ensure that their participation is a positive experience. If you have access to resources, pay your research participants in order to recognize the time they spend with you. If you do not have the resources to pay participants, recognize that this constrains many individuals' ability to participate in your research and work to come up with other, non-monetary forms of compensation where possible. You can also show respect to the community partners you may be working with by directly including them in the process, to ensure the research also meets their needs and addresses issues they have identified. Provide them with updates on the research and the findings as soon as possible, and in a format that works for them.

Harm Reduction

Feminist research projects must do as much as possible to reduce potential harm to research participants and their communities. Integrating harm reduction strategies into your research practice can help to identify in advance whether any particular research practices might create more harm, or aggravate existing harms for survivors.

According to the transformative justice organization Creative Interventions (2020), harm reduction aims to "reduce as many harmful factors as possible" in responding to gender violence and abuse, including, notably, factors that are created and reproduced by the criminal justice system (sec. 5, p. 4). Above all, harm reduction aims to empower survivors by recognizing their self-determination and agency. Harm reductive approaches provide more options and support to survivors instead of prescribing one "correct" way to navigate acts of sexual violence. For example, if a survivor chooses to remain in contact with their abuser, a harm reductive approach would not criticize this choice but would instead work to minimize possible harmful effects of this decision. Accordingly, harm reduction makes survivors the authority of their own recovery, healing, and justice needs.

Harm reductive strategies that you can integrate into your research practice include discussing interview topics and questions before beginning the interview, training research assistants in active listening, phrasing interview questions using non-judgemental language, and allowing researchers and participants to take breaks as often as needed. Harm reduction can also mean frequently checking in with those involved in the research process to unpack the emotional toll of doing this kind of research and figure out the best ways to support one another.

Intersectionality and the Importance of Grounding Research in Experience

Ground your research in the lived realities of people's experiences and their own interpretations of those experiences. Aim to find out not only what people have experienced but also what they consider to be the key issues and causes for social change. Your research should accurately reflect the perspectives and experiences of those who are participating in your studies, and it should be presented in ways that best serve those participants.

Start from an intersectional framework in the research process. Doing so centers your commitment to research that is attentive to the multiple identity positions of your researchers and participants and to the ways that intersecting structures of power are at play within the very processes of doing research. It also means, most fundamentally, centering racialized individuals in the research process: as knowers, as agents, as analysts. For us, this has meant centering racialized, queer and gender non-conforming individuals and their experiences—as researchers and participants—at the heart of the research we have been doing on student activism against sexual violence.

As Black feminist researchers have long argued, intersectionality means more than "inclusion" and "adding in" attention to race: it means studying the ways that relations of power shape the lives and agency of people in differential ways. As Black feminist media studies scholar Brittney Cooper (2016) puts it: Intersectionality is a "conceptual and analytic tool for thinking about operations of power" that marginalize, obscure and often make illegible the lives of women of color (p. 404).

Intersectionality also involves challenging established feminist research practices and assumptions. It is not just about recognizing differences; it means those differences transform the research process itself and its findings. Intersectional work requires self-reflexivity,

and a commitment to acting on the question: "what do I recognize, and not recognize, because of the positions I occupy?" (see Rice, Harrison and Friedman, 2019, p. 16). By drawing from intersectional feminism, your research can be more accountable to the different experiences of your colleagues and participants and their differential positionalities vis-à-vis social privileges and oppressions.

Oppressive social norms and institutions—and, crucially, the people who work in and for them—have not only subjugated the knowledge and experiences of marginalized groups; they have also mined, appropriated, and stolen their intellectual and cultural practices. This is especially important to consider in your own work, and to recognize that even well-intentioned work can unwittingly replicate extractive and marginalizing practices.

Diversity on the Research Team

Having a diversity of people and perspectives on the research team can expand your analysis and make you more effective as a team. Having a diverse research team means you will also be better attuned to people's differences, their needs, and their range of perspectives. Your research participants should ideally represent a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives to achieve a better and more accurate understanding of the differential impacts of sexual violence and avenues of redress.

