A Case Study on Sex Offending: Indigenous Healing in Qualitative Research

Valerie Schwan Cloud Clearer Ringland

Indigenous theory brings a new perspective to sexual violence research. It considers healing the trauma of sexual violence a collective responsibility to transform culture and equally values healing for victims, offenders, and bystanders (family and friends). Voices of traditionally silenced community members, in this case, sex offenders and family members, offer unique and vital perspectives on sexual violence and healing. The indigenous trauma healing tool of empathic dialogue was used with sex offenders and their family members, with the researcher-participant in the dialogues as herself a survivor of child sexual abuse. The data and results of five empathic dialogues are reported, along with potential implications for public policy and practice.

Introduction

The impacts of sexual violence are numerous. Common challenges for survivors include low self-esteem, self-blame, guilt, shock, confusion; denial; suicidal ideation; PTSD; depression, flashbacks, substance abuse, chronic diseases, and sexually transmitted infections Morrison, Quedara & Boyd, 2007). Perpetrators face life-shattering consequences such as imprisonment; lifetime status as a registered sex offender; expulsion from university; public humiliation; family shaming; and, attempted retribution (Consequences for perpetrators, n.d.). More work has been done on supporting survivors of sexual violence to heal than on supporting perpetrators. Interviews with men who have been violent with women have found they carry a deep sense of self-hatred (Kaufmann, 1999). A lack of empathy is a primary challenge for sex offenders (Borduin & Schaeffer, 2001; Hanvey, Philpot & Wilson, 2011). Another factor is the obsessive-compulsive judging to “measure their worth and compare themselves to everyone else and always come up failing” (Prendergast, 2004, p. 19). Increasingly, there is a call to address the secondary trauma of friends and family members who support survivors and/or perpetrators in healing, and have healing needs of their own Morrison, Quedara & Boyd, 2007).

Indigenous Theory

A decolonization framework in research is a means to “redress the constructs used by academics and governments” (Sherwood 2010, p. 121). Indigenous theory is within the framework of decolonization, where the word “indigenous” may be used to describe specific people whose beliefs, traditions, and ways of living originate within a cultural group and place, *or* a view of the world as a web of life that is inherently interconnected and operates in cycles (Cervantes & McNeill, 2008). For this research project, the latter definition applies. An indigenous approach to healing that honors the inherent interconnectedness of all beings asks us to make as much space in our hearts for everyone involved in sexual violence, whether as an *offender*, *victim*, or *bystander* (a family member or close friend suffering secondary trauma).

Empathy, compassion, and inclusion is a new framework for researching sexual violence, as research on sex offending has traditionally focused on criminological deterrence and psychological deviance. Voices of traditionally silenced community members, in this case, sex offenders and family members, offer unique and essential perspectives on sexual violence and healing. In indigenous theory, when we offend or are offended against, we are out of balance with ourselves, our families and communities, and our Creator. “The use of judgment and punishment actually works against the healing process. Ross (1996, p.253) argues that “An already unbalanced person is moved further out of balance,” in which he cites a Hollow Bone Reservation position paper on restorative justice. We need to experience a sense of empathy with our human family and all beings and engage in healing that re-evaluates aspects of our cultural identities and individual sense of self. “A return to balance can best be accomplished through a process of accountability that includes support from the community through teaching and healing” (Thibodeau & Nixon, 2013).

Such a process is exemplified by an Ojibway community in Canada called Hollow Water. In Hollow Water, the survival of an individual is synonymous with that of the community; ultimately, the entire universe is considered family, which creates a unique framework for healing (Garret & Herring, 2001). A group of community members who sought, in the 1980s, to address

Corresponding Author: Valerie Schwan Cloud Clearer Ringland
Email: connect@earthethos.net

Australian Counselling Research Journal ISSN1832-1135

alcoholism, unemployment, and housing shortages, realized that 60-70% of the community had experienced sexual abuse dating back three generations and that 35-50% of offenders had been victimized (Sawatsky, 2009). They formed a team and trained each other in skills from wilderness and addiction therapy to policing and traditional tribal teachings. In working with the Canadian legal system, a thirteen-step process emerged for dealing with sexual violence in their community. When asked about an offender, one team member said, "He's always going to be here. His kids are here. Don't give up on this person. Keep at him until [he] understands that our focus is to one day have a healthy community" (Sawatsky, 2009, quoting a community worker, p. 116). After twenty years, one study found that the sex offender recidivism rate in Hollow Water was six times lower than the national average. There was a backslide in progress due to changes in team members, a decrease in State funding, and changes in legal personnel. The community had begun healing and prevention responses, including a traditional fasting ceremony and vision quest for purification, a wilderness therapy program, and communal dances (Sawatsky, 2009).

Research Questions

How do indigenous theory and the use of the trauma healing tool of empathic dialogue as a form of qualitative research interview enrich our understanding of sexual violence, trauma, and healing? What are the met and unmet needs for healing and support of registered sex offenders and their family members?

