

# A Trauma-Informed Approach to Sexual Violence Research Ethics and Open Science

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This paper provides a critical overview of ethical considerations for working with sexual assault survivors as part of a research study. Specifically, this work outlines how the trauma-informed practice movement can be used to understand ethical practices for conducting research with sexual assault survivors, with a specific focus on what trauma-informed practice means for open science. Open science is a movement to make scientific research (i.e., publications, data, and samples) and its distribution accessible to everyone (i.e., laypersons and science professionals).

## **WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?**

- This work encourages researchers and practitioners to center the needs of survivors throughout all phases of the research/evaluation project.
- This work has specific, trauma-informed suggestions for ethical research with sexual assault survivors from recruitment through to dissemination.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers first provide an overview of what the trauma-informed practice movement is, and how this can guide research with sexual assault survivors. Then, the researchers explain ethics and participant recruitment using a trauma-informed approach to research. Third, they discuss a trauma-informed approach to data collection, and a trauma-informed approach to dissemination. The researchers conclude with implications of trauma-informed research ethics for open science.

## **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

To begin, the authors suggest that scholars should move beyond the basic requirements of institutional research ethics boards (REBs) in order to provide survivors with the ability to make informed choices during the process, have a sense of agency, and provide ample opportunity to feel empowered. Indeed, this approach centers the needs of the survivor and treats them as an equal partner on the project. Then, the authors consider recruitment and suggest that researchers need to reflect on whether the study participants are physically, mentally and emotionally ready to make informed decisions about participation. This holds true for both “victim-only” as well as general population samples. Since these studies may go into depth about experiences with sexual violence, the trauma-informed approach suggests a) giving a clear overview of what the study is really about during recruitment (i.e., sexual violence); b) using clear wording to help introduce questions if they are sexual assault-related, and c) reiterating throughout the study that the individual can discontinue their participation at any time with no consequences. Looking next at data collection, the authors suggests that using a trauma-informed research approach can help participants because it creates an environment that is safe and respectful if they are feeling distressed. Further, this approach highlights the survivor’s strengths and resilience instead of symptoms and pathology. Indeed, the goal here is to minimize the chance of re-trauma. Additionally, the trauma-informed approach is culturally sensitive, and aims to involve the participants in various stages of research development.

## **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This research can be used as an ethical guide for scholars who are considering including questions about sexual violence in their study. Additionally, this work can be used to inform service providers, health care professionals, and anyone involved in the criminal justice system about considering the needs of the survivor first and foremost, and using trauma-informed principles when working with this population.

## **ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS**

Rebecca Campbell, PhD, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA  
Rachael Goodman-Williams, MA, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA  
McKenzie Javorka, MA, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA

## **KEYWORDS**

Sexual assault, research, ethics, trauma-informed, open science

## **FULL REFERENCE**

Campbell, R., Goodman-Williams, R., & Javorka, M. (2019). A trauma-informed approach to sexual violence research ethics and open science. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(23-24), 4765-4793.