Examining Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Victimization by Method in Samples of Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

Sheryl Pimlott Kubiak Ph.D. a , Nkiru Nnawulezi b , Nidal Karim c , Cris M. Sullivan b & Marisa L. Beeble d

a Department of Social Work, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA
b Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA
c Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
d Department of Psychology, The Sage Colleges, Albany, New York, USA

Available online: 19 Apr 2012

To cite this article: Sheryl Pimlott Kubiak Ph.D., Nkiru Nnawulezi, Nidal Karim, Cris M. Sullivan & Marisa L. Beeble (2012): Examining Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Victimization by Method in Samples of Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System, Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 51:3, 161-175

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2011.618528

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Examining Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Victimization by Method in Samples of Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

SHERYL PIMLOTT KUBIAK
Department of Social Work, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

NKIRU NNAWULEZI
Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

NIDAL KARIM
Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

CRIS M. SULLIVAN
Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

MARISA L. BEEBLE
Department of Psychology, The Sage Colleges, Albany, New York, USA

Definitions vary on what constitutes sexual and/or physical abuse, and scholars have debated on which methods might yield the most accurate response rates for capturing this sensitive information. Although some studies suggest respondents prefer methods that provide anonymity, previous studies have not utilized high-risk or stigmatized populations. In this article, the authors report on serendipitous findings when using two methods to assess the past year incidence of sexual and physical violence among women involved in the criminal justice system. Women who participated in an anonymous survey reported higher physical and sexual victimization than did the women who were interviewed, even though the questions were identical. Implications of the findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS incarcerated women, methods, physical victimization, sensitive information, sexual victimization

Address correspondence to Sheryl Pimlott Kubiak, Ph.D., Department of Social Work, Michigan State University, 254 Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA. E-mail: spk@msu.edu
Numerous studies have found that women involved in the criminal justice system have high rates of both physical and sexual assault, and that rates can vary depending on how the questions are framed (Fisher, 2009; McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2009; Wolff, Shi, & Bachman, 2008). Definitions of what constitutes physical and/or sexual abuse may vary by individual and often depend on life experiences and the stigma associated with identifying as a victim (Fowler, Blackburn, Marquart, & Mullings, 2010; Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003). In addition to the question’s construction and the individual’s own perception of the question, the approach we use in collecting the information also matters.

Decisions regarding methodology are based, at least theoretically, on using the method best suited to answering the research question. Pragmatically, however, decisions are often influenced by the need to match the feasibility of a particular design to the setting and available resources (Rosenbaum, Rabenhorst, Reddy, Fleming, & Howells, 2006). Balancing the decision between the best and most feasible method is often difficult, as data collection methods can affect response rates, integrity of the data, and study findings. This choice is particularly poignant when queries focus on sensitive subjects such as having experienced physical and/or sexual violence, necessitating that methodological decision making also considers the respondents’ comfort in answering the questions. Previous research on experiences of violence has illuminated tensions between methods that afford anonymity versus those that focus on engagement and rapport building. Unfortunately, many of the studies comparing anonymity versus rapport building methods have concentrated on college students and not on high-risk women from stigmatized social locations. The purpose of this article is to reflect on how methods of data collection affect disclosure of abuse across two studies involving women in the criminal justice system. The first study utilized an anonymous paper-and-pencil survey, while the second utilized in-depth face-to-face interviews. Both studies included identical questions about women’s experiences of physical and sexual violence. Although the two studies focused on similar samples and were conducted within the same year in the same geographic location, the self-reported rates of abuse were considerably different. This article explores the methodological differences between the two studies and how they may have contributed to the variation in disclosure rates. By researching the methods that are most effective when asking women with criminal histories about their victimization experiences, we can decrease trauma and increase accuracy of reporting. Consistent with prior feminist approaches to research, both studies placed value on women’s voices and interpretations of their experiences.