Methodology

This is a case study of sexual offending within an indigenous framework inspired by Hollow Water. A case study is a qualitative research methodology where an issue is examined in a contemporary context bounded by place and time (Creswell, 2012). The interviewing methodology was based on the indigenous trauma-healing practice of empathic dialogue (Atkinson, 2002), which uses empathic listening and storytelling to promote healing (See Figure 1). Empathic dialogue aligns with feminist interviewing, emphasizing the importance of flattening the researcher-above-the-subject hierarchy of classical science

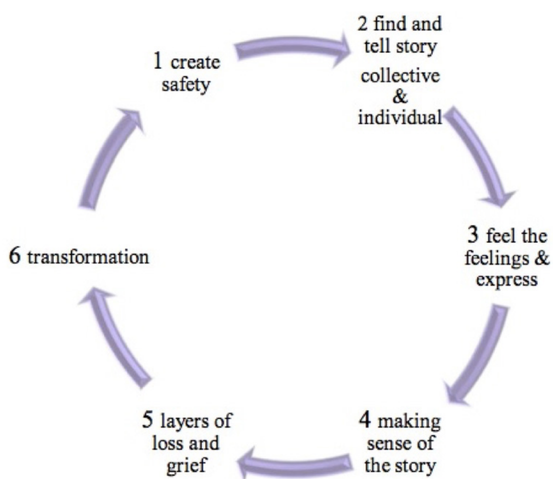

Figure 1. Healing trauma through empathic dialogue

(Oakley, 1981) and, instead, creates an honest dialogue between equals (Campbell, 2002). The researcher is a participant and observer open to answering questions and sharing, mindful that the focus of the interview is to create a safe space for the subject. Expressing and using emotions facilitates an honest process of inquiry that creates common ground between researcher and subject and clearer, fuller research results (Campbell, 2002). Such interviews are also opportunities for giving voice in publication and, as such, are acts of social justice. Indigenous theory further suggests that empathic dialogue can create opportunities for spiritual growth and healing (Atkinson, 2002).

This study consists of N=5 individual interviews, which were conducted from 2016-2017 in Texas between a researcher who is a survivor of child sexual abuse and subjects who were either registered sex offenders or close family members of registered sex offenders. Through these interviews, I intended to provide subjects a safe, healing space for storytelling. To answer the question of whether the empathic dialogue itself was healing, the final interview question was: "How do you feel?". Throughout the research process, I did my utmost to connect with an inner sex offender, to better understand where I was judging, shaming, and violating against myself and others, as well as my inner bystander, to understand better where I was not speaking up, offering support or maintaining healthy boundaries. Since I was the researcher observer-participant in these interviews, I refer to myself in the first person. I use the terms "empathic dialogue" and "interview" interchangeably.

The first research subject and I were connected through a mutual acquaintance. During a phone screening, I outlined my theory and research interest. The subject described treatment he had undergone, affirmed he had been prosecuted for all sex offenses committed, and said he considers participating in the research as part of his social amends-making. Upon completion of an IRB process, we met for an interview in 2016 for over three hours. In 2017, he connected me with an organization he was part of so that I could expand the study through snowball sampling. The Executive Director of the organization said he spoke so highly of our interview that she wanted to participate and also that others would. Following IRB approval, she sent out my message requesting study participants. I received more interest than I could accommodate. I chose to interview four more subjects, one more sex offender and three bystander family members. They were able to meet in person because physical presence is valued in the indigenous theory of healing. I transcribed the interviews, then read through them in one sitting. I pulled out quotes about individual stories relevant to the research questions, printed them out, and organized the strips of paper into piles. Six categories of results emerged.

Data

The data consisted of N=5 interviews, which were empathic dialogues between me as a participant-observer researcher, and each subject. Participants' stories of sexual violence are outlined below. They are referred to as Offender A, Offender B, Bystander A, Bystander B, and Bystander C. I, as researcher observer-participant, am the Victim.

Offender A was a male computer programmer in his 40's. Growing up, his grandmother physically and verbally abused him. His family was with the Church of Christ. His mother said masturbating would make him gay, his father believed that

sex brought disease, but he had a lot of sexual curiosity. At six, he kissed another boy's penis; at eight, two 14-year-old boys forced him to masturbate them; at 16, the teacher he most respected gave him alcohol, touched his penis, and tried to seduce him. By 18 he hit himself while masturbating, convinced "there must be something wrong with me." At 19, he found his mother in an alcoholic coma. His parents told him about affairs and other marital issues. He started partying and had a crisis of faith: "I remembered too many times saying, 'God help me not to get drunk tonight,' and I got drunk anyway…It's like I'm at war with myself." He entered in-patient treatment, joined AA, NA, and the Unity Church. He got a girlfriend, cheated, became depressed and suicidal, and was told he had repressed memories of child sexual abuse. He went into treatment for that, broke ties with his family, changed his name, and moved. He married, had two children, and began sexually abusing them. When he touched his daughter's 11-year-old friend's breasts, her scream "broke the spell." He felt immense self-hatred: "This is just like it was for me when that teacher fondled me." He joined Sex Addicts Anonymous ("SAA") and confessed to abusing his kids so they would get help. He went to prison for five years plus three years' probation. He said: "I had feelings that I knew were inappropriate about children, almost from the time I was a child," and he never felt safe enough to talk about them. He has reached a place of self-forgiveness and tries to participate in society.

Offender B is a male welder in his 50's whose mother sodomized him from age three to six. His grandfather was an alcoholic who stopped drinking after raping his mother when she was a girl. At eight, his mother served him alcohol, and he was soon addicted. By the age of ten, he and a friend regularly drank when the friend's ex-convict father passed out, and the friend's mother also bought them some. At 13, he stole a bicycle, went to juvie, and left school: "I went to work as a flat roofer…the people I was working with were alcoholics, so it was beer thirty from the time I got into the work truck…I started smoking cigarettes when I was 13, methamphetamine…sticking needles in my arm when I was 14, cooking the stuff at 18." He drank so much that he passed out once when he was found and was brought into a hospital. A doctor said he had more alcohol in his system than water: "So what did I do when I left the hospital? I celebrated by getting a drink. And that's why in AA it's called insanity." He married, had children, and sodomized his daughter when she turned seven. He felt it was wrong but could not stop, so he went on the run. He ultimately turned himself in, read the Bible "front to back in like a week," pleaded guilty and went to prison for 10 years. Determined to become a better person, he studied Christianity, messianic Judaism, Islam, and other spiritualities, including a meditation program called Avatar, which he still follows. Upon release, he received help from an SAA sponsor, then met a retired police officer who is an "accountability partner" and "father figure." A few years ago, his daughter contacted him: "It was amazing." He helped her understand and stop her own addictive behavior. He now runs his own welding business.

