

Why do people participate in research interviews? Participant orientations and ethical contracts in interviews with victims of interpersonal violence

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Abstract

Researchers are increasingly interested in why people want to participate in qualitative interview studies, particularly what they hope to gain from participating. The present paper contributes to this research agenda by analysing the motivations of victims of interpersonal violence: a group that is considered ethically challenging to involve in research, given their history of being intruded upon. The analysis is based on 174 qualitative interviews from three separate studies: two on intimate partner violence and one on sexual assault. A key finding is that many victims welcome the opportunity to participate and often use the interviews for their own purposes. We identified three different ‘participant orientations’, or ways victims relate to the interview and the research, including ‘telling for oneself’, ‘telling for others’ and ‘telling for the researcher’. We discuss how these orientations imply different ethical contracts between the participant and researcher and their links to recruitment methods.

Keywords

research ethics, motivation, consent, recruitment, domestic violence, sexual violence

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Introduction

This article contributes to the growing research literature on research participants' agency and the positive gains of participating in qualitative research (Boss, 1987; Clark, 2010; Hutchinson et al., 1994; Hynson et al., 2006; Lohmeyer, 2020; Perera, 2020; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Our interest in the topic arose partly from a general unease over the increasingly narrow understanding of consent in ethical reviews of research, and the implicit underlying assumption of the research interview as potentially harmful – particularly for groups that are seen as particularly vulnerable. This understanding is a contrast to our own experience of research participants' willingness and even eagerness to participate in research as well as to the growing literature that demonstrates participants' agency, personal stakes in and gains from participation in research. We were further intrigued by the differences we experienced in recruiting participants in the three qualitative research projects that are analysed in this article, which we link to and discuss with regard to different recruitment strategies.

Our particular focus is on victims of domestic and sexual violence as participants in qualitative interview studies. A key aim is to add nuances to what we have come to think of as the 'vulnerable victim paradigm' that we expand on below. The notion refers to the tendency in ethics reviews to primarily focus on victims' rights to protection from research participation due to their vulnerability and risk of being re-traumatized: a concern that is both pertinent and potentially problematic.

It is generally recognized that studies among victimized persons need to be particularly sensitive to issues of consent and participant control. The experience of being deprived of control and existential security and, more generally, the violation of personal integrity is a constitutive aspect of domestic and sexual violence (Kelly, 2013; Stark, 2009). The problem arises when ideas of vulnerability work to exclude victims from participation. As commented by Downes et al. (2014: 1) this can lead to 'a dangerous lack of evidence' as well as to a form of silencing that contributes to what Salter (2012) describes as the continuing invalidation of gender-based violence as a social problem.

The vulnerable victim paradigm illustrates the expanding understandings of protection and narrowing understandings of consent that currently shape discussions on research ethics (Connor et al., 2018; Downes et al., 2014). Victims' own motivations for participation are seldom included in these discussions. Rather, the perspective is from the outside, and general. This paper contributes with much-needed insight into victims' rationales for participating in research, what we call 'participant orientations'. We take our cue from Lohmeyer's (2020) recent analysis of the qualitative interview as a site for 'parallel projects': that of the researcher and that of the participant. We ask:

- (1) What are victims' motivations for participating in qualitative research interviews, and how do they articulate what's in it for them?
- (2) If participants come to the research interview with different 'participant orientations' – then what do they implicitly demand of the researcher in the interview and beyond? What are the underlying 'ethical contracts' in different participant orientations?

- (3) How are different participant orientations and different ethical contracts in the research interview linked to recruitment methods?

In the following, we first discuss the ideas of vulnerability that guide ethics reviews for studies among victims of interpersonal violence, and then position our study within the expanding field of research on the benefits of participation in qualitative interviews. The methods section offers details on the three studies that our data come from while the analysis and discussion sections draw out different participant orientations from the interviews, the corresponding ethical obligations for the researcher and how these may be linked to recruitment methods.