Burnout

Burnout refers to feelings of emotional exhaustion, hopelessness, apathy, and alienation from one's work. Burnout can include physical symptoms such as headaches and tiredness. It can affect anyone on the research team but the impacts of burnout are often not distributed equally. Members of the research team who are survivors of sexual violence may be more likely to experience burnout and in ways that negatively affect their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Burnout also disproportionately affects researchers with marginalized identities, particularly racialized and queer and trans researchers. This can be due to a number of reasons including harmful dynamics between members of the research team, everyday experiences of oppression that occur outside the research context, and the lasting historical legacies of sexual violence as a tool of power and domination against marginalized groups. To minimize the effects of burnout, establish clear professional and emotional boundaries and hold regular check-ins as a research team to talk about how to best support one another and maintain healthy and anti-oppressive working dynamics.

Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent involves informing research participants about the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the range of topics that will be covered in a participant interview. Gaining consent should be regarded as a process, rather than a singular event. Remind participants that continued participation is voluntary and that they can choose to end their participation at any time. Ideally, consent should be obtained in writing but should also be regarded as open to change.

Giving participants flexibility in the consent process is key. It is important to remember that gaining consent from participants to take part in a study is different from gaining consent to release your participants' data.

Participants may consent to being interviewed but may not consent to having their data shared. Alternatively, they may want their data anonymized. Providing participants with control over whether and how they want their data shared gives participants more self-determination in considering what personal data they feel comfortable releasing.

Historically, obtaining consent to share and release data has not been standard research practice and this has disproportionately harmed racialized communities, who have experienced loss of privacy and breaches of confidentiality after having participated in research studies. Feminist research practices should use trauma informed approaches that take historical harm into account by explaining both the benefits and the risks of sharing data.

Gender-Based Violence

"Gender-based violence (GBV) involves the use and abuse of power and control over another person and is perpetrated against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender. Violence against women and girls is one form of GBV. It also has a disproportionate impacts on LGBTQ2 (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and two-spirit) and gender-non-conforming people. GBV includes emotional and psychological violence, such as intentional misgendering, intentional "outing", and use of gendered slurs, as well as physical, sexual, and structural or systemic violence." (Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support, and Education, n.d.)

The above definition lacks an intersectional analysis of gender violence. INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans People of Color Against Violence (n.d.) addresses gender violence as "violence against women of color (including trans women) and trans/queer people of color" that combines "'violence *directed at* communities,' such as police violence, war and colonialism, and 'violence *within* communities,' such as rape and domestic violence."

Intersectionality

"When race and gender factors are examined in the context of rape, intersectionality can be used to map the ways in which racism and patriarchy have shaped conceptualizations of rape, to describe the unique vulnerability of women of color to these converging systems of domination, and to track the marginalization of women of color within antiracist and antirape discourses." (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1265-66)

While in use for many years, the term was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, to describe how different forms of oppression – racism, misogyny, transphobia, etc. – interact in complex ways. Intersectionality sheds light on how various identity categories impact one another and change how individuals experience the world. For example, a Black woman experiences gender differently than a white woman because her gender is racialized and her racial identity is gendered. Crenshaw and other Black feminists developed intersectionality as an analytic framework for, as Brittney Cooper (2016) argues, "understanding black women's subordinated social position and the situated effects of mutually constructing systems of oppression in black women's lives" (p. 390). Other black feminist texts, like the *Combahee River Collective Statement* (1983) refer to "the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (p. 264).

For more information, see:

→ The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (2006), Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: A Primer. The primer identifies several key methods of intersectional feminist research that you can adopt in your own work.

→ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), "Mapping the Margins." Crenshaw highlights the ways in which approaches to gender-based violence often continue to marginalize women of color because these

approaches understand rape and domestic violence as a discrete set of experiences that do not accurately reflect the circumstances and needs of women of color.

→ Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016, Dec. 7). "The Urgency of Intersectionality" TED Talk. Crenshaw's TED Talk addresses how viewers can use intersectional perspectives to understand structural racism and misogyny in policing and its impacts of racialized communities.