Background

Survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews are two of the most utilized methods in social science research. Questionnaires utilize various
approaches (e.g., computer assisted, paper-and-pencil), vary in length, and are generally inexpensive to administer when trying to reach a large number of respondents (Singleton & Straits, 2005). Utilization of this method is best when the subject matter is easily understood, and generally eliminates interviewer bias as each respondent receives the question in exactly the same format. Conversely, telephone or in-person interviews are used when the subject matter is more complex, requiring explanation or clarity from the interviewer, ensuring that each respondent is interpreting the question correctly and each interviewer is, in turn, understanding their responses. Interviews necessitate a one-to-one relationship between the respondent and interviewer and are consequently more time consuming and costly. Therefore, written surveys allow for greater anonymity due to the lack of direct communication between the respondent and researcher, while face-to-face interviews benefit from the rapport built between the researcher and respondent. As with any self-report measure, both surveys and interviews require that the researcher rely on the respondent’s perceptions and beliefs, unlike more objective measures such as behavioral observations. Furthermore, questionnaires risk inattention or haphazard responses, while interviews may facilitate more filtered, socially desirable responses (Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, & Gonzales, 1990).

The differences between these two methodological approaches are likely to affect disclosure of sensitive information. Sensitive information pertains to topics that are considered socially undesirable (Saunders, 1991) or counter to normative societal expectations if disclosed (Ragins, 2008). Examples include involvement in criminal activity, the use of drugs and alcohol, and experiences of assault or abuse across the lifespan. Disclosure of this type of information or the likelihood of response bias may be influenced by an individual’s appraisal of the costs/benefit of participation in the study (Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006) or perceived confidentiality of the information (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Smith, 1994). Some scholars believe that disclosure of sensitive information is enhanced through building rapport in face-to-face interviews, while others believe that promoting anonymity through surveys or questionnaires is best (Reddy et al., 2006; Wood, Nosko, Desmarais, Ross, & Irvine, 2006).

The extent to which methodology affects disclosure rates of sensitive information may be confounded by other study characteristics, such as the sample. For example, in studies employing college samples, there seems to be little difference in rates of disclosure by method. Using random assignment to four method conditions, including paper-and-pencil surveys and face-to-face interviews, two independent studies found no differences in disclosure of physical and sexual victimization (Reddy et al., 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). However, in a different college sample, DiLillo, DeGue, Kras, Di Loreto-Colgan, and Nash (2006) found that although disclosure rates did not differ by method, abuse survivors reported feeling less
threatened by methods that did not involve direct human interaction and were more likely to be concerned with confidentiality.

While research with college samples tends to find no difference in disclosure rates of physical or sexual victimization by method, studies conducted with community samples have been more equivocal. For example, findings from a prenatal clinic sample revealed that women were more likely to disclose abuse in a written questionnaire when compared to a directed interview (Canterino, VanHorn, Harrigan, Ananth, & Vintzileos, 1999). In contrast, McFarlane, Christoffel, Bateman, Miller, and Bullock (1991) found that women recruited from a health clinic were more likely to answer affirmatively to abuse questions in the face-to-face interview than to a paper-and-pencil survey about sexual abuse and fear of male partners. It should be noted, however, that in this study the written surveys were not anonymous because they could be linked to individuals at the time of the interviews. A more recent study within a pediatric care clinic (Kim, Dubowitz, Hudson-Martin, & Lane, 2008) compared face-to-face interviews, paper-and-pencil surveys, and computer/audio methods. Results showed higher disclosure rates of physical abuse in the more anonymous methods (paper-and-pencil and computer).

Issues pertaining to the research setting, including personal characteristics of the researcher, have also influenced disclosure. The three most commonly studied characteristics are the effects of interviewer age, race, and gender on participant responses. Most studies find higher disclosure with female interviewers (Dailey & Claus, 2001). Some studies found that older interviewers were more likely to obtain higher rates of disclosure of sensitive information (Johnson, Fendrich, Shaligram, Garchy, & Gillespie, 2000; Wilson, Brown, Mejia, & Lavori, 2002). In contrast, one study found that respondents disclosed sexual and physical abuse most frequently to interviewers who were within 5 years of their age compared to interviewers 20 or more years older than them (Dailey & Claus, 2001). Interestingly, although matching interviewer and interviewee characteristics is generally the norm, Dailey and Claus (2001) found that Black survivors disclosed physical and sexual abuse more often to White interviewers than to Black interviewers.

Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, and Sefl (2010) found that feminist approaches to interviewing are sensitive to the power imbalance between “researcher and researched,” and can facilitate women’s disclosures about victimization. In fact, those interviewed acknowledged that techniques that built trust, decreased hierarchy, and increased comfort promoted greater ease in reporting sensitive information. In addition, when interviewers repeatedly reminded the women of their option to skip questions that made them feel uncomfortable, it made them feel more control over the interview and that interviewers were nonjudgmental, enhancing their desire to respond.