Bystander A is a retired teacher in her mid-50's and mother of a man convicted for possessing child pornography. Her son realized he was gay in middle school, felt it was "social suicide," and was "disgusted by the whole idea." The family went to a Methodist Church where being gay was not celebrated. He got into pornography, which involved adolescent boys, because "his sexuality was stuck there, although the rest of him grew up." While working a pet store and living with his parents, he awoke one morning with rifles in his face as he had downloaded a file that was part of a sting operation. An FBI SWAT Team searched the house, questioned everyone, and confiscated his computer and phone. Their attorney said not to talk about it, so for a year and a half Bystander A did not even tell her sister. When she did tell her family, they were supportive. Her son was suicidal, depressed, and self-punishing: "Once in a while he would go off the deep end, he would drink a lot of beer and smoke and take a Xanax, and at one point he had burned himself, 'This one's for mom, this one's for dad...'" She spent time with him since he was unable to play video games, watch TV, or do much outside of work. A counselor "helped him accept who he was." He was promoted. After two and a half years, he was indicted for possession of child pornography. Family, friends, and neighbors wrote letters and testified for him. He went to prison for a year-and-a-half and spent six months in a halfway house. "My kids always come first…they're my life's projects. I told [my son]…' If you wanna ask me if I would have you all over again knowing what I know now,' I said, 'Yep, in a heartbeat, it's all right, 'cause you're a good guy.'"

Bystander B is a mother in her 60's with a son who had sex with a minor. Growing up, her family was emotionally closed. When her son started smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol in high school, she thought he would outgrow it. At 22, he did drugs at a party and had sex with a sixteen-year-old. Her mother reported that to the police. He was put on probation and sent to sex offender treatment. Bystander B told the probation officer and treatment provider he needed drug treatment and was told he would receive it, but he did not. Upon testing positive, he was sentenced to eleven years in prison. Though she found it unfair: "I am not the main one involved. It's his journey, not mine." During seven years in prison, he "turned his life around." He "found Christianity," joined the choir, and earned degrees in welding and woodworking. He is on parole living in a trailer outside Bystander B's house, and eats dinner with her daily. Bystander B could not find a support group for sex offenders' family members, so she started a non-profit sex offender advocacy and support organization. She is the Executive Director and receives no pay. The organization has over 600 members on an email list, holds monthly support groups across Texas, does legislative advocacy, holds an annual conference, files civil rights lawsuits, and provides support to sex offenders who are leaving prison. The work has become a calling, and she has no regrets.

Bystander C is a hospice nurse in her mid-50's and wife of a registered sex offender who works in the oil fields. She knows he was wrongly accused. His thirteen-year-old niece visited, asked to move in the night before she was to go home, then called the police the next morning, saying Bystander C's husband touched her crotch and breasts through her clothes. Bystander C wonders if the girl's step-father was abusing her, as he was on his way to pick her up when she reported the alleged abuse. Bystander C's husband had a "troubled family." His parents were verbally and physically abusive and divorced when he was twelve. When he was 21, his younger sister committed suicide, which "destroyed their family." Bystander C's family supports her husband, and so does their daughter, who had just graduated from high school when her dad was accused. Instead of sending her to college, Bystander C and her husband spent more than half a million dollars on his defense, with support from friends, neighbors, and her family. Bystander C and her daughter received counseling, and her husband did 300 hours of community service. The niece moved away at 17, and her mother relinquished parental rights so she could marry her 22-year-old boyfriend. When he was

deployed, she moved back, and four years after the indictment, they went to trial. Five of the niece's friends testified that she was a liar: "10 o'clock at night, and it was Saturday…[the jury was] deadlocked, and the judge kept sending them back and said, 'If you don't do this, we'll just be right back here Monday,' and lo and behold a half-hour later they came back with a guilty verdict…[My friend and I] were just screaming." The jury suggested five years' probation, which the judge doubled. Bystander C describes life since the accusation as being in a constant state of fear and punishment. She was unable to work for over two years after the conviction, and they moved cities to leave abusive treatment providers and restrictive living ordinances. She takes solace in the fact that this experience did not break her, her husband, or their daughter. As a Christian, she wrestles with forgiveness.

I, the researcher/Victim, am an attorney and social work researcher in my mid-30's. I told each subject during the phone screening that I experienced incest during childhood, and at the beginning of each interview, I briefly shared my story and invited questions. An uncle sexually abused me from a young age, my mother was abusive, and I was cared for by a nanny until school. I had little sense of direction or self and was a "good girl" who followed rules. While studying engineering as my parents wanted, serious health problems in my digestive, reproductive, and hormonal systems emerged. Somehow I graduated and went to law school. I was drawn to children's rights and restorative justice. I spent over a month bedridden the first year and suffered a concussion in my second. As my health started to improve, I felt I needed space, so after law school, I moved overseas to advocate for children's rights. I suffered burnout, took a break, and started recovering memories of sexual abuse from infancy to adolescence, as well as multiple memories of reporting and not being believed. As part of my healing process, I engaged in this research project.

Results

Six themes emerged during data analysis: Social Context, Victimization, Church and Spirituality, Healing, Unmet Needs, and Interview Impact.