Notions of vulnerability in research ethics

Ethical review processes are conducted by different bodies depending on the type of research and local and national systems. Across different institutional arrangements, a key theme is the participant's right to privacy and to be protected from the potential risks and harms of research. In the evaluation of concrete projects, these rights and risks are weighed against society's need for knowledge about important social issues. As a consequence, ethical guidelines and reviews pay less attention to the individual's desire or need to bring their experience forward to society, to tell their story to researchers as part of their own process of healing or for any other reason. Fisher (2012: 3) links this conception of ethics as a matter of privacy and protection to a liberal model of citizenship: '[t]he liberal model of citizenship underpinning ethical practices has placed the emphasis on negative freedoms (that is freedom from interference by other people) whilst overlooking some of the emancipatory benefits that may be derived from participation in qualitative studies, especially for individuals categorized as vulnerable'. This construction also positions researchers in a specific way. As Bamber and Sappey (2007) have pointed out, when participants' need for protection is placed in the foreground, researchers are correspondingly constructed as untrustworthy and prone to unethical and harmful behaviour, which is only prevented by close monitoring and control.

From a more moderate position on vulnerability, researchers have focused on preventing harm and making the research more sensitive to the vulnerability of participants. They have particularly paid attention to the research interview, and how to reduce harm and re-traumatization. One example is Hydén's (2014) 'teller-focused' interview method, which is designed to ensure that the participants have control over how they want to tell their story. Hydén's method reflects a common concern with the power asymmetries intrinsic to qualitative research interviews (Allmark et al., 2009; Juritzen et al., 2011; Miller and Dingwall, 1997). More generally research interviews are often seen as a 'deliberately created opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in' (Dingwall, 1997: 59). The concern to protect research participants who are assumed to be vulnerable, however, has also been found to undermine their agency and contribute to their devaluation (Heggen and Guillemin, 2012).

The underlying risk of doing harm and the implicit positioning of research participants as vulnerable also inform the development towards more inclusive and participatory

research when researching ‘sensitive topics’ or ‘vulnerable groups’ in a number of contexts (Aldridge, 2014; Minikel-Lacocque, 2019; Shaw et al., 2020; Swarts, 2011). Still, recruitment methods are often treated in superficial ways in the literature on qualitative interviewing (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015). According to Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009: 282), at this stage ‘control over the research process lies in the hands of the researcher’ and ‘[t]he goal of this stage is to persuade potential participants to participate in the research and share their personal experience and knowledge’. This construction of recruitment as persuasion excludes various self-recruitment strategies that have increased with the use of social media, particularly among hard-to-reach samples such as those with rare diseases or other uncommon or stigmatized experiences (Gelinas et al., 2017). What about those who do not need to be persuaded but who enrol on their own accord and insist they want to participate, such as the participants in two of the tree studies we depart from here? Much of this literature is also based on researcher or outsider perspectives, while less is known about research participants’ own motivations for taking part in the research, and particularly how participants think they can benefit from talking to a researcher. The literature on these issues is discussed next.

Benefits of participation: empirical studies

The present analysis follows up on the call from numerous researchers to shift attention from the risks of research participation towards the benefits. Studies in this tradition have identified a range of benefits. Based on an analysis of several sets of in-depth interviews, Hutchinson et al. (1994) described six different types: catharsis, self-acknowledgement, a sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment and healing. They also commented on the informed and active consent of participants as something to be respected. Quoting Boss (1987), they argued that people are often capable of making their own judgements about research participation: ‘Respect for first refusals and not pushing is therefore critical, but we must also respect their informed consent to participate since that may be a signal that they feel they can cope with – and may even welcome – our intrusion’ (Boss, 1987: 152).

Dyregrov et al. (2011a) reported similar findings as Hutchinson et al.’s (1994) in their analysis of participants’ motivations for being interviewed about bereavement by suicide. The majority of participants reported positive experiences, which the researchers grouped into four main categories: helping others, venting, insight and ‘just because’. In a related study, the same researchers highlighted the importance of meaning-making as a motive for and outcome of research participation:

[T]he interviewees used the interview to perform a complex reconstructive task, striving to piece together the shattered biographies of the deceased and themselves. With traumatic loss, a sense of meaning may be shattered; however, with meaning reconstruction, there is the possibility for new adaptations and new behaviors. Thus, even if they were interviewed only once, many of the grieving family members and friends claimed that it was ‘therapeutic’. (Dyregrov et al., 2011b: 702).