Some researchers have also studied the impact on survivors disclosing abuse in research interviews (Campbell et al., 2010; Newman & Kaloupek,
2004). Overall, women who choose to participate in research that inquires about their victimization experiences find that interviews can cause emotional discomfort. However, they have also been cathartic. Most studies have found that women believed the benefits of doing an interview outweighed the emotional toll they experienced (Draucker, 1999). Survivors within numerous studies have described the benefits to participating in interviews that asked about victimization (Black, Kresnow, Simon, Arias, & Shelley, 2006). Some women have discussed the desire to provide information that will help other women who have survived similar violent experiences (Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). Others have appreciated the opportunity to discuss their assault with a nonjudgmental, empathetic listener (Campbell et al., 2010).

Perhaps nowhere is the power differential between researcher and study participant more acute than in research about women involved in the criminal justice system (Davis, 2003). Researchers, even women of the same age and race, are privileged as among those in the “free world” and may be thought to have power or influence over the individual’s fate. Strategies to minimize these power imbalances (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991; Mies, 1991) may be unsuccessful when individuals involved in research are confined or under court jurisdiction. Because this differential is so acute, there may be more pressure upon the respondent to respond in a more socially desirable fashion. Unfortunately, there is limited literature focusing on the impact of disclosure when interviewing incarcerated women who are survivors of violence. Hlavka, Kruttschnitt, and Carbone-Lopez (2007) conducted interviews with 142 incarcerated women who were asked to report their past victimization history. While most women in the study answered all of the victimization questions, the authors found a significant relationship between victimization history and disclosure. Women who had survived childhood sexual assault involving intercourse were less likely to complete the interview than were women who either experienced childhood sexual assault without intercourse or who had no prior victimization histories. Hlavka and colleagues also found that women who chose not to complete the interview either chose not to talk about their abuse at all, or did not go into detail. Noncompleters chose to bury or block out their experiences, avoided talking about their experiences, or discussed their experiences after the official interview was over.

In sum, women generally report that participating in research studies that ask about victimization is a beneficial experience. If women choose not to participate in an interview, they will simply engage in behaviors that cue the interviewer that they do not want to answer the question. However, there is a still a great deal of research needed on disclosure and impact of interviewing, particularly with women who occupy multiple stigmatized social positions. No study to date has compared data collection methods of gathering sensitive information such as physical and sexual victimization

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**Rates of Victimization Disclosure by Method**

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from highly stigmatized populations. Incarcerated women are stigmatized not only because of their illegal behaviors, but also for their embodiment of multiple and intersecting oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1991, 1995; Hurtado, 1997). This particular social location can include minority racial/ethnic status, poverty, lower educational attainment, and unemployment (Kubiak, 2005). This societal stigma, in addition to self-blaming views (Ahem Stuber, & Galea, 2007), might inhibit disclosure of information that women feel would contribute to their stigmatization.

This article presents results from two similar but independent studies. Both studies utilized two distinct methodologies initially designed to address separate research questions. However, an overlap in study questions provided us an opportunity to examine differences between methodological approaches. Through an ad-hoc analysis, we contrasted the disclosure rates of physical and sexual abuse among women involved in the criminal justice system using two methods: paper-and-pencil surveys \( n = 515 \) and face-to-face interviews \( n = 50 \). Based on the prior literature and our assumption that women of a stigmatized social location may feel the need to respond in more socially desirable ways, we hypothesized that the paper-and-pencil questionnaires, being more anonymous, would yield higher disclosure rates of abuse.

**METHOD**

**Study 1: Paper-and-Pencil Questionnaire Within a County Jail**

The primary purpose of this study was to validate a brief screening instrument that identifies women with high levels of functional impairment secondary to psychological distress (See Kubiak, Beeble, & Bybee, 2009, 2010). In the survey questionnaire, the brief measure was cross-validated against measures of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder and included questions about traumatic event exposure. The questions were straightforward, easy to understand, and, in many cases, had been derived from validated scales.