Social Context

All subjects discussed context, from family of origin to Church and community, to popular culture generally. Two compared the way sex offenders are treated to that of people with AIDS: "People think there's just some things that a human... if they've done it, they can't come back from… there's something inherently wrong." Bystander C said social judgment felt like a Scarlet Letter, citing the *SEX OFFENDER DIVISION* police car that visits her home. Bystander B said that the best way to kill a legislative bill was to show how much it would cost to enforce. Subjects said popular culture portrays everyone on the registry as dangerous predators. Most laws affecting sex offenders were purely punitive or designed to help people feel secure from "stranger-danger." Offender A said: "There is such a visceral contempt, disgust, and I've felt it myself…before I committed these offenses, I was like…' burn 'em at the stake.'" Subjects felt that the majority of sex offenders were "not bad guys," but people who had made mistakes and ought to be able to "complete their punishment and move on." Many commented about sex in popular culture, like 'Better Sex in 10 Days' headlines on magazines that even children can see at the grocery checkout.

Most subjects had adverse experiences in childhood: "You alter [a child's] growth pattern with sexual abuse…I believe that's why people that have been sexually abused as children are more apt to addiction." Bystander C said: "[My husband and I] had been together a couple of years when he was like, '[T]his is what a mom's supposed to be like?'" Offender A said: "One of the things that led up to my offending against the kids is that I didn't have…much in the way of social connections." All subjects grew up with Christianity: "I remember being afraid of Hell."

Many talked about feeling "fundamentally flawed" and seeing sex as dirty and bad. Some talked about substance abuse and the numbing effect it had on their behavior. Offenders were also impacted by the school. Offender A said: "Teachers commended me for being curious, as opposed to 'Go away you're bothering me' which is…what I got from both of my parents," but felt betrayed when a trusted teacher touched him and the principal did nothing. Offender B checked out of school when a teacher put him down in first grade. Offenders lacked positive role models, especially males.

All subjects talked about addiction, from alcohol and drugs to sexual exploration. Offender B said: "Alcohol was a big part of my life, and it contributed to who I was with the sexual assault of my daughter." Offender A was once caught "peeping on my sister" and felt "really ashamed." Bystander A's son and Offender A used pornography as an outlet for their sexual shame. Offender A wanted to have sex more than his wife: "I don't like the way I treated her in retrospect." Three subjects reported the offender had not interacted with the criminal justice system until the sex offense, and Bystander A felt that as a result, her son had not learned to understand the consequences. Bystander B remembered getting into trouble as a teenager: "[My friend and I]…snuck out the window. I got grounded." She reflected that her mother had not asked who the boys at the party were, nor thought to call the police.

Victimization

"Our biggest challenge is trying to dispel the myth that people on the registry aren't human; they're monsters." All subjects felt victimized by the sex offender registry and laws regulating sex offenders: "You just feel like you're stuck under a microscope to have people…looking at everything in your house, and having to account for your every minute." Subjects talked about men in their organization who had met a girl at a bar or an 18-and-older club who felt like victims of entrapment when they found out she had used a fake ID: "I don't think these girls understand that you could be ruining someone's life *for life.*" They talked about renewing their driver's license every year, having to get a "Sex Offender" stamp in their passport if they wanted to travel, struggling to avoid driving in school zones, needing criminal background checks to access databases necessary to run their own business, and how each county and city and state had different ordinances affecting sex offenders and different processes for registering as visitors or residents. Many felt victimized by the criminal justice system:

> It's just a horrible game… I still have nightmares... [about] court all the time…I thought that there was justice, and now I feel that there is none…it changes your whole view of politics and the whole legal system.

Bystander A said she "is not a big fan of law enforcement

anymore," and that "with computer crime, they can just stay in their office, it's like fish in a barrel." She likened the punishment her son received to "hitting a gnat with a bomb" and felt "if you give them something reasonable, they might learn more from it." Offender A said the laws on sex offense crimes were "not terribly unreasonable" but lamented not being able to participate more fully in the community after prison. Offenders' arrests were "humiliating" and "dramatic." It was hard to wait years to see if a case would proceed. Bystander C went to court with her husband every 4-6 weeks for over four years, causing them to miss a lot of work while he remained on curfew and the price of his bail bond increased. She found the courtroom biased, with a "Victim's Room," which the jury walked past before deliberation, and said that the prosecution "harassed our witnesses when they were sitting in the hallway." Subjects commented on how little say victims have about which cases move forward, how much difference a judge, jury, and district attorney make, and how labels such as "high risk" are applied without standards. "One of our members was given the high risk at court, and it was a Romeo-Juliet thing, one victim, one girl," said Bystander B. Most took plea bargains and felt there needed to be a wider range of sentencing options. They talked about the financial impact of hiring lawyers, counselors, doing psychological tests, probation programs, and paying the commissary for offenders in prison. They reported challenges getting a housing plan approved when an offender left prison and struggles with employment.

"Before all this happened, [my son] thought that people in jail deserved to be there, they're bad people, but now, he says that really 90% of them were just people who made a bad choice, got caught and they'll be fine afterwards." Offenders reported "reckless" treatment in prison; one almost lost a toe that turned green and went untreated for a year. Prisoners are prohibited from masturbating, which Offender B said damaged his prostrate and caused "immense physical pain.", Support was limited: "They say on the one hand, oh, we want you to stay connected with family and friends, but usually the only ones they approve visitation for are a significant other or family, friends are turned down." It was "overwhelming" when an offender got out of prison with the short period of time to register, get a driver's license, meet their parole officer, begin treatment, and other requirements. Bystander B said: "[My son] is lucky he had me, because I gave him a ride…I wonder about these guys who get out, and they have to take the bus. They don't even know what the bus routes are, they can't get on the computer." After her son was released, when she took him to meet his parole officer, he was so upset he "sobbed on my shoulder for about 15 minutes," because "he hadn't been able to show emotion for three-and-half years." Subjects reported the criminal justice system is "just a mess. It destroys families… there's no healing involved."