In one of the first studies to specifically explore research participants' motivations, Clark (2010) interviewed experienced qualitative researchers about how they understood the mechanisms that motivate and facilitate participants' engagement in research. He concluded that the researchers identified several supporting mechanisms, both at the individual level – including subjective interest, enjoyment, curiosity, introspective interest, social comparison, therapeutic interest, and material and economic interest – and at the collective level, including representation, political empowerment and informing 'change'.

Wolgemuth et al. (2015), building on Clark (2010), concluded that participants in their multi-case study identified several benefits of participating in qualitative research, including the opportunity to '(1) talk to someone; (2) self-reflect; (3) emotionally cleanse; (4) become knowledgeable about a topic of personal/professional interest; (5) connect with a broader community based on shared experience; (6) advocate for a community/cause; and (7) help someone else down the road' (p. 358). The therapeutic effect of participating in qualitative research has similarly been noted by others. For example, Perera (2020) elucidated how research interviews may become an opportunity for participant reflexivity in real time during the interviews. The transformative potential of telling one's story is also noted in research on narratives on difficult experiences more generally (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999; Sandberg et al., 2015).

What we have seen in the specific literature is a general acknowledgement that participants often not only willingly consent to research interviews but may even be eager to participate for their own reasons. What has also become apparent is that there is no agreement about how motivations should be conceptualized, nor is there much discussion about how different participant orientations position the researcher or what kinds of ethical 'contracts' such positionings imply. Our analysis contributes to this end.

Materials and methods

The analysis is based on data from three separate qualitative interview studies: two studies on intimate partner violence and one on sexual assault which comprise a total of 174 interviews (165 women, 9 men). All three studies were set in Norway and aimed to elicit victims' own narratives about their experiences of victimization. The studies received ethical approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and informed consent was secured from all participants. The participants did not receive any economic compensation.

Because we are particularly interested in participants' motivations for telling their story in the context of a research interview, we describe the recruiting process in each study in some detail.

Study 1 investigates women's experience of violence from previous male partners and in-laws, based on interviews with 97 women aged 22–70. About a quarter had immigrant backgrounds from non-Western countries. Most of them were recruited through different services. All non-immigrant participants were recruited via social media (Facebook and Twitter).

In Study 2, 28 women and 9 men aged 19–70 were interviewed about their experience of intimate partner violence in heterosexual and queer relationships. Half the participants were recruited via social media and the ‘snowballing’ technique, while the other half had previously participated in a survey study (Thoresen and Hjemdal, 2014) and were randomly selected among those who had reported some form of partner violence and agreed to be recontacted. The interviews took place 3 to 4 years after the original survey.

In study 3, 40 women aged 22–44 were interviewed about their sexual assault experiences as youths or young adults. In most cases the assailant was an acquaintance or friend, but some had been raped by former boyfriends or partners. Most of the participants were recruited through a social media post that described how the research was to be about negative sexual experiences and sexual assaults, while a few responded to posters distributed to sexual assault centres.

The interviews in study 1 and 3 were primarily conducted face to face, while the interviews in study 2 were mainly conducted via telephone. In each study a team of researchers was used as interviewers, including the authors of this paper. All three studies used a semi-structured interview guide with the following key topics: family background and upbringing, experiences with violence and abuse, reactions, coping and help seeking. The interview style was flexible and allowed the participants to take the lead and decide the level of details they would offer about their experiences of violence and assault as well as their biographical context. The interviews thus varied in length from one to several hours. With one exception, the interviews were conducted in Norwegian. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Quotations from the transcripts were translated into English by the authors and have been lightly edited for clarity. The quotations presented in this paper represent particularly clear illustrations of the different participant orientations. The study number is indicated in parentheses for each quotation.

Identifying participant orientations

During the interviews, people’s reflections on their motivations for participating were most often prompted by direct questions by the interviewer, while in some interviews, participants would talk about their motivations when asked about how they had experienced being interviewed or connected to other topics. Our analysis of the interview data was two-staged and inspired by reflexive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2019), where themes are understood as ‘particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset’ (p. 592) and not as simple descriptive labels. First, citations that referred to motivations were sampled across the three studies and sorted into three broad categories – ‘telling for oneself’, ‘telling for others’ and ‘telling for the researcher’ – which we see as representing different ‘participant orientations’. The citations within each of these categories were then analysed in greater detail to allow for nuances within the categories to be conceptualized.