In total, 568 women incarcerated in an urban jail were approached to participate in this study regarding the prevalence of current mental health symptoms and disorders. Nine percent \( n = 53 \) opted out for reasons unknown to the researchers, rendering a final sample of 515 women. Due to our commitment to anonymity, and to ensure that women would not believe their answers to questions could identify them, very few demographic characteristics were collected (see below). Women’s length of stay at the time of survey administration ranged from 1 to 466 days \( M = 42.55 \text{ days}; SD = 62.11; \text{Median} = 21 \text{ days} \). Women ranged from 18 to 60 years of age, with \( M = 34.11 \), and \( SD = 10.16 \). Race was not collected on individual participants, but the overall 2007 census indicated that 59% of women incarcerated in this facility were African American (personal communication, R. Pitts, October 8, 2008).
PROCEDURES

Women were invited by correctional staff to come into a large room that had tables and chairs. To ensure confidentiality, informed consent was obtained verbally. Women who needed assistance (e.g., verbal administration) to complete the survey were provided this help (the survey administrator read out the survey questions and the participant marked her responses on her own copy of the survey). Surveys took between 10 and 30 minutes for women to complete.

The IRB approval for this study was largely reliant on the anonymous nature of the study. This imperative nature of this anonymity was based upon the women's currently incarcerated status and that the survey contained sensitive information on mental health and trauma. The absence of demographic information was purposeful to this goal of anonymity, in the off chance that jail staff would view the survey as researchers went through security entering and exiting the jail. Working closely with the IRB staff we developed a unique identifier that would have women creating their own codes using a specific algorithm (e.g., day of birth, last letter of your last name, first initial or first name). The sole purpose was to prevent duplication of data collection.

Study 2: Face-to-face Interviews Within an Alternative Incarceration Site

This study, which built upon the results of the previous study, involved exploring women's help-seeking behaviors once they were released from jail. More specifically, we wanted to discern how women defined their needs, how they prioritized them, and how and when they made decisions to seek outside help. Due to the personalized and exploratory nature of the study, we employed a face-to-face interview approach that allowed the interviewers to probe based on the particular woman’s response. The study sample consisted of women who had recently been released from jail and who currently resided in one of two secure residential facilities. However, they were still under the jurisdiction of local criminal justice authority on either probation or diversion status. Women who participated in the interviews ranged from 18 to 59 years of age with $M = 39.92$, and $SD = 10.41$. Of the women, 62% were Black, 34% were White, and 4% were Latina.

PROCEDURES

All of the interviewers were trained professionals who had extensive histories working with women in the criminal justice system and/or in services for women who experienced interpersonal violence. Before each interview, participants were given a consent form to sign that described their
participation in the study. Every participant was informed that the interview was confidential and that their participation would not affect their relationship with the criminal justice system or the community agency. The interview probed for areas of concern and help-seeking activities across seven domains: (a) Basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing; (b) alcohol or drug treatment; (c) education or employment; (d) psychological or emotional concerns; (e) healthcare; (f) building relationships with family and friends; and (g) maintaining physical safety and avoiding harm. After women identified their concerns, they were asked to explain the areas that were a concern and others that were not; where they went for help; and which source was the most and least helpful to them in meeting their specific need. The final section of the interview guide consisted of structured questions on mental and physical health, experiences of trauma and victimization, and demographics.

Interviews took place over a 6-month period, ranging in length from 29 to 80 minutes. Twenty-nine women were interviewed from one agency and 21 women were interviewed from the other. Each of the 50 participants was compensated with a $25 gift card to a local convenience store. Interviewers reserved a private room in each organization’s main building. The rooms varied in size based on the day and availability but the interviewer made sure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Paper/pencil survey women in jail (N = 515)</th>
<th>Face-to-face interview women exiting jail on probation or diversion (N = 50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>$M = 34.11$ (SD = 10.16) Range: 18–60</td>
<td>$M = 39.92$ (SD = 10.41) Range: 18–59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with minor children</td>
<td>Not asked</td>
<td>54% (n = 27) Range: 0–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in jail (days)</td>
<td>$M = 42.55$ (SD = 62.11) Range: 1–466</td>
<td>$M = 104.91$ (SD = 73.48) Range: 30–335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest history</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One arrest</td>
<td></td>
<td>42% (n = 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two arrests</td>
<td></td>
<td>44% (n = 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three arrests</td>
<td></td>
<td>10% (n = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four arrests</td>
<td></td>
<td>4% (n = 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of offense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-related</td>
<td></td>
<td>32% (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property related</td>
<td></td>
<td>36% (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td></td>
<td>19% (n = 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of Black women</td>
<td>59%a</td>
<td>62% (n = 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of White women</td>
<td>41%a</td>
<td>34% (n = 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse in past 12 months</td>
<td>44% (226)</td>
<td>24% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse in past 12 months</td>
<td>18% (94)</td>
<td>10% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aRace was not collected on individual participants but the overall census of women entering this jail during 2007 indicated that 59% are African American.*
the woman was comfortable and that her information could not be overheard in the hallway.

