

Sexual Assault by a Participant: Reflections from a Lone-Working Researcher

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This summer, while interviewing individuals for my Masters dissertation, I was sexually assaulted. It was a sunny, and warm early afternoon in Glasgow – a relative rarity, even in the summer – and I had just finished up some work on campus to meet with someone interested in taking part in an interview for my dissertation. What unfolded over the course of an afternoon seemed so unlikely, and so insidious that I actually doubted myself. However, I quickly realised – on a visceral, and immediate level afterwards – that sexual assault, harassment, and everything in between isn't about sexiness, it's about power.

I know this of course, had read, and heard it many times over and never disagreed. I would reassure friends of this fact, and argue in its defence. But, it was only when someone continually spoke, and touched me in a way I was uncomfortable with, and against my wishes – even after polite reprimands, and physical leaving of the situation – that I truly knew what it was about.

What shocked, and eventually angered me most about the situation, was my perceived failure to stop the situation sooner. I was polite, I continued with my interview after establishing throughout that the participant in question was comfortable to continue with the sensitive subject matter – albeit with pauses to move my hand or legs away, or to ask the participant to get back on track from too-personal questions. The interview, unsurprisingly wrapped up very quickly. I was uncomfortable throughout, but explained it away. I mean with the research subject, how could anyone, especially a stranger in that situation, mistake my intentions for being there, or talking to them privately face-to-face? As we were leaving he asked me out for a drink. I declined, citing errands that I hoped to run before meeting my second participant of the day. I said my goodbyes and made my way to the shops. He followed.

I put it down at first, to him making his way home. He caught up with me. He continued to touch my arm, shoulder, hair, and ask personal questions. It was over-friendly to the extreme I thought in the moment. He sat next to me on a busy street, asking personal, and progressively suggestive questions while I became increasingly uncomfortable, embarrassed, and frightened as it dawned on me just what the situation was becoming. When his hand made its way up my leg while he asked about my relationship with my partner, stated that I looked unhappy and that he could “make me happy”, I stood up. I knew I had to leave. I had tried to get him to leave throughout, and had finally stopped by a bench on a busy main street in an effort to stop him following me. This hadn’t worked. As I said goodbye – again – and moved away – again – he moved in quickly and tried to kiss me, only succeeding on reaching my cheek as I moved my head. I stumbled back as he turned and walked away. I waited and watched, knowing I would go in the completely opposite direction, even if it meant I got lost in a part of the city I hardly knew. I was frightened, uneasy, and I felt physically sick – which I was in fact, when I found my way back to the University campus. I cried. I went to see my next participant – which went without incident.

In the next few days he would email me several times, each more suggestive than the last. I struggled, thinking “am I making a fuss?”, “am I reading too much into this?”, “was he only being friendly?”. Maybe I had just misunderstood the situation? Did I do something? Was I not professional enough? These thoughts continued, gradually chipping away at my confidence until I questioned if anyone would believe me, if I hardly believed it myself. Should even report it? My instincts were yo-yoing between going forward to the police to report it, or to keep my mouth shut about what happened. I consider myself to be articulate, confident, and able to handle myself professionally in my research. Qualitative research – gaining insight from the individuals themselves, in particular – has always been a love of mine as I’ve moved through my academic career in psychology. It seemed the wisest option almost, to stay silent on the situation. Especially, I thought, as it had taken place in a research and academic context, and I’m at such a fraught crossroads in my academic career, with my future hanging in the balance, and uncertainty being the word of the day. Disclosing

such an incident would only call into question my academic ability to take on doctoral level research, surely? Or so my thoughts went.

Friends convinced me otherwise. I went to the police. I reported it. I had evidence – emails, CCTV. I was taken, I thought, seriously at the time. My statement took three hours, after more than hours waiting to be seen. Although looking back it was peppered with niggling questions – about the details of my clothing, why I hadn't called them on the day, why I had stayed in that situation, and why I had waited so long to report it (about four days). I apologised for taking up their time repeatedly during this process, thinking I was guilty of taking their valuable time away from another 'real crime'. I was assured it would be looked into, that indeed something had happened.

They called a few days later to say the CCTV either wasn't available for the time period, or was not able to be made out sufficiently. I had another lengthy conversation on the details of my clothing and my intentions during the incident. I sent through more evidence, and copies of text messages. Later on that week I was told the individual in question had been 'invited' in for questioning. He vehemently disputed my claims. He claimed he knew me previously, that I was friendly towards him, that I wanted him to proceed in the sexually aggressive manner (although he didn't view his actions this way). "Anyway", the policeman said, "He disclosed you also suffer from mental health issues too. Is that true?". My heart dropped at the implication, and the call ended with the news that he was released with barely a caution, and without any charges. I was told not to worry, and to take good care of myself in the future.

Although the end result was a bit disappointing, I'm glad friends encouraged me to speak out about what happened. Ethically, as researchers in these situations we are rightly very aware and focused on the harms we could potentially inflict on those involved in our work. So much so, that as I've found, very little specific or concrete thought is actually given over to the harms they can evidently do to us. The incident left more of a mark on me than I thought it would, impacting on every sphere of my life, and coming at an especially difficult period dealing with already-poor mental health, and an important time in my dissertation research and academic career as a whole. It has taken some time to come back from it, truthfully. In writing about my experience, I realise that as well as being cathartic – in a way I didn't think it would be – it has also proved constructive and empowering. Something tangible that others experiencing what I experienced can access, and know they're not alone. Writing on these situations in this particular setting is thin on the ground I found, further cementing my decision to disclose – which is never a neutral act in any circumstance. I sincerely hope this never happens to you, but if it does I hope that you now feel you can report it.