Sexual Violence

"Sexual violence is about domination—across race, nation, class, gender, and other dimensions of inequality...[S]exual violence does not only result from individual deviancy. Rather, it is structurally organized around political ends." (Armstrong, E. A., Gleckman-Krut, M., & Johnson, L. 2018, p. 101)

Many definitions of sexual violence refer to non-consensual sexual acts committed by an individual against another person or group of people, including sexual assault and harassment. While instances of sexual assault and harassment are examples of how sexual violence occurs on an individual level, we understand sexual violence as broader than its frequently cited legal definitions which tend to emphasize isolated acts of violence. Sexual violence creates and reinforces systemic power imbalances. It is both a cause and a consequence of social inequalities that occur along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, and citizenship status, among other social classifications. As such, sexual violence extends beyond individual acts of violence to also impact broader social relations along differential lines of power.

However, when conducting research with survivors, sexual assault and harassment will almost certainly come up and it is important to know these definitions as well.

Sexual Assault: "Sexual assault refers to any act of a sexual nature carried out in circumstances in which an individual has not freely agreed or consented. Sexual assault includes unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature from unwanted kissing and touching to forced sexual intercourse and/or oral sex." (Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support, and Education, n.d.).

Sexual Harassment: "Any unwanted sexual communication or attention that is offensive, intimidating or humiliating, whether in verbal, written or visual form. This may include psychological violence, verbal abuse, manipulation and coercion." (Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support, and Education, n.d.).

Survivor/Victim

"Both terms are used to refer to a person who was sexually assaulted. In the 70's and 80's, advocates and activists in North America who worked to support those who have been sexually assaulted encouraged moving away from the term "victim" to the term "survivor". Now most commonly used in North-America, the term "survivor" generally focuses on agency and resilience whereas "victim" refers to the person being victimized by someone else and focuses on elements outside of a person's control. "Victim" is commonly used in the judicial system (by the police and in court) and is the most common term in the media. It is equally possible for a person to be a survivor and a victim depending on their experience. Personal, cultural, and socio-political reasons may influence a person in self-identifying with either term." (Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support, and Education, n.d.).

When interacting with research participants who have experienced sexual violence, ask how they would like to be referred to. While many feminist movements encourage the use of 'survivor,' it is always best to prioritize the needs and wishes of the research participant.

Survivor-Centered Approach

"A survivor-centred approach means that all those who are engaged in violence against women programming prioritize the rights, needs, and wishes of the survivor." (Ward, J., Shepard, B., Macdonald, N., Lafreniere, J., 2011)

Trauma-Informed

"Trauma and violence-informed approaches are policies and practices that recognize the connections between violence, trauma, negative health outcomes and behaviors. These approaches increase safety, control and resilience for people who are seeking services in relation to experiences of violence and/or have a history of experiencing violence." (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018, Feb. 2)

Trauma-informed research practices recognize that survivors of sexual violence have specific needs when it comes to the research process. Trauma-informed approaches are also guided by the recognition that trauma and its related effects are disproportionately experienced by marginalized groups. A trauma-informed approach centers intersectionality and harm reduction principles to acknowledge the widespread and differential impacts of trauma and integrate efforts to recognize and reduce retraumatization during the research process for both researchers and research participants.

Vicarious Trauma

The traumatizing effects that some people experience as a result of working with and listening to traumatic accounts of sexual violence. It is a kind of stress caused by listening to explicit accounts of a traumatic event or having explicit knowledge of a traumatizing event. Vicarious trauma can particularly effect researchers as a result of bearing witness to survivors' stories and engaging with their stories emotionally and with empathy. For more information on vicarious trauma and researching sexual violence, see the 2015 toolkit "Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Vicarious Trauma Among Researchers of Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence" created by the Sexual Violence Research Institute located in Pretoria, South Africa.