In contrast to the first study, this study received IRB approval using a confidential versus anonymous standard. Confidentiality was an easier standard to achieve when women were in the community versus confined in jail. Research staff entered the residential facilities without being searched upon entrance and exit, and were able to keep the research material in their possession at all times. This and the one-to-one interview method increased our ability to solicit more demographic information (See Table 1).

COMMONALITIES ACROSS STUDIES

These studies were conducted within the same year, within the same urban county, and with similar research team members. In both studies, identical questions were asked about physical and sexual assault in the past 12 months. These questions were worded as follows: (a) In the last 12 months, have you been hit, slapped, kicked, punched, or physically hurt or injured by someone?; and (b) In the last 12 months has anyone ever forced you to have an unwanted sexual act?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The age (ranging from 18 to 60) and race (59% vs. 62% African American) of the samples of women were similar. However, rates of disclosure of abuse by sample were quite dissimilar. In the paper-and-pencil survey, 44% of the sample (226 women) responded affirmatively to questions about physical assault within the past 12 months compared to 24% (n = 12) of the women in the face-to-face interviews. Similarly, disclosure of sexual assault in the same time period was much higher in the paper-and-pencil survey versus the face-to-face interviews (18% vs. 10%). Despite the ad hoc design of this study, the reported differences between the two studies warrant some discussion about methodological choices when asking women with criminal histories to disclose abuse. The survey method utilized the same researcher for the entire data collection process. The researcher, a 31-year-old White woman, was present in the room during the survey administration in the jail at every data collection time point. In contrast, a team of three researchers was utilized for the face-to-face interviews. Table 2 outlines the characteristics of each researcher. Interviewers varied in age, race, the number of interviews completed, average time of the interview completion as well as the disclosure rates. Interviewer 1, a Black woman who was the youngest of the interviewers, completed the most interviews while Interviewer 3, a White woman who was the oldest interviewer, completed the least. If time of interview is a proxy for rapport or participant engagement, it appears that
Interviewer 1 would have the lowest level of rapport, Interviewer 2 in the middle and Interviewer 3 the highest.

Some methodologists have argued that “if the interviewer is skilled and sensitive, the interview may be preferable even to an anonymous questionnaire when the questions are personal or emotionally laden” (Aronson et al., 1990, p. 262). However, this study corroborates the work of Canterino and colleagues (1999) as well as Kim, Dubowitz, Hudson-Martin, and Lane (2008), suggesting that women may be more likely to disclose prior physical or sexual victimization through anonymous methods rather than through face-to-face interviews. Women in this study were much less likely to disclose abuse if they were interacting with the interviewer, even in a confidential setting, than were women in the more anonymous survey condition. Although prior research with college students found no differences in reporting rates by method, this study more closely resembles the research involving community samples, and is the first to examine the use of different data collection methods with a highly stigmatized population.

In considering other factors that may have influenced the results we reflect on the setting, interviewer characteristics, and the particular social location of the women involved in the studies. Conducting research within jails and similar locked settings has unique challenges with regard to privacy, confidentiality, trust, and rapport. Several researchers have reported difficulty maintaining participant confidentiality due to the scarcity of privacy and uninterrupted time when collecting data in incarceration settings (Farkas, 2006; Maeve, 1999; O’Brien & Bates, 2003). For example, O’Brien and Bates (2003) reported that on some occasions during survey administration, prison guards were present in the room, even though they had been requested not to be there, inferring some element of coercion and perhaps reducing the women’s comfort in participating. Based upon these studies we may have suspected that women within the jail setting would be less inclined to share information about abusive histories irrespective of method. In the current study, however, it does not appear that the jail setting inhibited reporting.

