GHENT UNIVERSITY
“People always hurt you”

A qualitative study of survivors’ dating and romantic relationship experiences following adult sexual violence

IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

• Most research on intra-individual impact (Goff & Smith, 2005)
• Theoretical evidence for impact on intimate relationships (Bradbury & Karney, 1995; Goff & Smith, 2005; Monson et al., 2010)
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE AND INITIATION

Quantitative

• Decreased relationship satisfaction (Vitek & Yeater, 2021)
• Mental health of survivor associated with decreased relationship satisfaction in partner (Georgia et al., 2018)
• Avoidance of relationships (Collibee & Furnam, 2014)

Qualitative

• Partners’ PTSD symptoms, frustrations, not knowing how to help the survivor (Smith, 2005)
• Communication difficulties (Connop & Petrak, 2004)
• Not feeling worthy (Brownstone et al., 2018)
• Distrust in potential partners (O’Callaghan et al., 2018)
GAPS

Theory
• Not tailored specifically for sexual violence
• Does not consider relationship initiation processes

Existing studies
• Do not study relationship experiences of survivors in-depth
• No attention to broader context
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

“How do survivors experience previous, current and future intimate relationships following sexual violence”?

“How do survivors cope with these relationship experiences?”
SAMPLING PROCEDURE

- Adaptive sampling in clinical and community settings
- Importance of agency (no rewards, self-identifying)
- >18 years old, ASV >16 years old
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- 14 survivors
- 21-63 years
- All Caucasian
- 10 identified as female, 4 identified as male
- 7 single, 2 married, 5 in a relationship
- Time since ASV 2-26 years ago
- 12 multiple sexual victimizations, 3 ASV + CSA
- Index assault: 3 rape by dating/romantic partner, 1 attempted rape by ex-partner, 5 by acquaintance, 3 by stranger, 1 human trafficking, 1 sexual harassment by acquaintance
INTERVIEW PROCESS

- Gaining insight in meaning-making of sexual violence and psychosocial impact of sexual violence
- Semi-structured: interview guide
- Agency
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<th>Table 1. Interview guide</th>
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<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Impact questions</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Reflexive questions</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ending</strong></td>
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REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Relistening and rereading interviews
2. Selecting unit of analysis (casual/sexual/intimate relationships)
3. Coding of interview
4. Constructing themes
5. Defining themes
6. Reviewing, refining and redefining themes
7. Writing manuscript
QUALITY GUIDELINES

1. Reflexivity
3. Reviewed by experts in couple and family research and therapy (G. Lemmens & L. Verhofstadt) and experts on the topic of sexual violence (K. Uzieblo, I. Keygnaert, H. Littleton)
RESULTS
The meaning and impact of sexual violence is context-related

- The decision to (temporarily) avoid intimate relationships
- The experience of sexual violence plays a role in what one looks for in a relationship
- Sexual violence takes up space in a relationship
- Healing effects of being in a relationship
- Coping with sexuality following the assault
Afterwards it became clear he also cheated on me. So now I cannot separate what exactly causes the issues I have in relationships. Is it due to distrust? I think it’s mostly due to the distrust because of the cheating. (Joanne)
I even contacted an online counselor through the chat to ask how I can prepare for this disclosure. They did not really help me but I had the opportunity to tell my story and then decide for myself what I wanted to do. (Mary)
The decision to (temporarily) avoid intimate relationships

Focusing on oneself

“People always hurt you”: distrust in others

“I am damaged: relationships are not for me”

So I had decided for myself – I even told my friend back then (laughs), that’s why I remember it – “Until the end of the year, no guys should try their luck with me. They should not even try to kiss me whatsoever. I just want to be by myself, I need a period for myself”. (Mary).
The decision to (temporarily) avoid intimate relationships

- Focusing on oneself
- “People always hurt you”: distrust in others
- “I am damaged: relationships are not for me”

I don’t like getting acquainted to new people. I avoid it at all costs. And, you know, when I do meet new people – in general, not only men – I am like ‘I don’t want to attach myself to someone, because people hurt you’. You don’t feel like wanting to have pain, so you avoid it. So, I am kind of difficult in meeting new people while I am actually very social (Ella).
The things that have happened have lowered my self-esteem immensely. It confirmed that I am worthless. […] Yes, also in relationships. If someone who seems very cool likes me than it seems too good to be true for me, you know. And even if that person sticks around and we get together, I destroy that relationship pretty quickly (Abby).
The experience of sexual violence plays a role in what one looks for in a relationship

- “But I did not want to be alone”: falling for the wrong person
- Acknowledgment and recognizing: an abused partner
- Engaging in relationships characterized by decreased emotional and physical connection

I was in a kind of relationship back then because I felt so bad. I did not want to be alone, you know? But being in that relationship made it actually worse. I could not handle a relationship in that moment. […] I felt so bad I thought “I don’t want to be alone” but sometimes it’s better to be alone than to throw yourself into a relationship. (Joyce)
The experience of sexual violence plays a role in what one looks for in a relationship.