"Advancing Theory, Methods, and Dissemination in Sexual Violence Research to Build a More Equitable Future: An Intersectional, Community-Engaged Approach"

(McCauley et al., 2019)

This article develops intersectional frameworks and participatory methods to show how research on sexual violence might actually serve and benefit survivors by addressing the intersections of misogyny, gendered homophobia, racism, and sexual violence. The article illustrates how research on structural oppression can act as a form of sexual violence prevention.
→ https://journals.sagepub.com doi/10.1177/1077801219875823

"Critical Components of a Survivor-Centred Response to Campus Sexual Violence"

(Rossiter, K., Porteous, T., & Dhillon, M., 2020)

This resource provides a good framework for thinking about what survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches to campus sexual violence look like in practice. It includes recommendations for writing policy, formulating clear reporting procedures, guaranteeing the privacy and safety of survivors, providing effective and timely support and accommodations to survivors, and implementing comprehensive anti-violence training and education programs.

Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on the Perpetuation of Sexual Violence

(Jewkes, R., Dartnall, E., and Sikweyiya, Y., 2012)

This document is written for researchers and provides broad but concrete recommendations for how to conduct responsible research on sexual violence. These recommendations are explained with

reference to key ethical and safety issues that arise while conducting research on this topic. The guide also provides examples of best practices to illustrate its recommendations.
→ https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-04-13/EthicalRecommendations.pdf

"Feminist Research with Student Activists: Enhancing Campus Sexual Assault Research"

(Krause et al., February 2017)

This article describes strategies for working with student activists as research collaborators. It places particular emphasis on avoiding objectifying research participants and instead considering student activists as agents of change who have valuable contributions to the research process and must be treated as equal collaborators.
→ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/fare.12239

Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Vicarious Trauma Among Researchers of Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence

(Sexual Violence Research Initiative, 2015)

This document discusses why and how vicarious trauma can impact researchers of sexual violence and provides strategies for preventing and responding to vicarious trauma at individual, project, and organization levels. Particularly useful is a comparison of risk factors that increase the likelihood of vicarious trauma and protective factors that can be implemented to prevent, mitigate, and address the effects of vicarious trauma.
→ www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-06-02/SVRIVTguidelines.pdf

Learning Together: A Guide for Feminist Practice in Violence Against Women and Girls Research Collaborations

(Raising Voices and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, 2020)

This guide focuses on feminist research collaborations between activist organizations and research organizations. It provides information on how to navigate the ethics of research partnership and how to foster more equitable power dynamics, from initial project planning to data collection, analysis, and interpretation to the dissemination of research findings.
→ https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2020-12-17/Learning%20together%20brief.pdf

Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage

(Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women, 2012)

This resource is a practical guide to reporting on sexual violence, from initial research and preparation to interviewing to writing. The guide emphasizes contextualized reporting, accurate terminology, and clear and balanced language. It also describes a public health model of reporting that focuses on wider social conditions and includes examples of more and less effective reporting and bad reporting based on real news articles.
→ http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf

"Training Interviewers for Research on Sexual Violence: A Qualitative Study of Rape Survivors' Recommendations for Interview Practice"

(Campbell et al., 2009)

This article offer suggestions for researchers on how to conduct trauma-informed interviews with survivors of sexual violence. Important recommendations include training researchers on how to work with survivors of diverse backgrounds and experiences, emphasizing the role of empathy, compassion, and trust during interviews, and giving survivors control over how they discuss their experiences and in what level of detail.
→ https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801208331248

Use the Right Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence in Canada

(Femifesto & collaborators, 2015)

This toolkit for journalists was written by Femifesto, a Canadian feminist organization engaged in activism around rape culture and media reporting. It provides information on survivor-centered language, frameworks, and interviewing practices to be used when covering sexual violence in the media.
→ http://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/UseTheRightWords-Single-May16.pdf

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Citing this Toolkit

Information in this toolkit is free to use by anyone. It can be printed and shared (for free), linked to online, or used in part on in whole. Please include the full citation information when using information from this toolkit.

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Get in Contact

We would love to hear from other folks who are developing methods of survivor-centered research, and anyone who would like to share ideas about best practices. To get in touch with us, please send an email to Prof. Carrie Rentschler at: carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca

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