Perhaps interviewer characteristics were related to disclosure rates, as the younger interviewers had a lower than expected number of women talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>No. of interviews</th>
<th>Avg. time (min)</th>
<th>Expected physical abuse</th>
<th>Actual physical abuse</th>
<th>Expected sexual abuse</th>
<th>Actual sexual abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38.23</td>
<td>n~10</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
<td>n~4</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>n~8</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
<td>n~5</td>
<td>n = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>n~4</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
<td>n~1</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Expected rates of physical and sexual abuse are based on the rates that were obtained in the survey/questionnaire method that preceded the interviews.
about either physical or sexual abuse. Previous research reports that respondents were most likely to disclose personal information to those who were closer to their age or older. The mean age of the women interviewed was mid-to-late 30s and the interviewer who conducted the majority of interviews was in her early 20s. This difference in age, and at times race, may have led to some respondents sheltering her from more truthful responses or it could have been responses to the social distance between the interviewer and the respondent (See Table 2).

Social distance is defined as the social identity differences between the participant and the interviewer. There is evidence that the greater the distance between the interviewer and the participant, the less likely a participant is to disclose (Lord, Friday, & Brennan, 2005). Johnson and colleagues (2000) found that social distance related to participants’ reporting of lifetime and recent drug use. The closer a respondent matched demographically to an interviewer, the greater the likelihood to disclose. Participants’ preference for someone who holds similar characteristics can also be found in a study by Catania and colleagues (1996). They let participants choose their interviewers. Women participants typically chose women interviewers, while men chose to be interviewed by both genders but with a slight preference for women (Catania et al., 1996). Giving participants a choice increased disclosure of sexual assault, risky sexual behaviors, and sexual concerns by men. There were also fewer study drop-outs.

Although attempts were made to minimize social distancing in the face-to-face interviews with greater attention to matching on the demographic characteristics of sex, age, and race, it may have been that the distance between women involved in the criminal justice system and women who are highly educated professional may have been too wide. The multiple and intersecting stigmatized identities (Crenshaw, 1995; Hurtado, 1997; Kubiak, 2005) that women within this particular social location hold may have inhibited disclosure of yet one more stigmatized identity the victim/survivor of physical and/or sexual assault. Although all three of our interviewers were female and varied by age and race, none had experienced the stigma of incarceration. The inherent power differential between the researcher and the researched cannot be ignored (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Riger, 2000; Andersen & Hill-Collins; 2001) and is especially acute when researchers are part of the “free world” (Davis, 2003). Inattention to these factors within this study is a limitation and should be examined more closely in subsequent studies.

Furthermore, there has been little research comparing various types of criminal justice research settings, particularly with research involving women. Therefore we are unsure if there are distinctions between a locked jail facility and an alternative corrections placement, such as a half-way house or secure residential facility. In this instance, administrators in the alternative placements where the face-to-face interviews occurred maintained a strong
affiliation with the jail administrators. Both of these alternative programs received funding from and were monitored by the county corrections department. We suspect that women may believe that the "alternative incarceration" sites are actually very similar to the jail setting.

A further limitation of the study is our inability to detect differences between the women on key demographic variables. Our commitment to women's anonymity meant we had to limit collection of any information that might identify any individual to jail staff. Although this prevented us from examining demographic differences, it may have enhanced women's comfort in disclosing. Another limitation involves the actual questions used to assess abuse. Previous studies suggest using multiple methods/questions to ascertain abuse (Fisher, 2009; Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008; Schwartz, 2000; Shepard & Campbell, 1992). In contrast, only two questions were asked of women regarding their prior history of physical or sexual victimization in this comparative analysis. However, when these questions were posed using the two different methods, women were more likely to endorse items if they were presented in anonymous, paper-and-pencil format rather than through an in-person interview. It should also be noted that we did not begin either of these studies with a goal of comparing methods. The results, then, while intriguing, need to be replicated in future studies.

This study furthers the debate regarding choice of method in assessing physical or sexual victimization, especially when working with highly vulnerable and stigmatized populations. While it may seem intuitive that establishing a warm rapport with a woman might enhance the likelihood of her reporting prior abuse, this study suggests that the anonymity provided by a paper-and-pencil survey outweighs this consideration. However, additional research is needed with more diverse samples and question formats before we can unequivocally endorse one method over another.

REFERENCES