Church and Spirituality

All subjects spoke about Christianity, God, and a search for spiritual meaning in their experiences. Bystander C said the hardest part was "losing your trust in God, thinking there is no God." Bystander B's son found Christianity in prison, prays regularly, and is part of a men's group at Church. Bystander C's son went to Church with her for the first time since leaving prison and was "overwhelmed by all the people who knew he was gay and knew he went to prison and what he did and hugged him." Her faith never wavered. Offender B said, "Without Christianity, I don't know if I could've made it. It's a belief system about changing who you are." He now follows a meditation system called *Avatar* and is a sponsor for others in 12-step programs. Offender A sees a Higher Power as: "a group of people that have identified a problem and collectively want to overcome [it]… sharing and supporting each other." He recently joined a discussion group on philosophy and ethics.

Healing

Subjects reported that healing required relationships with others. Bystander B spoke highly of a support group for family members of drug addicts she and her husband had attended, and Bystander C said counseling helped her process things. Subjects were grateful when a sex offender was treated "like a human." Offender A said his treatment provider was: "very humane and intelligent…' Yes, these offenders play games and try to get away with stuff, but they're not evil and broken.'" Bystander A felt a boyfriend had "probably saved [her son's] life because he would go spend the night with him when he was feeling down." All subjects struggled with depression and grief, and offenders felt guilt and shame for what their families had been through. "We lost so much time and life and money, and so much has been wasted…now I take two different anti-depressants. I didn't need that before all of this." All Bystanders had dogs, and one regularly talked to hers.

All subjects talked about acceptance and forgiveness: "Whatever you did in the past, it can be forgiven." Offender B talked about a "horrific" recurring vision in prison of his family in a glass box with a monster "tearing them apart…tearing their hands off, pulling their heads off of them, eating their guts," and realized, "I was looking at a reflection of myself." Bystander C said about her niece, "I'd like to think that we could forgive her… if I saw her, I don't think I would kill her at this point. I don't know if I could've said that five years ago." All subjects looked for things to be grateful for. Bystander C said: "One of the associate attorneys…had worked in the DA's office…he really worked hard on this case...and [after my husband] got convicted, he quit [practicing law]." Bystander A said, "Depending who's at the mail at prison," she "was able to send [her son] feathers" from his pet bird, and "one of the guys there made him a dreamcatcher." Offender B felt the social worker who helped him as a teenager in juvie had prevented him from committing much worse crimes.

Subjects reported being humbled: "I had the image that when I had my children, if you raise them right, they're gonna grow up and be perfect people…And I had no doubt about it, that I was raising my kids right. Funny, little did I know." Bystander A said: "It's just been an ordeal…Oh God, it was horrible!" Part of healing was letting go of life making sense. Bystander C said, "You can't understand what's not explainable, but it's still hard to deal with… It's *old*. I don't wanna talk about it anymore, but… there are no days that we don't think about it, that it's not affecting something." Bystander B agreed: "I try not to analyze it anymore because it's so painful to look through all that." Offender A said: "The process of being in prison, and sort of being taken down to this brute level of humanity, I think it's what I've heard people describe about being in basic training…I had a strange sense of coming to terms with who I am." He "felt a sense of reconciliation," that while he had caused a lot of harm, "a distinction between what I did and who I am became crystal clear…I was able to forgive myself but without excusing myself…I had nowhere to go but up…[which] was a relief." Offender B said he tells victims he

meets in SAA that abuse “is not personal”; that sexual, drug and alcohol abuse is “an addiction overruling the person.”

Part of healing was accepting responsibility for the past and trying to develop a sense of mastery for the future. One offender owned an oil consulting company, two were welders, another was trying to work at a pet store, and one had a computer business. Offender B said:

> My road to recovery was intense; it wasn’t just for the alcohol, drug, and sexual abuse; it was for mental rebuilding; you have to get into a state of mind that you can’t participate in these activities… anxiety has been the root of my problems and my acting out. [Now I use meditation to] deal with the anxiety… without an addiction attached.

Having something to look forward to was important; subjects shared dreams of traveling and moving to the countryside, seeing children with loving partners, seeing each other’s strength, and helping others. Offender B said, “I’ve got a lot of potential to…come up and make good yet.” Finding ways to be of service was a universal desire. Bystander B said, “We try to help as many people as we can to re-integrate, to feel like they’re worth something. They are worth something.” Finding a network of others who were dealing with similar challenges was healing. “Even though it was an uphill battle,” being part of an organization advocating to improve laws impacting sex offenders felt worthwhile. Subjects were strong and resilient: “We’ve been run over by a big truck, and we got up.” Bystander A said: “We may be down, but we’re not out.”

Unmet Needs

“I wish the public understood that it could happen to someone they love…and stop grouping everybody into one big ball. I wish they’d look more on re-entry, re-integrating, figuring out why the person did that to begin with.” Offender B felt there was no holding politicians accountable that the laws they passed were actually based on fact or were seen to be working. All subjects talked about the impact of being on the registry:

> If you commit murder, and you get out on parole… you can live wherever you want, you can travel… you sell heroin… get millions of people addicted… it’s ruined people’s lives, and they’ve died… you get out of prison…and you live your life. This, you don’t. You’re punished forever. And I don’t think that you should have to be punished forever.