Below we describe the three participant orientations we identified in the analysis. We focus on the content and meaning of each orientation as well as nuances within them. The orientations do not denote groups or types of participants; rather, they are ideal types in the Weberian sense: constructions that highlight distinctive components. In each interview,

orientations could mix and overlap. For some, what we call the ‘telling for others’ orientation could be part of a personal project of healing, that is, ‘telling for oneself’. Others talked about such motivations as something separate: ‘I have a dual motive for saying yes. The first is that I think research is a good thing; knowledge is good. The other is purely egoistic. It’s processing work for me’ (3). We describe the orientations separately for analytic reasons.

Telling for oneself

The first orientation, ‘telling for oneself’, which we identified across all three studies, focuses on the value of telling for the participants’ personal development and healing. The interview is their moment to be listened to, find meaning and perhaps find ways to move on. The ‘telling for oneself’ orientation establishes the interview setting as a possibility to take ‘narrative ownership’ (Pemberton et al., 2019) of one’s experiences in a culture where silencing and ‘invalidation’ (Salter, 2012) is a real risk for victims of violence and assault. The orientation thus has an existential dimension: it has to do with self-worth and self-knowledge. The interviews are treated as a reflective space and an opportunity for formulating, reclaiming and coming to terms with their story, and to exercise their voice as part of healing and getting on in life. We draw out several nuances to this orientation below.

Making it real, making it tellable

The ‘telling for oneself’ orientation could be expressed as simply a need to tell someone, to put the story out there in the world. For instance, one woman talked about how she was happy that her story of being sexually assaulted was included in the research, that it was ‘written down, [so] that I’m not the only one who knows’ about the assault (3). Telling something in an interview setting validates the experience as something real and worth talking about. Some, like this woman, had tried to talk about it before but had not felt that they had been heard:

I’ve tried to open up, but they haven’t understood ... I don’t feel that I’ve met anyone with enough understanding to listen to the whole story. I’ve seen a psychologist, too, but I couldn’t bring it up with him. I don’t know if it was because he was a man, but I couldn’t bring it up.... I’ve thought that I just need to tell someone, which is why I responded (3).

In other interviews, the telling was a way to piece a complex and chaotic story together. For some participants, this was their first opportunity to pull together a full story for their own purpose, in contrast to the fragmented narratives structured by the needs of police and service workers. They may want the researcher’s assistance in articulating and remembering, but their project is to tell the whole story. One participant (from study 1) particularly stressed that she saw the interview as a chance to finally talk about her own experience of abuse. She had consciously suppressed this part of the story when providing evidence in both the child protection case and the criminal case against her former

husband, who had sexually abused their daughter. The interview gave her a space for talking about it all and to establish a form of coherence. Another example (from study 2) was a woman who had chosen to stay in a relationship with the man who had abused her, even after the public prosecutor had issued an indictment against him. In connection with the police case, she had thought a lot about what had happened through the years:

It's not easy to have made the decision to be where I am. It's made me think a lot: What makes me do it, and why do I choose the way I do? And when I saw that study, I thought, 'It's definitely very important to do research', so that's why I said I was interested (2).

The interview seemed to give her a further opportunity to make sense of her choices.

Finding voice, moving on

Telling for oneself was often connected to a project of healing and moving on. For some, the interview represented a 'real step' (3) in opening up about their experiences after years of being silent or talking about them vaguely or only when drunk, as illustrated by the following quote:

When I saw that link [on Facebook], I thought that this might be the only time I manage to talk about it, or maybe it can open [opportunities] for talking to others later. I thought it could be a start to maybe becoming comfortable to work with [my experience]. To try and find a psychologist or tell someone I know. That I need to test it out first, with someone neutral (3).

Other women used the interview as part of their ongoing process of healing. They practiced 'putting it into words more often' (2). As another participant noted:

I have decided that I'm moving on from that shit. I will talk it to death. And I will talk and talk and talk about it, and I will have described what happened so many times that I eventually can describe it without falling apart ... gaining control over my own story. I'll benefit from [being interviewed]: you don't need to think about that (3).

Healing was presented as hard work and something that involves telling one's story over again and over again – often as a project of de-shaming – and the interview was useful towards that end.

Telling for others

The 'telling for others' orientation was also identified across the three studies. For many of the participants, telling for others was also a way of helping themselves. In its purest form, however, the 'telling for others' orientation represented a moral project of using one's experience to improve the situation for victims, expressing solidarity and a responsibility to do good. An important backdrop to this orientation was the participants' own experiences in the aftermath of violence: feelings of being alone, of being misunderstood or

ill-treated by the agencies that were supposed to help. The ‘telling for others’ orientation was expressed in slightly different ways, which we draw out below.

Helping others

One articulation of the ‘telling for others’ orientation was through a general wish to help others and to make a difference for someone, as the quotes below indicate:

The reason I wanted to sign up was [to see] if I could make a difference. It’s become very important to me [to] try to be and do something for others. It’s not so easy to know what to do to be there for others, so this was maybe one thing [I could do] (1).

I feel I have a social responsibility.... I think my story is important, and maybe someone can benefit from me telling it (3).

The participants talked about the value of having their stories out there so that other victims would know that they were not alone: ‘I find comfort in [knowing that my experience is not unique]; it makes it easier to live with my story’ (3).

Some immigrant women talked about telling their story in order to inspire others, as illustrated by the following quote:

I really want to be an inspiration or be someone who shows the way for a woman who doesn’t dare to talk or who doesn’t dare to leave her husband because then he’ll do something to her (1).

A woman with a long history of mental health problems following abuse had realized that she might never get the life she had wished for herself, such as getting an education and having children. She saw the interview as an opportunity for validation at an existential level, thus constituting an example of how contributing to research may at the same time be about telling for others and telling for oneself: ‘This is what I live for now – that I [my story] may be used for something sensible’ (2).

Improving understanding

‘Telling for others’ could also be linked to a need to increase general understanding of the phenomenon of violence in society at large, both in order to improve services for victims and to change people’s attitudes towards victims of violence. By telling their stories, they could help fill in the picture of different aspects of violence: ‘If you want to get a picture of this [situation], you have to include as much as possible’, one woman said (1). Her particular concern was to challenge the stereotype that violent men are ‘those without education, those without this or without that’. She wanted to tell society that ‘there is so much shit behind nice facades’.

Many wanted to correct what they saw as a narrow and distorted picture of the typical victim. Central to this ambition was their own experience of not being represented in

portrayals of violence, be they white middle-class women, feminist women, women from closed religious communities or other groups. This is what one participant wrote in her first email to the project leader:

I was subjected to psychological violence by my cohabiting partner for two years, and I've noticed that many don't fully believe my story, because I'm so typically resourceful and independent. It would be nice to be able to contribute to an increased understanding and a more nuanced picture of what violence is and who can be exposed to it (1).

Both this woman's and other participants' insistence on diversifying the picture of the victim was often framed as a contrast to their own previous prejudice. They used to think of the abused woman as deviant in some sense of other. 'Because it's so easy to think like that, and I thought like that myself; like, what is wrong with you?' (1).

Yet another concern was the diversity of abuse itself, as in the following quote from a participant who wanted to explain that even minor transgressions are part of what sexual assault is:

When I contacted you, I thought that 'my story isn't that serious compared to what others have experienced'.... But then I thought that it's a part of it, too, and I'm sure there are many people who have experienced these less invasive [incidents] ... and then it affects them more or less after. So, this is a part of it too (3).

Her message was that while her experience contrasted to common portrayals of rape, it added to the picture of what sexual violence is. By telling, she could contribute to broadening the understanding of sexual assault.

Improving the system

To improve agencies and routines was one expression of the 'telling for others' orientation, succinctly captured in this quote: 'We need research so that people can be better at it' (1). The participants wanted to tell us about lacking and faulty services so that politicians, leaders and people in general would understand the problem. They pointed to how the availability and quality of services should be improved, thereby changing the way victims are met: 'It's not like the police are always there for you.... So, I feel a little that the system should get better. Maybe that's what I wanted to say' (1).

The specificity of the wish to improve the system varied. One participant, a woman with a long story of suffering several forms of institutional injustices after leaving a violent man, came to the interview with a clear agenda. She wanted the research to contribute to redressing some of the specific institutional failures that she had experienced, and also to prevent other women from falling victim to them, by telling her story. When talking about her motivations towards the end of the interview, it was almost as if she gave the researcher an assignment to set things right:

I think that I actually managed to give you a total picture [so] that you see both the law and ... the consequences and how I managed to cope, and why I managed to cope. And how all those I've had contact with now mostly shy away. They just pass the matter on because there's no one [who takes responsibility]. I call it cowardice. They have the opportunities, but they do nothing, just pass it on, and suddenly they've quit their jobs, and they probably know they did something wrong, but: 'now it's off my back somehow' (2).

The 'telling for others' orientation seemed to be driven by an urge that their own harm should not have happened in vain, exemplified by a participant who explained that she did not want more people 'to go through the same hell' as her (1): 'If I can use my story, then I think it's perfectly okay, then it hasn't happened in vain. Then I've withstood these storms for a reason'.

Another central part of the motivation to contribute may be understood in terms of civil duty. This aspect was especially related to the question of reporting abuse and assault to the police, and the moral discourse on reporting as a major preventive tool. In the Norwegian context, this discourse is particularly strong regarding sexual assault (Hansen et al., 2021), which is mirrored in our material, although we also saw the discourse among some of the participants in the partner violence studies. For women who had experienced but not reported rape, contributing to the research was a way to at least do something. One woman described her thoughts as she saw the ad for the study on sexual assault in a Facebook group:

Okay, I didn't report it to the police, but what I've been through may say something about ... [telling] your story, if that can contribute to awareness that this actually happens. So, it's not like it's my day in court, but it will be used for something positive. That's what I thought (3).

Another woman offered that because she had not reported, she had an 'even bigger responsibility to do something about it' (3) – for instance by participating in the research.

Telling for the researcher

The 'telling for the researcher' orientation captures those few participants who did not appear to come to the interview with their own project or agenda, other than being interviewed for research. In contrast to the other orientations, this orientation is founded more on an absence than a presence of personal motivations and projects in the interview. The orientation thus cannot easily be illustrated by quotes, as the participants had nothing or little to say about their motives for participating. Bearing in mind that the participants could have had motives for participating that they did not state in their interviews, this orientation is best defined in contrast to the other two orientations. It was only present among some of the participants who were recruited through the survey in study 2. They answered the questions posed by the researcher, but they did not elaborate on their own motivations for participating. Unlike many of the others who on their own initiative started by elaborating on their motivation, they went straight to talking about their experiences with abuse; when asked towards the end of the interview about their

experience of being interviewed ‘*How was your experience of participating in this interview?*’, their answer was often just a general ‘*It was okay*’ statement. However, the lack of verbal elaboration on their motivation should not be seen a lack of motivation, which they demonstrated by sharing their stories.

Nevertheless, these interviews were also less elaborate and more researcher-led. Compared to the other orientations, the most striking difference was perhaps the absence of an actively narrating and reflecting subject in many of these interviews. The participant to a larger extent remained the interview *object*, the responding ‘you’ in the interview. This situation contrasted with that of the other orientations, in which the interview situation contained a first-person narrating presence and agency – sometimes to the degree that the researcher felt unable to get through the interview guide or finish the interview. The participants who told for the researcher shared less of their thoughts and sense-making compared to those who articulated the other two orientations.

Discussion and conclusion

There is a growing interest among qualitative researchers in why people want to participate in research and how the benefits of research participation may be conceptualized. Informed by this scholarship, our aim with the present study was to understand the motivations of victims of domestic and sexual violence in telling their stories to a researcher in a qualitative interview. Contrary to the idea that this group should be protected against the risk of re-traumatization and other harm, many of the victims who signed up to be interviewed displayed a strong sense of *urgency* to share their story. We understand this urgency as reflecting what [Salter \(2012\)](#) refers to as a cultural current of ‘invalidation’ of violence and abuse in society at large.

Many victims have experiences of not being believed, experiencing lacking or inadequate services, or of being confronted with stereotypical ideas of victimhood from friends and family and within services. The research interview, in contrast, offers a neutral space for telling the story to an interested listener who will not question the story, nor the person who is telling it, and, importantly, has no power to influence the immediate outcome of the story. There are of course power imbalances in research interviews that the researcher needs to be mindful of, but from the perspective of the participant, the interviews seemed to offer a form of ‘interest-free’ interaction that validated the participant’s story – and on a more basic level the participant as a person, whose life and experiences matter as well.

While protection from research may be warranted for some individuals, a key insight from our study – with relevance for ethics reviews – is that for those who want to participate, the qualitative interview can represent a much-needed form of validation. With [Fisher \(2012\)](#), we argue for an increased focus on the right to participate as a corollary to the right to decline participation in research ethics discussions. In this perspective, the ethical concern not to involve vulnerable victims in research or to protect them from the harms of telling about their experiences is turned upside down into an ethical imperative of acknowledging victims’ desire to take part and to share their experiences.

As both Hutchinson et al. (1994) and Boss (1987) have argued, researchers should respect participants' own judgement and consent to being 'intruded' upon. Inherent in this acknowledgement is the insight that their desires and agendas may differ, depending on who they are and where they are in their process of dealing with the violence and abuse they have suffered. While we as researchers may want the same from the participants, our study has shown that their different motivations imply or produce different researcher-participant relations, and thereby different ethical challenges for the researcher. This aspect is what we discuss in the following, paying attention also to the role of different entryways into the qualitative interview for such challenges.

We identified and conceptualized three different participant orientations in this study: 'telling for oneself', 'telling for others' and 'telling for the researcher'. As noted earlier, these are ideal types that capture tendencies in the interview material and that may overlap and mix for the individual participant. The two first orientations both corroborate the findings in other research on difficult experiences of the transformative power of forming a coherent narrative, be it for the purpose of personal healing or for more altruistic reasons (Clark, 2010; Dyregrov et al., 2011b; Wolgemuth et al., 2015); Pennebaker and Seagal (1999).

In the orientation 'telling for oneself', where the key motivation is meaning-making and healing, the researcher is positioned as a receiver and *listener*. This researcher role is well known from the methodological literature, although what constitutes good listening is not often spelt out (Lavee and Itzchakov, 2021). In this study we are concerned with the ethical dimension of listening. In the 'telling for oneself' orientation, the participants seek a person who is interested, competent and capable of receiving and enduring their story. They see the interview as a safe space where they can start or continue their own processing of the experience of being abused. Thus, the role of the researcher has a strong element of validation. Being accepted as a participant will in itself validate their experience as a victim of violence. Validation will also happen throughout the interview as the researcher affirms with nods and sympathetic sounds, comments on the relevance and importance of what is said, asks qualified follow-up questions and wraps up the interview.

The sensitive listening role also entails not questioning any different versions of the story that the participant might tell during the interview, which Hydén (2014) describes as essential in 'teller-focused' interviews. The researcher may be positioned as a supportive listener, providing a neutral and safe space for telling and self-reflection, with the researcher in the quasi-therapeutic position, where she and the research participant together try to bring the story to life and make sense of it. In other cases, the emphasis is rather on being a witness, an empathetic listener who can contain and document the story. In any case, the demands on the researcher are immediate, in the here and now. When the researcher fulfils the role as listener and validator, the participant's project is realized in the interview itself. In other words, within this ethical contract, the researcher pays the interviewee back immediately.

In our studies, this orientation was associated with self-recruitment via social media. The participants gave their consent freely and without hesitation, and the encounter was based on a form of trust in the researcher on a personal level. The ethical challenges associated with this orientation relate to the researcher's handling of the meeting – the

interview – itself, as well as the potential negative emotional effects on the participant and the researcher herself in the period after. Ethical soundness relies on the handywork of sensitive interviewing, of being attuned to the participant’s emotional state, and contributing to meaning-making and validation, if invited. While personal motivation and active consent do not preclude adverse effects of telling, the issues of harm and protection will often be an explicit part of the interview. In terms of weighing the interests of the participant against those of the researcher, being the listener and validator is not at odds with the academic interest of qualitative research, provided the researcher has the time and resources required to process and use the data.

The orientation ‘telling for others’ positions the researcher as a change-maker or *doer*. The participant motivation is associated with helping others through contributing to change; thus, the researcher is expected to make that change happen through gathering and disseminating knowledge. The researcher as *doer* is expected to help fix things for the better for other victims of abuse and to make society a better place. This researcher role is most often connected to the researcher as an activist in methodological literature, which has a particular set of ethical challenges (Kara, 2017). We interpret that our participants demanded ‘action’ from the researcher in a more traditional form, to use the tools of the trade and the expert role to counter stereotypical ideas about victims and to identify how and why invalidation and injustices still occur.

In our analysis, we saw how the positioning of the researcher as *doer* may come in different versions or degrees. The researcher could be positioned as an ally or a spokesperson or as a co-combatant in the struggle to improve the societal understanding and response to violence and abuse. While most of our participants who articulated this orientation came with a general expectation of research being a part and an accelerator of change, others had a more specific and immediate assignment to us as change-makers: for instance, that the research should address shortcomings in the police, child welfare services or other agencies. In any case, the contract was based on the researcher following up after the interview, making change happen through her role as an expert with the power to influence government agencies and professionals.

The positioning of the researcher as *doer* was associated with recruitment via social media in our research projects. The consent was active, and in some cases particularly active, almost demanding of the researcher. Thus, the ethical challenge was to find a balance between accommodating the participants’ agenda of change and adhering to scientific standards of analytical distance: what Rosmer (2010), in a study of activist groups, refers to as balancing solidarity with critique when presenting the research. Exactly how difficult this balancing act may be will depend on the nature of the research project, as some are more geared towards practical impact than others, and of course on the degree of alignment between the participant agenda and the research results. In any case, the researcher should be careful not to provide any guarantees as to the outcome in terms of actual change. On the other hand, improving understanding and society’s response to victims’ diverse needs should be a general ethical obligation for those who research interpersonal abuse.

The third orientation, ‘telling for the researcher’, positions the researcher as just that – a researcher, or investigator. This is a person who wants something from the participants

that the latter are willing to give, not for their own benefit or for any greater good, but for research as the researcher's project. In its pure form, there is no inner personal drive behind this orientation. The researcher is the one who asks questions and receives answers. The consent is free but less active (if not reactive), the participant's attitude being more of an 'Okay, I can do this for you, no problem' outlook. Or, as one of Peel et al.'s (2006) interviewees put it, 'it's no skin off my nose', stressing the ease of participation. This orientation represents the extreme opposite to the 'keen as fuck' youths interviewed by Lohmeyer (2020), and the pushiness we experienced from some of the self-recruited participants. Consequently, there is no expectation of payback from the researcher, other than being treated decently during the interview. The ethical contract is based on the researcher simply being a researcher with an interest in a particular topic, and then communicating with the research community. Still, this situation may accentuate the perceived pressures on the researcher to ensure that the interview process is a positive one.

In the present study, this orientation was associated with recruitment through invitation via a third person and invitations based on a previous consent to be recontacted. The participants who articulated this orientation were less invested compared to the self-recruited participants. Even if participants have given their informed consent, this situation may make the researcher uncomfortable, as it indicates an unequal exchange in which the researcher is positioned in a particularly powerful and possibly exploitative and harmful role – which is inherent in what we referred to as the 'vulnerable victim' paradigm earlier – while the intrinsic reward for the research participant is uncertain. This interpretation is premised on participants wanting or needing a reward, other than simply being people who can share their story with the interested researcher. Still, even if not all participants are personally motivated, the discrepancy between the value for the researcher and the potential lack of gain for the participant is a noteworthy ethical consideration.

This challenge especially seemed to arise when participants were not self-recruited but responded to an invitation that targeted them specifically, from either the researcher or a third party whom they may have felt loyalty towards and who may have even put pressure on them to accept. For this group, the research interview may happen at a random and possibly inconvenient point in time. Particular care should be taken when recruiting people who have consented to being recontacted in a previous study to ensure that their consent is still valid in ethical terms. The temporal aspects of consent processes thus should be explored in research ethics, as they may shape the relations between researcher and researched and could mediate the potential gains and disadvantages of participating in research.

The analysis presented in this paper expands the understanding of the gains for participants in qualitative research on sensitive topics. In line with other research, we found that many of the participants had signed up for the research as part of their process of reclaiming agency and seeking validation, both at an individual and at a social and civic level. Our study thus corroborates the intrinsic gains for participants of taking part in qualitative interviews that previous studies have found. We identified three participant orientations and explored how these orientations represent different researcher-participant contracts with different ethical implications and power dynamics. The study has also

shown that the intrinsic gains of participation in qualitative interviews may vary according to the recruitment method.

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