- "But I did not want to be alone": falling for the wrong person
- Acknowledgment and recognizing: an abused partner
- Engaging in relationships characterized by decreased emotional and physical connection

I have had a relationship with someone which has ended. It became asexual at first and eventually became romantically difficult as well because she associated many things of my body with the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. If I compare my experiences as a 22-year old to those events, I know it’s an extreme example, but it almost seems trivial. No, it’s not trivial but it is at least a lot less severe and something where I think of a lot less and which influences my life in a lesser extent than her experiences (John).
The experience of sexual violence plays a role in what one looks for in a relationship

- “But I did not want to be alone”: falling for the wrong person
- Acknowledgment and recognizing: an abused partner
- Engaging in relationships characterized by decreased emotional and physical connection

I got acquainted with a guy with whom I really fell in love with. The reason I fell in love – I thought I was not able to ever fall in love again – is because that guy had autism. So, I felt very reassured he was not going to cheat on me or he was not going to, you know. He did not play dominant games because he just was not very present emotionally, you know? So, he does not think he has to take control over me. It’s like: “Ok, I got used to you and I like having you around”. Sex was also not that important for him, you know (Ella).
The costs of silence

The problem is that I am one of those persons who has to talk about everything. Talking to my boyfriend was not an option because I still thought I had cheated on him. […] it’s very hard for me to say this, but I am the kind of person who – even when in a relationship – I push guys who try something away. So, what he said was logical. Until that [the assault] happened. Then I was in a crisis like ‘look what I am capable of’…
Sexual violence takes up space in a relationship

- Talking about the assault requires courage and preparation
- The necessity of talking about needs and emotions
- Sexual violence as a shared crisis

The costs of silence

…I am someone who cannot handle secrets. I would even spoil presents because I cannot keep things for myself. This whole thing was eating me up inside. And now I still find it difficult. Recently I saw him again and somewhere in me I still feel like I am a liar or that I have not been completely honest. (Mary)
When the partner is supportive, speaking is gold

From the moment I was able to talk again, I told my boyfriend what had happened. Then he became very angry because his opinion was that I should have said something immediately so we could say something to the guy who did that. Then we went on by foot and during our walk he remained very angry. (Joanne)
Sexual violence takes up space in a relationship

Talking about the assault requires courage and preparation

The necessity of talking about needs and emotions

Sexual violence as a shared crisis

*When the partner is supportive, speaking is gold*

He reacted much better than I could have imagined. [Cries] Sorry. I did not know what to expect. I had told him I had something important to say. […] Even when I know it’s bad what has happened, I still blame myself for my role in the situation. I feel disgusted with myself and I was so scared he would feel the same disgust about me. Instead, he held me before he had read the whole letter.

(Mary)
Sexual violence takes up space in a relationship

- Talking about the assault requires courage and preparation
- The necessity of talking about needs and emotions
- Sexual violence as a shared crisis

Even if I would have been with my ex then, I would have interacted with him differently. […] If I would have done those four years [counseling training] earlier, we would have never been divorced. But I did not know how communication worked so yeah, it escalated. It was fire on fire. We could not talk anymore. So, it stopped there. (Audrey)
In the relationship with my ex-boyfriend right after the incident, I did that a lot. I constantly put him in dilemmas and I did not make it easy for him. Sometimes, for example, I asked for a lot of attention and the next thing he knows, I turn around and ignore him. Really, that kind of stuff (laughs). This is not okay. I think that is testing behavior. Like ‘what can I do before he leaves me?’. Because I need to hear, feel to what extent I can trust him. (Sophie)
Shortly after that moment I had the luck of being together for a very long time with a good friend. That was a kind of safe space to, you know, whatever. That you are familiar with each other, you’re intimate with each other. When we broke up, I really had to get used to how difficult it is for me. It takes time for me to learn to trust someone nearby my body and vice versa. (John)
CONCLUSION
- ASV as an enduring vulnerability affects relationship expectations
  - Distrust in potential partners
    <-> choosing distant/predictable/recognizable partners
  - Negative self-image
    -> feeling not worthy to be in a (supportive) relationship
  - ASV as a stressor puts strain on relationships
    - Non-disclosure comes at a cost
    - Disclosure and negative reactions
  - Supportive relationship as a corrective experience
  - Importance of contextual info
CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Challenge negative self-perceptions and negative self-worth
- Challenge distrust in others
- Challenge relationship expectations
- Focus on expression of needs
- Consider the broader history
- Explore disclosure processes and partner reactions
- Explore and alter communication patterns within couple
LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- Transferability instead of generalizability
- Only survivors who were willing to share their story
- Broad interview, however spontaneous
- Survivor’s perspective (dyadic perspective possible for those in a relationship)
QUESTIONS? SUGGESTIONS? TIPS? IDEAS?
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Teaching assistant and PhD student

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Figure 3. A vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage.

Bradbury & Karney 1995
Figure 15.1. Cognitive-behavioral interpersonal theory of posttraumatic stress disorder (Monson, Fredman, & Dekel, 2010).
Figure 1. The Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress model (Nelson Goff & Smith, 2005).

Goff & Smith, 2005
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Context of sexual violence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margret</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2x Attempted rape by ex-partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male and female</td>
<td>CSA, oral rape at 17 by older co-worker, sexual harassment by boss and date rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sexual harassment at 15, unacknowledged rape at 16 an acknowledged rape at 17 by strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rape by acquaintance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male and female</td>
<td>Date rape and multiple unacknowledged date rapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rape by father as an adolescent, human trafficking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male and female</td>
<td>CSA, sexual harassment by partner, rape by acquaintance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rape, exhibitionism, sexual harassment, sexual intimidation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiple times sexual harassment, (attempted) rape from 14 years onwards by acquaintance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Years of CSA, 2 x sexual abuse, 3x rape</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Oral rape and sexual abuse by peers, sexual harassment by strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Years of CSA by godfather/uncle, 2x sexual harassment by co-worker/acquaintance</td>
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<tr>
<td>John*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rape by acquaintance, sexual harassment by stranger</td>
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<td>Ella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Multiple acknowledged and unacknowledged date rapes</td>
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