Offender A said: “Whenever I tell people I’m a sex offender, it’s just throwing the past in my face…I’m no longer that person.” He said if someone was unsure he was trustworthy, they could speak with his daughter: “I believe people should either be on civil commitment or should be completely out of the system like any other offender.” Offenders needed self-discipline, awareness, and honesty to heal. Offender B said that without an accountability partner to be totally honest with, it was impossible to recover. Subjects pointed out that the psychology of sex offending and of re-offending is complex: “I mean, it’s a simple and easy explanation to say, ‘I was abused that way as a kid’… [but] it’s not nearly that simple. The things I did are worse than anything I experienced.” Offender A needed “ongoing therapy… because if I can talk about it and be honest, then I have less chance, I believe, of acting on it.” He added, “From a recovery perspective, just like alcohol…I might be able to have one drink and get away with it…it might be okay for me to teach a Sunday school class, but I’m not gonna try it. Why would I take the risk?” Subjects felt that sex offender treatment could be more tailored: “People [] that perpetrate offenses against young children… [have] different needs.”

Most subjects told stories about people they knew on the registry and wanted people to know that being on the registry did not mean someone was guilty, dangerous or predatory: [My son’s] a good guy who got caught up in the wrong thing.” They said it was so hard to talk about sex offending that they lived in fear of being ostracized, losing a job, and punitive laws. Subjects pointed out that “stranger danger is very rare, and you’re not going to prevent those…you’re hurting families of people who are registered…you’re passing a law to make people feel safe, [but] it’s not doing anything.” Bystander C felt that she and her husband had effectively entered prison together when was put on the registry: “There’s not really much we that we can do,” she said. “We can’t go to Church because what Church doesn’t have some kind of babysitting room?”, most of their friends have children or grandchildren, and their daughter was generously waiting until her dad was off parole to have a baby. Bystander B said: “I met a man who was married to the girl…he was 24 and she was 15 when they met…They just celebrated their 23rd wedding anniversary,” yet he is still on the registry. Bystander A agreed “the things they’re in for are ridiculous…One guy, his daughter…had used his phone to take pictures of herself… but the phone was registered in his name, so he’s the one who went to prison.” After her son gets out of the halfway house and is on parole, he will not be able to see his nieces without an official chaperone, which she said was “just stupid” since he was allowed unsupervised visits in the halfway house.

All subjects talked about how hard romantic relationships were for offenders: “I don’t know where these guys go to meet someone…to me, you’re putting yourself out there for rejection.” Bystander C said: “It’s affected our sex life.” She said counseling did not help: “There’s nothing you can say or do that would take it away or make it better.” Subjects cited the importance of caring treatment providers, and of “guys who leave their treatment group and go home and commit suicide.” Bystander C said: “When you go into sex offender counseling, the whole point of it is to repent for your sins, so you have to say, ‘I did this, and I’m a bad person, and these are things I did wrong, and the risks that were there, and if I’m ever in this situation again, this is what I need to do.’” Subjects were grateful for treatment providers who found fun things for Offenders to do. Bystander B lamented: “there are no avenues for people to get help,” that a man had gone to therapy for inappropriate feelings toward his step-daughter and the therapist reported him, but he was released because he had not done anything. Offender A said before offending that he “felt afraid to tell any kind of therapist because…I didn’t want my career destroyed, I didn’t want my kids taken away.”

Some subjects wanted more education in schools about the laws and consequences of sex offenses. Bystander B wanted girls to learn what could happen to a guy if they lied about their age. Bystander A had invited police officers to teach her middle school students that what they put on the internet or sent in text messages was traceable, and the consequences of that: “If the laws had been in the 60s and 70s the way they are now, half the male population would be in jail or have a record.” Bystander C was passionate about jury duty: “If it was one of your family members, you’d want a good person on the jury.” Bystander B felt that Victim’s Rights groups needed to speak out more: “Texas is spending billions of dollars on the prisons, on the public registry… and what do they do for victim’s healing?” She wondered why

there were no public service billboards encouraging responsible partying. She suggested that law enforcement and attorneys speak up about problems with the registry and unfair applications of sex offender laws. She knew of multiple "high risk" offenders who were "living in cars" and did not think that was contributing to public safety or their welfare. Offender B felt strongly that requiring family participation for adolescents in juvie was important for preventing abuse later in life: "Parents have to be active in the program" so that kids are not sent "right back on the street in the adverse situation" using use drugs and alcohol to "numb [their] conscience [and] the drive to be a productive person."

Interview Impact

All subjects were positive about the interviews, and two people who only participated in the screening process told me that conversation alone had been helpful. Offender A said the interview had given him an opportunity to "continue to re-evaluate and examine the process by which I became an offender and the process by which I remain abstinent from offending… an opportunity to share very honestly with someone that I don't know…a safe place to talk." He said having that safety was valuable because it is hard to talk about, even though he has practiced in treatment. He cried a few times during the interview and left quickly to avoid more crying in front of me at the end. He read over the interview transcript and initial paper I wrote, as his interview was a pilot project for this study, and permitted me to share them with his ex-wife in case it would help his children. She said there were things she was able to hear through me she could not have heard from him directly that she was grateful to know. That first interview was powerful for me, as I had not previously spoken with an honest sex offender, and I felt it was powerful for him because he had not spoken so candidly with a victim. Offender B enjoyed himself, laughed numerous times, and at the end of the interview said, "I feel good," and asked for advice about his poison ivy rash.

Bystander A felt she had "make a positive impact" by participating in this study, cried a number of times, and said she was grateful for the opportunity. Bystander B was very peaceful during the interview, asked many questions to understand indigenous theory, and said at the end: "I feel good that I met you; I think it was fun talking to you. I think it was kinda inspirational, and I wish there were more people doing things like you are, that are more willing to look at this in different ways." Bystander C said listening to her story helped because "it gets really old rehashing it over with the same people…I feel a little bit relieved that I can talk to you. You can understand; you can see the big picture." That our meeting was a one-time interview, and we would have no ongoing relationship allowed her to share more openly than she otherwise would have. She thanked me for doing the study and said: "Maybe it will do some good, and help you, and you can help other people, and see what we can do to help everybody on all sides of it, cause it's so painful all the way around."

All subjects had done a lot of emotional and spiritual work. At one point during the dialogue, Bystander C said, "It's a mental screwing that we got…because you can't make sense of it," then asked me, "What's it like to look at a victim from a different angle?" She appreciated experiences I shared that mirrored hers, such as questioning spiritual beliefs, struggling with forgiveness, feeling gratitude things were not worse, a negative impact on my sex life, and being able to help others. Bystander B was the only one who agreed with me that stopping punishment altogether was a good idea. Offender B asked me to explain why I was doing this research and offered to put me in touch with his daughter if it would help. With most subjects, I expressed that while my road has been hard, I felt grateful that being in the Victim role allowed me to be on the righteous side of social judgment and that I felt a responsibility to learn from them, offer healing space, and speak out about injustice, which led to this research project.

Discussion

From an indigenous theoretical perspective, we need to start looking at sexual violence as a cultural issue requiring community involvement to prevent, address and heal. A recent article put forward five evidence-based suggestions for sex offender registry reform: (1) do not register juveniles, (2) registration duration should be guided by risk assessment research, (3) relief and removal procedures need to function, (4) judges should be given discretion, (5) residence restrictions should be removed (Levenson, Grady & Leibowitz, 2016).

In Texas, the first sex offender registration laws went into effect in 1991 and since then have been amended every session. Registration dates back to offenses committed in 1970 in any jurisdiction, and it is a felony not to comply with registry laws. Implementation of laws is done at the local level, and jurisdictions often pass ordinances such as "child safety zones" prohibiting registered sex offenders from visiting public parks, buildings with daycare centers, or driving past school zones and require sex offenders to do things like spending Halloween in the sheriffs' office. There are state laws prohibiting them from many businesses and trades and from living on college campuses (Texas Sex Offender, 2017). As a comparison in the U.S., California began its sex offender registry in 1947 (California Sex Offender, n.d.). On October 6, 2017, the governor signed SB-384, allowing low-risk sex offenders to be removed from the registry 10 or 20 years after serving their sentence, which affects 90% of registrants. The bill was introduced at the request of the L.A. County District Attorney and law enforcement officials who said the registry, which had grown to 105,000 names, had become too large to manage and was undermining public safety (McGreevy, 2017). As of October 15, 2017, there were 122,707 on the Texas registry, more than 90 percent low risk, with a dozen added daily.

Financial and public safety concerns about the registry are real: in 2016, the Texas Department of Public Safety spent over $1.4 million and had 21 employees managing the registry full-time, and when the Houston Police Department needed to respond to Hurricane Harvey in 2017, 10 of their 14 officers were supposed to be monitoring 5000 residents on the registry, only 500 of whom were considered high risk (Floyd, 2017).

> In 2011, Texas began a so-called deregistration process… to remove those who were unlikely to re-offend from the list and…save taxpayers money. Focusing police attention on truly dangerous offenders would also improve public safety… [So far] only 58 sex offenders have been permitted to deregister…less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the current registry. (Dexheimer, 2016)

Texas's registry requires reform, and a commitment to improving the deregistration process would be a solid first step affecting the 122,707 people on the registry, their families, friends, and communities while freeing police to deal with actual

crimes and crises. Researchers, victims' groups, prosecutors, and law enforcement may need to work together to educate the public and provide Legislators with information to amend the laws appropriately. Given the impact on adolescents, I agree with the subjects' suggestion to teach about sex crime laws and internet safety in school. Subjects also had ideas about public service campaigns to prevent sexual violence, and I am sure victims' groups do too. Also, an evidence-based risk assessment tool would help ensure that "high risk" offenders are dangerous and "low risk" were not. If we do not engage in reform, as Bystander B said, "With twelve people added every day, it won't be long before everybody knows someone on the registry."

As for whether an empathic dialogue itself is healing, all subjects expressed that the experience was therapeutic. Given research on the healing power of empathy in therapy, it is not surprising that being deeply listened to and witnessed is healing. For me, the dialogues were illuminating about life experiences in some ways familiar to my own, in some ways not. Interviews were painful and uplifting reminders of human fortitude. Offender B admitted he "liked the escape" of drugs and alcohol. If I struggle with an addiction, it is workaholism. Workaholism is defined as working compulsively with little enjoyment (Spence & Robbins, 1992). A nascent body of research linking sexual violence victimization with workaholism suggests that some victims of sexual violence cope by channeling hypervigilance and attention to detail, inability to relax, desire for control, and accustom to overwhelm into work (*See, e.g.,* Tudiver, McClure, Heinonen, Scurfield & Kreklewetz, 2000; Chouliara, Karatzias & Gullone, 2014; Carleton, Mulvogue & Duranceau, 2014). While completing my dissertation, this certainly gave me food for thought.

Conclusion

As Tiwa healer Beautiful Painted Arrow has said, "For the true human, the first thing is to find out how to listen" (Rael, 2015, p. 15). When we really listen to each other, we see commonalities everywhere, even between a victim of sexual violence, a sex offender, and a bystander family member. Everyone deserves to be heard and support to heal and make amends. The stigma our culture has developed with sex offenders is something carried in each of us. Bystander C said when her husband "talked with one guy that he had worked with and found out he went through a similar thing…that's the first person that he told about [the sex offense] that didn't change the way he'd think about him." Bystander A said: "Just let my son start over." It reminds us that we are not our worst act and that we are all learning and living together. We can become aware of thoughts that dehumanize us, such as 'He's a monster.' We can look for the humanity in everyone and help people find it in themselves when they are dissociated and lost. We can commit, as professionals and community members, to put more effort into supporting offenders and their family members. Moreover, suppose we do not feel moved to stop judging and punishing, as indigenous theory suggests. In that case, we can stop punishing people "forever" and treat sex offenders how we treat other felons, which is still quite harsh.

References

Atkinson, J. (2002). Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia. Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press.

Borduin, C. & Schaeffer, C. (2001). Multisystemic treatment of juvenile sex offenders: A progress report. In Miner, M. H. Coleman (Eds.) *Sex Offender Treatment. Accomplishments, Challenges, and Future Directions,* Binghampton, NY: Haworth Press, pp. 25-42.

California Sex Offender Registry, n.d. Office of the Attorney General, California Department of Justice. Available at: https://oag.ca.gov/sex-offender-reg

Campbell, R. (2002). *Emotionally involved: The impact of researching rape.* New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Carleton, R. N., Mulvogue, M. K., & Duranceau, S. (2015). PTSD personality subtypes in women exposed to intimate partner violence. *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy, 7*(2), 154.

Cervantes, J. & McNeill, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Latina/o healing practices: Mestizo and indigenous perspectives.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Chouliara, Z., Karatzias, T., & Gullone, A. (2014). Recovering from childhood sexual abuse: A theoretical framework for practice and research. *Journal of psychiatric and mental health nursing, 21*(1), 69-78.

Consequences for perpetrators (n.d.). Violence, Awareness and Response Program, Minnesota State University. Retrieved January 26, 2016, from https://www.mnsu.edu/varp/assault/consequences.html

Creswell, J. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Dexheimer, E. (2016, July 14). Program to corral ballooning sex offender registry failing, *Austin-American Statesman.* Available at: http://www.mystatesman.com/news/state--regional/program-corral-ballooning-sex-offender-registry-failing/z4ltoUh7g2A8KSxI64vv5I/

Effects of sexual assault. (n.d.). RAINN. Retrieved January 26, 2016, from https://rainn.org/get-information/effects-of-sexual-assault

Floyd, J. (2017, September 29). The Cost of Texas' Sex Offender Registration Program [Blog post] Retrieved from https://www.johntfloyd.com/the-cost-of-texas-sex-offender-registration-program/

Gilligan, J. (2001). *Preventing Violence.* London, UK: Thames & Hudson.

Hanvey, S., Philpot, T., & Wilson, C. (2011). *A community-based approach to the reduction of sexual reoffending: Circles of Support and Accountability.* Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kaufman, M. (1999). Men, feminism and men's contradictory experiences of power. *In* J. Kuypers (Ed). *Men and power.* Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, pp 59-83.

Leibowitz, G. S., Burton, D. L., & Howard, A. (2012). Part II: Differences between sexually victimized and nonsexually victimized male adolescent sexual abusers and delinquent

youth: Further group comparisons of developmental antecedents and behavioral challenges. *Journal of child sexual abuse, 21*(3), 315-326.

McGreevy, P. (2017, October 6). California will soon end lifetime registration of some sex offenders under a bill signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, *Los Angeles Times.* Available at: http://www.latimes.com/politics/essential/la-pol-ca-essential-politics-updates-bill-ending-lifetime-registry-of-sex-1507332406-htmlstory.html

Morrison, Z., Quadara, A. & Boyd, C. (2007). “Ripple effects” of sexual assault. *Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault. Issues, 7,* 1-31. Retrieved February 20, 2016, from https://aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/issue/i7.html

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. *Doing feminist research, 30*(6), 1.

Prendergast, W. E. (2004). *Treating sex offenders: A guide to clinical practice with adults, clerics, children, and adolescents.* Haworth Press.

Rael, J. (2015). *being & vibration: Entering the new world.* Tulsa, OK: Millichap Books.

Ross, R. (1996). *Return to the teachings: Exploring aboriginal justice.* Toronto, Canada: Penguin Press.

Sawatsky, J. (2009). *The ethic of traditional communities and the spirit of healing justice: Studies from Hollow Water, the Iona Community, and Plum Village.* Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sherwood, J. (2010). *Do no harm: decolonising Aboriginal health research.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertation Database.

Spence, J. T., & Robbins, A. S. (1992). Workaholism: Definition, measurement, and preliminary results. *Journal of personality assessment, 58*(1), 160-178.

Texas Sex Offender Registration Program Frequently Asked Questions. (2017). *Texas Department of Public Safety.* Available at: https://www.dps.texas.gov/administration/crime_records/pages/faq.htm#a1

Thibodeau, S. & Nixon, G. (2013). Transformation for Native men with assaultive issues: The medicine wheel and Wilber’s spectrum of consciousness: A case study. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies 33*(1), 197-216.

Tudiver, S., McClure, L., Heinonen, T., Scurfield, C. M., & Kreklewetz, C. M. (2000). *Women survivors of childhood sexual abuse: Knowledge and preparation of health care providers to meet client needs.* Winnipeg, Canada: Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence.