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Uncovering Hidden Life Experiences Through Longitudinal Ethnography: The Case of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse*

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Many family science and human development scholars argue that it is critically important to examine women’s histories of physical and sexual abuse in studies of their life course. Yet, given the sensitivity of this topic and respondents’ tendency to withhold troubling information about themselves, it is difficult to gather accurate and detailed information about these experiences in women’s lives (see Jouriles, McDonald, Norwood, & Ezell, 2001). For example, studies such as the National Violence Against Women Surveys are designed specifically to identify the prevalence of abuse, but they do not gather information about processes involved in women’s disclosures of abuse (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Finkelhor, 1994). Moreover, panel surveys of life course and family transitions such as the National Survey of Families and Households and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics either do not include questions about abuse, or employ less than ideal measures that result in significant under-reporting of these experiences. Overall, most surveys rely on narrow measures that fail to capture the full range of women’s subjective experiences of abuse, or they neglect to consider it as a phenomenon affecting the entire life course of women and their families (Macmillan, 2001; Williams, 2003).

Such problems in measurement and assessment impede our understanding of abuse prevalence and the ways in which it shapes the life course of women, particularly low-income women who face heightened vulnerabilities from its effects (Leone, Johnson, Cohan, & Lloyd, 2004).

Compared to surveys, ethnographic studies often find themselves “knee-deep” in data about women’s physical and sexual abuse experiences. In many ethnographies, women’s histories of abuse often emerge naturalistically as unanticipated themes during data collection. For example, in ethnographic studies seeking to understand the life course of low-income women, researchers reported that although they did not specifically solicit information about abuse, it was a disturbingly common experience for their respondents and was frequently
revealed as a fact of family life to be negotiated along with the other numerous challenges of poverty (Butler & Burton, 1990; Dodson 1998; Fine & Weis, 1998; Musick, 1993). And, more recently, large scale studies of welfare reform that included ethnographic components have reported the emergence of abuse issues as unanticipated yet significant factors influencing outcomes of interest (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin 2004; Scott, London, & Myers, 2002). These studies suggest that abuse is a highly influential force in low-income mothers’ lives that is likely to go undetected in studies that neither address it directly nor employ methods that are sensitive enough to capture it naturalistically. In light of these findings, we ask the following questions: Could ethnography be one of the most useful and important methods for gathering accurate data about the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in the life course of low-income women? What are the processes involved in women revealing histories of physical and sexual abuse through ethnography?

In this chapter, we address these questions using longitudinal ethnographic data from *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study* (hereafter the Three-City Study). This ethnography (described in greater detail later in this chapter) sought to understand the life course experiences of 256 African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White low-income mothers of young children in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio over a six-year period following the implementation of welfare reform. We begin this discussion with a brief overview of the features of ethnography that render it a viable life course method for gathering accurate and detailed data about physical and sexual abuse in women’s lives. We then describe the processes involved in uncovering women’s abuse experiences in the Three-City Study ethnography. In doing so, we illustrate the degree to which experiences of physical and sexual abuse permeate the lives of low-income mothers and present methodological and ethical challenges to ethnographers. Our
process of uncovering abuse in women’s lives was characterized by distinctive respondent
disclosure patterns evoked by certain trigger topics, recent crisis events, and ethnographers’
direct inquiries. The disclosure experiences also involved ethnographers’ own emotional
reactions and ethical responsibilities toward the respondents. The implications of these
disclosure processes for research designs and methodological issues concerning life course
research on low-income women are also discussed.

**Ethnography and the Revelation of Physical and Sexual Abuse**

Very few people are completely open in what they say and do in the presence of other human
beings. This claim applies to passersby on a city sidewalk, close and lifelong friends, and
respondents answering a sociological survey. As social learning theorists would argue, all
individuals are socialized to be mindful of some normative set of rules regarding disclosure of
their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors--guidelines gleaned through their participation in social
life. Goffman (1959, 1963), with his emphasis on phenomena such as impression management,
stigma, and passing shed important light on this universal human tendency to guard the
information we reveal to others. A main reason for this lack of disclosure is that people learn,
both explicitly and implicitly, that their communication of information about self, others,
thoughts, and actions can have consequences, both negative and positive (Blumer, 1955;
Deutscher, 1966; Schwalbe, 1987). With this in mind, people often try to craft desired images of
self, limit the kind and amount of information they share, and hide sensitive or discrediting
information from others. And so, alcoholics may attempt to hide signs of inappropriate drinking;
workers sometimes cover up evidence of laziness or mistakes to bosses; family members may
reveal limited information about one another to outsiders; and women may hide or minimize
experiences of sexual and physical abuse in their lives.
How should social scientists who are intent on learning as much as possible from those they study deal with this challenge? More specifically, how can one gain access to hidden information, such as women’s histories of being physically or sexually abused, especially when that data can help in understanding and interpreting their life circumstances? We contend that ethnographic research is an especially valuable means for gaining access to such sensitive data. More than most data collection methods, longitudinal ethnography is likely to uncover sensitive and hidden experiences that shape individuals’ lives (Smith, Tessaro, & Earp, 1995).

Ethnography allows for the discovery of such experiences in at least two ways. First, it enables researchers to collect a wide range of data by actually being there, over time, with those being studied, to observe and question individuals under the conditions (e.g., in the workplace; interacting with family members) in which study participants usually act. Second, ethnographic research enables fieldworkers, through the development of trust and rapport with those studied, to elicit data on sensitive information in participants’ lives—information that is less likely to be revealed in any one single meeting or a limited series of encounters.

“Being There”

Ethnographic research, and fieldwork in particular, is a necessarily social research practice (see Gans, 1968; Gold, 1958; Jarvie, 1969; Stebbins, 1972; Vidich, 1955). Unlike other methods of research, ethnographic fieldwork entails actually inserting oneself, to varying degrees, into the lives of the people being studied (see Clarke, 1975). In the course of doing research, ethnographers are inevitably enmeshed in social relationships with those studied by virtue of participating in the latter’s activities. Asher and Fine (1991, p.196), in their study of women married to alcoholics, underscore this feature of ethnographic research:
Good field research inevitably involves the creation and cultivation of relationships. These relationships will, depending upon the goals of the research and the types of persons whom one is studying, take many forms, but in all cases there must be both a measure of personal caring and respect and an interpersonal distance that derives from the separate roles and social worlds of researcher and informant.

Any given ethnographic research project is likewise made up of a series of social acts and relationships, a history of cumulative acts that also entails the roles, identities, interactional pressures, and normative social obligations attendant on any set of social relationships (see Emerson & Pollner 2001; Singer, Huertas, & Scott 2000). Ethnography also stands out as social practice precisely because of the need to cultivate and maintain relationships with those being studied, often over long periods of time (see Cassell & Wax, 1980; Clarke, 1975; Harrington, 2003; Wolcott, 2001).

As typically practiced, ethnographic study involves the close-up and detailed reporting of what people do and say in the flow of everyday activities. It is achieved through some mix of observation, participant-observation, and formal and informal interviewing (see Agar, 1996; Spradley, 1980). Likewise, ethnographic research functions as a kind of ongoing, joint accomplishment with those individuals or groups studied, one where fieldworkers are compelled to manage relationships, identities, and emotions as they attempt to maintain their good standing relative to the individuals and groups they are studying (see Kleinman, 1991; Kleinman & Copp, 1993). As a result, much of the epistemic and analytic power of ethnographic research comes from “having been there,” from observing individuals or groups of people acting under
conditions in which they usually act and from describing a social world from the perspective of those who inhabit it (see Becker, 1996; Duneier, 2007; Stack, 1974, 1996).

It is in this sense of being there, and being there over extended periods of time, that ethnographic research serves as a useful way of getting at sensitive or potentially hidden behaviors. Part of this advantage derives from doing sustained ethnographic fieldwork that provides opportunities for collecting data as people go through their daily rounds, across different settings and activities. Another, particularly epistemological advantage comes from fieldworkers’ actual participation in activities with research participants. Such participation (i.e., participant-observation) provides opportunities to engage in close observation and questioning of social actors as they go about their lives, adapt to their particular circumstances, and provide understanding of their milieu from the perspective of those inhabiting a distinct social world—a world quite different from that of academic researchers (see for example, Burton 1990, 1997; Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison 1996).

Rather than relying solely on what people tell them, for instance, in formal interviews, ethnographic fieldworkers are able to supplement, and, hence, provide a check against, these data in the course of doing participant-observation and informal questioning. Thus, occasions can arise where ethnographers experience contradictions between what people tell them and what ethnographers actually observe them doing or hear reported from others. The reasons for these contradictions, as discussed earlier, can be many: a desire to hide potentially embarrassing information; a person’s fuzzy memory during formal interviewing; or, even the way a particular question is couched by the ethnographer. Regardless of the reasons, fieldworkers, by being there over time and participating in the social world being studied, gain opportunities to uncover new, contradictory, and potentially illuminating types of information (see also, Duneier 2007).
Building Trust and Rapport

Ethnographic fieldwork also enables researchers to get at sensitive and hidden data in another way: by being present when research participants are ready to reveal previously concealed information, on their own terms. Because many forms of sensitive data, like experiences of physical and sexual abuse, are kept hidden by research participants, such data can be difficult to obtain, at least until some measure of trust has been earned by researchers (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Wax, 1956; Wolcott, 2001). Sincere promises of confidentiality and anonymity can go some distance toward convincing participants to share sensitive data, but these measures are sometimes not enough. In settings in which those studied are concerned about revealing too much of themselves, it is not until a long-term comfortable relationship has been established that research participants will share information with ethnographers that could potentially place them in a less favorable light.

Part of the capacity of ethnographic research to elicit sensitive kinds of data is due to participants’ desire to reciprocate by giving something back to ethnographers who have over time sustained the relationship (see Stack 1974). Ethnographic methods are also effective because fieldworkers are willing to serve as sympathetic listeners over a sustained period of time through what may be difficult interactions. Central to such sustained relationships are feelings of trust and rapport that fieldworkers are able to establish and maintain with those they are studying. Where trust and rapport are established, research participants often come to reveal sensitive information in the course of altercasting (Goffman, 1959; Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963) fieldworkers into the role of therapeutic listener, someone to whom they can voice their fears and problems in confidence (see for example, Ortiz, 2004; Wax,1956). Sympathetic listening is made possible because of the ethnographer’s facility in listening without judgment.
and making and keeping promises of confidentiality: in the process the ethnographer gains the trust of the research participant. For ethnographers who come to the research setting as outsiders, a lack of involvement in the participant’s immediate social world can make them all the more attractive as good listeners (Kloos, 1969; Pollner & Emerson, 1983). As an outsider, the ethnographer can come to represent a special category of acquaintance or friend who is not bound up in the participant’s network of close relationships and thus is not likely to spread gossip and create trouble.

**Description of the Three-City Study**

To illustrate the processes involved in how ethnography can facilitate uncovering physical and sexual abuse in the lives of low income women, we draw on data from the Three-City Study. This study was a longitudinal, multisite, multi-method project designed to examine the impact of welfare reform on the lives of low-income African American, Latino, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White families and their young children [For a detailed description of the research design of the ethnography see Winston et al., (1999)]. Study participants resided in poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. In addition to longitudinal surveys of a random sample comprising 2,402 families, and an embedded developmental study of 700 families, the Three-City Study included a team-ethnography of 256 families and their children. These families were not in the survey sample but resided in the same neighborhoods as survey respondents.

**Sample Description**

Families were recruited into the ethnography between June 1999 and December 2000. Recruitment sites include formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and
other public assistance agencies. Of the 256 families who participated in the ethnography, 212 families were selected if they included a child age 2 to 4 to insure sample comparability with the survey and embedded developmental samples. To inform our understanding of how welfare reform was affecting families with disabilities, the other 44 ethnography families were recruited specifically because they had a child aged 0 to 8 years with a moderate or severe disability. At the time of enrollment in the ethnography, all families had household incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

(Table 1 About Here)

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the mothers in the ethnographic sample. The majority of mothers (42%) were of Latino or Hispanic ethnicity with the largest groups being Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, in that order. Over half of the mothers were aged 29 or younger and a majority had a high school diploma, GED, or attended trade school or college. Forty-nine percent of the mothers were receiving welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families--TANF) when they entered the study; one-third of these, were also working. The 256 mothers identified a total of 685 children in their households, with most children under 4 years of age. Most mothers indicated that they were neither married nor cohabiting at the start of the study. However, longitudinal interviews and observations of the sample revealed over time that more respondents were in marital of cohabiting relationships than they had initially reported.

Ethnographic Methodology

To gather and analyze ethnographic data on the mothers and their families a method of “structured discovery” was devised to systematize and to coordinate the efforts of the Three-City Study ethnography team (Burton, Skinner, & Matthews, 2005; Winston et al., (1999). An
integrated and transparent process was developed for collecting, handling, and analyzing the data. There was consistent input from over 215 ethnographers, qualitative data analysts, and research scientists who worked on the project over the course of six years. Interviews with and observations of the respondents focused on specific topics but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships among variables. The interviews covered a wide variety of topics that included intimate relationships, health and health access, family economics, support networks, and neighborhood environments. Ethnographers also engaged in participant observation with respondents, attending family functions and outings, being party to extended conversations, and witnessing relationship milestones such as a couple’s decision to cohabit. They accompanied mothers and their children to the welfare office, hospital, daycare, or workplace, and noted both context and interactions in each situation. Ethnographers met with each family once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003. Respondents were compensated with grocery or department store vouchers for each interview or participant observation.

**Data Sources**

The ethnography generated multiple sources of data that were used to uncover patterns of physical and sexual abuse within the sample. Ethnographers in each city wrote detailed field notes about their interviews and participant observations with families, and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, transcripts of principal investigators’ group and individual discussions with ethnographers and qualitative data analysts about the families were consulted in this analysis. During the data collection process, the principal investigators held monthly cross-site conference calls to raise Thought Provoking Questions (TPQ) with ethnographers and qualitative data analysts. The purpose of these conference calls was to
discuss emergent themes in ethnographers’ on-going field observations and in the data analysts’
synthesis of the ethnographers’ field notes and transcribed interviews. All sources of data were
coded collaboratively by ethnographers and qualitative data analysts according to a general
thematic coding scheme developed by the principal investigators. The coded data were then
entered into a qualitative data management (QDM) software application and were summarized
into detailed case profiles about each family. The QDM program and case profiles enabled
counts across the entire sample as well as detailed analysis of individual cases. (In the specific
case examples used below, mothers and their family members have been assigned pseudonyms.)

**Uncovering Physical and Sexual Abuse: The Three-City Study Ethnographic Process**

Although our ethnographic methods generated information on a variety of topics related
to women’s life course experiences, it is important to note that this ethnographic study *was not*
explicitly designed to examine issues of domestic violence or sexual abuse in women’s lives.
Women’s reports of abuse emerged naturalistically in the course of interactions with the
ethnographers. When stories of abuse experiences began to surface early in the data collection
process in all three cities, the research team initiated a series of discussions about how to address
these disclosures and observations. Principal investigators, senior ethnographers, data analysts,
and family ethnographers met online and in conference calls to address a variety of ethical,
empirical, and methodological dilemmas posed by “uncovering these experiences” and to
develop procedures to protect the physical and emotional safety of respondents as well as
ethnographers.

During these discussions the family ethnographers (who were the most directly involved
in data collection) emphasized the great effect on families of the domestic violence and sexual
abuse that had been reported to them. Informed by these concerns, the senior ethnographic staff
requested that data collectors and analysts pay special attention to these issues and attempt to
document their impact on women’s lives, their families’ lives, and their relationship to specific
outcomes. As a result, the Three-City Study ethnography generated considerable interview and
observational data on the patterns and effects of domestic violence and sexual abuse among low-
income families over time and across generations. In efforts to analyze and disseminate these
data, researchers affiliated with the study sought to place these findings in the context of prior
research. Literature reviews conducted for this paper, as well as for articles recently published
(Cherlin, et al., 2004; Purvin, 2003, 2007) and in preparation (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion,
& Holder-Taylor, 2007), indicate that issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse have not
been adequately addressed in general studies of the lives of low-income women, and that
gathering data on, measuring, and appropriately interpreting the incidence and processes of
physical and sexual abuse among low-income women is complicated and difficult in practice.

The Prevalence of Abuse

Over the course of the study we determined that the prevalence of physical and sexual
abuse in mothers’ lives was considerably higher than was ever anticipated. Sexual abuse
included mothers’ reports of rape, molestation, parentally-enforced child prostitution, and the
witnessing of incest. Physical abuse comprised physical beatings, attacks with weapons, and
witnessing repeated physical violence among parents, partners, and children. With respect to the
incidence of physical violence, in most cases the violence was directed toward women and
children by men, but in three instances women were perpetrators as well. For example, Serena, a
35-year-old mother, suspected her abusive partner of cheating on her and “followed him to the
club with a gun.” They argued, she pulled the gun on him, and in the struggle that ensued,
Serena’s partner was shot in the hand. Serena was charged with assault with a deadly weapon and received two years probation.

Drawing on existing studies which underscore the impact of witnessing sexual abuse and domestic violence on the life course (Feerick and Haugaard, 1999; Luster, Small, and Lower, 2002; Straus, 1992), and the severity of the exposure in the sample, we purposely included “witnessing experiences” in the sexual and physical abuse categories. Mothers’ reports of witnessing sexual abuse or domestic violence of short duration or of questionable intensity such as, “I saw my mother’s boyfriend slap her one time,” were not included in the analysis. However, witnessing experiences, such as the one recounted by Noel, a 34-year-old mother of five, were included:

My sister and I slept in the same bedroom in bunk beds. I slept on the top bunk and my sister on the bottom. Every night for as long as I can remember, my father would come to my sister’s bed and force her to have sex with him. I lay there and listened quietly.

Most mothers who reported sexual abuse also reported physical abuse, suggesting that sexual abuse often occurred in the context of physical violence. As Table 2 indicates, 36% of the mothers disclosed that they had been sexually and physically abused; 6% revealed that they had only been sexually abused (primarily in childhood), and 26% said they had only been physically abused (primarily in domestic violence situations as adults). In 35% of the cases, mothers reported that they had not been sexually or physically abused in their lifetimes. It is possible, of course, that some of these mothers may also have experienced abuse but were reluctant to mention it. Still, the long duration of the fieldwork and the trust that was developed between the
Ethnographers and respondents make is likely that our reports are more complete than many other studies.

**Patterns of Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Abuse**

Overall 64% of the mothers who participated in the ethnography disclosed that they had been sexually abused or experienced physical abuse in childhood, adulthood or both. What we found intriguing, and what we hope scholars who study the life course of women will find useful, are the ways in which ethnographers uncovered mothers’ histories of abuse. Data on sexual abuse and domestic violence were gathered from mothers through a number of emergent approaches. For example, after several mothers revealed abuse experiences in early interviews with ethnographers, we developed specific questions in the interview protocol concerning lifetime sexual abuse and domestic violence experiences. Some mothers revealed their experiences to ethnographers in response to these questions, but most did in response to questions about related topics such as intimate relationships; others, in the context of unrelated topics like housing; and still others as a function of experiencing recent episodes of abuse. Three patterns of participant disclosure of abuse were apparent in the ethnographic data: **trigger topics** that prompted disclosure, **crisis or recent events** that precipitated disclosure, and **ethnographer’s direct questions** that elicited disclosure. Of the ethnographic mothers who disclosed a history of physical and/or sexual abuse to the ethnographers 71% demonstrated the trigger topics disclosure pattern, 19% the crisis or recent event pattern, and 10% ethnographer-prompted disclosure.

**Trigger Topics**. The trigger topics disclosure pattern involved mothers’ unexpected revelation of their sexual abuse and domestic violence histories to ethnographers when they were asked about related topics such as health and intimate relationships, but also about seemingly unrelated topics such as transportation, family demographics, and intergenerational
caregiving. For example, general questions about health, particularly stress and coping, often triggered mothers’ disclosures of sexual abuse and domestic violence experiences. The conversation between, Sonya, a 37-year-old African American mother of three, and her ethnographer during a health interview illustrates this pattern:

    Ethnographer: “What would you say was the biggest source of stress for you in the past year?”
    Sonya: “Dealing with a man (referring to her son’s father, William). They can really put you in a depressed stage. Here I am doing what I know is right with my kids, then this one person goin' try to come in and try to tell you another way, which, he just want to be the head of the household and treat you like you just nobody. And I couldn't go for that…. It was eating me up inside.”
    Ethnographer: “Ok….let's talk more about William.”
    Sonya: “He's crazy…He was really jealous and just crazy. I had headaches daily when he was in the house. I was depressed, but I didn't take medication or nothing. My sister had told me to get rid of him. I was brainwashed though. He told me not to see my family because they didn't like him. I fell for it. He had me so stressed out. My pregnancy with Dante was hard because I was sick.
    Ethnographer: “You were sick?
    Sonya: Yeah, he had been sleeping around and gave me gonorrhea. I'm still embarrassed talking about it. Sometimes I didn't want to sleep with him but he'd rape me. I told him I was gonna’ call the police and he said, ‘Go ahead. Ain't nobody gonna’ arrest me for wanting to be with my woman.’”
In subsequent interviews Sonya described, in great detail, the physical violence and sexual abuse she had experienced from other partners as well as those experienced by her young daughter.

During Darlene’s health interview, which was conducted by the ethnographer during her seventh monthly visit to Darlene’s home, the ethnographer asked Darlene how she coped with stress. This 26-year-old Latina mother of four responded: “I used to keep a journal of my life, because, when I was younger, I was molested. And so was my sister, so you know, one of our things of therapy was, you know, to write down what we felt for the next time we [would see] our counselor, and I was just like, alright, you know, well, and then I just kept a habit of constantly writing…” Darlene, like Sonya, went on, in several interviews thereafter, to provide explicit descriptions of her abuse experiences.

Liza, a 28-year-old mother of three, initially revealed her experiences with abuse when the ethnographer accompanied her to a doctor’s appointment. At this appointment, Liza learned that her last pap smear was abnormal. When asked about her sexual history, Liza noted that she was primarily intimate with her husband. The ethnographer seized the opportunity to ask her how she met her husband. Liza stated that this was a “funny story.” She nonchalantly recounted that she met her husband after having just ended a relationship with a man who “broke her nose.” This information was disclosed on the ethnographer’s seventh visit with Liza.

Interview topics, such as work, transportation, residential mobility, and household composition also triggered abuse disclosures from some respondents. For example, during the twenty-third visit to the home of Delilah, a 40-year-old White divorcée and mother to four children, the ethnographer conducted a follow-up interview concerning Delilah’s past and current work experiences. While Delilah failed to mention particulars about her work history in previous interviews, after two years of interviews, Delilah finally told the ethnographer that in the past she
had worked at a bank as a switchboard operator until her former husband physically injured her.

Delilah stated: “I went to work with a black eye. People at the bank noticed. When it happened a second time, I felt embarrassed coming to work, so I quit like cold turkey. And, I really didn’t like that idea ‘cause, you know, it leaves you in a status of, not good standards.”

Residential history interviews frequently prompted disclosures of abuse. The following conversation between Estella, a 30-year-old Latina mother of three, and her ethnographer took place during a residential history interview. Estella had, in fact, mentioned to the ethnographer in a previous interview that as a child she had witnessed her mother being abused. The discussion of her former residences, however, prompted further disclosure:

Ethnographer: “So you remember that home, in that area.”

Estella: “Umm, in that area.”

Ethnographer: “You were like seven, eight years old then?”

Estella: “And, then I remember another one in (another city), right off of (street), it was a beautiful too, it was called (name of development). And, I used to live there, we used to live out there. And, let's see how many more places I can remember.”

Ethnographer: “But you don’t have any one in particular that would bring you memories.”

Estella: “Yeah, there’s one that’s a sad memory because I remember my mother being abused, between two men, in which one was her ex-husband and another was her boyfriend… and another one where me and my sister were molested by my mother's ex-boyfriend. So it's like there’s places that you know that I remember that are bad, and then there’s some places.”
Ethnographer: “Different places or the same place?" 

Estella: “Right, different places, and I just remember places where they were happy places, where I can remember.” 

Gathering demographic information on the martial histories triggered abuse disclosures from mothers, as well. Marital history interviews were generally conducted during the second monthly visit. Thus, when Marilyn, a 45-year-old White mother of four, discussed her abuse experiences during a marital history interview, she became one of the study’s earliest disclosers of abuse:

So for six years I was married to him, well not married to him. We got married a year, and it didn’t work out. We always fought, and then we renewed our vows for another year and that didn’t work out. Sometime before she (Marilyn’s daughter) was born he was very abusive . . . (There is an extended silence before Marilyn continued on with her story) . . . He beat me up when I was pregnant with her. So I was divorced since after she was born. He physically and mentally abused me. He locked me in my apartment, in my bedroom. He told me if he wanted to, he could rape me. He said, “Might as well get charged with something.” He gave me a couple of hits in the face, hit my head on the headboard which was glass. I ended up with a contusion and went in for premature labor.

On the next visit to the home, the ethnographer learned that Marilyn’s two youngest children had been sexually abused by her current boyfriend. In the three weeks that ensued, the police removed Les, Marilyn’s cohabiting boyfriend, from the home for committing these crimes.
Despite these very sensitive disclosures and unfolding events, Marilyn remained in the study for six years until its completion.

**Crisis Disclosure.** The crisis or recent event disclosure pattern occurred when the ethnographer unexpectedly “walked in” on a domestic violence situation when she was visiting the participant, or when the participant experienced a sexual abuse or domestic violence episode a few days or weeks prior to the ethnographer’s regularly scheduled visit. In both instances, the abuse situation was “fresh” in the minds of mothers and they chose to discuss it with their ethnographers in great detail. In most of these cases, the ethnographers suspected abuse (as indicated in ethnographers’ field notes and in discussions with their supervisors and team members), but they didn’t feel that they could directly ask the participant about it until the crisis prompted disclosure. For example, Janine, the ethnographer for Patrice, a 28-year-old White mother of two, describes the circumstances that led to Patrice’s disclosure that was prompted by crisis:

I arrived at Patrice’s house 10 minutes before the interview only to find the streets covered with cops, patrol cars, and an ambulance. “Oh my God,” I thought, “What has happened?” They were taking one man out of Patrice’s house. He appeared to be shot or stabbed. Patrice was on the porch screaming, her face bloody and cut. The kids were running around everywhere screaming and crying….. I feared that my worst suspicions about the prevalence of domestic violence in Patrice’s life were about to be confirmed . . . When I visited Patrice three weeks later the flood gates opened without me asking. I listened as she told me everything about the incident and about other incidents of physical and sexual abuse that she had experienced since childhood non-stop.
**Ethnographer-Prompted Disclosure.** The third pattern, *ethnographer-prompted disclosure*, reflects situations in which ethnographers directly asked mothers about their past and current experiences with sexual abuse or domestic violence. Ethnographers usually asked direct questions about these topics in an interview if they noticed a behavioral reaction from mothers when discussing their intimate relationships with their partners. One ethnographer’s recollections of interviews with Samantha, a 28-year-old, White mother of two, illustrate this pattern:

When Samantha was telling me how she met Charles (her current husband), she said that her break-up from her daughter’s father, Byron, was “a whole big mess.” The expression on her face and the way she said it sent up a red flag for me, so I wanted to ask her more about it. I asked her, when she had split up with Byron, if there was anything dangerous about it, or if it was just upsetting in general. Samantha said, “He was very, violent, um, and then I found out he was cheatin’ on me with a younger girl, at the time I was what, 20, 21, he was about 23 goin’ out with a fifteen year-old, so . . . I just had it. He was very abusive, and, I couldn't take it anymore anyways, so that just made me, get the strength to say, ‘get out of my house.’”

I then asked if he was abusive the whole time she was with him. Samantha said “No, um, actually it didn’t start until, um, the beginnin’ when I was pregnant, he didn’t know I was pregnant, I didn’t neither at the time, and then it stopped for awhile, and then after I had my daughter, it started up bad. ‘Cause I didn't think, he didn’t wanna be a family guy, you know, the responsibilities, so, and that’s it. He hasn’t seen my daughter since she was two.”
I subsequently learned that Samantha got two restraining orders on him, this was after they broke up. After Samantha met Charles, which was about 7 months after they broke up, Byron would call up Samantha and threaten her, and would drive by her house.

Later in this interview, and again in the intimate relationship interview, Samantha described in explicit detail the numerous bruises and injuries she received from this partner, and the effects his abuse had on her oldest daughter, who was an infant when she was exposed to it. Although Samantha initially described her current husband as not abusive, there was an incident about a year after this in which he became violent and she called the cops. I met with her about a week after that happened, and she described that to me in the course of explaining what had changed since our last meeting.

**Timing of Disclosure.** It is important to note that there was a range in the timing of mothers’ disclosure with approximately 12% of the mothers who revealed physical and sexual abuse (N=147) experiences telling their stories to the ethnographers during visits or participant observations that occurred in the first 3 months of their involvement in the study. Twenty-nine percent disclosed physical and sexual abuse experiences during the 4 to 6 monthly visits with the ethnographers, 40% during the 7 to 9 month visits, and 19% after 10 to 24 visits. The variation in disclosure timing reflects a range of *turning points* between the mothers and the ethnographers. Turning points are the precise moments in time when the participant trusts the ethnographer and their relationship enough to share, intimate, highly sensitive, and often painful information, such as a history of sexual abuse.
Ethnographers’ Reactions and Responsibilities to Participants

As the Three-City Study ethnographic data illustrate, the elements of ethnography that enable it to uncover experiences of physical and sexual abuse so effectively also present ethical and interpersonal challenges (see Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). Ethnographers, as noted earlier in the chapter, are very likely to find themselves in privileged positions vis a vis their informants by virtue of their roles as empathetic and supportive listeners who become, at least temporarily, trusted personal confidantes yet are not bound up in the participants’ social networks. Although effective and ethical researchers prepare for and develop protocols to address such potential issues of blurred interpersonal boundaries and disclosure, physical and sexual abuse create unique dilemmas for researchers engaged in ethnographic data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In the Three-City Study ethnography two dilemmas were particularly noteworthy: vicarious trauma and safety.

Vicarious Trauma

Chief among Three-City Study ethnographers’ reactions to participants’ disclosure of abuse was secondary or vicarious trauma. Developed as a construct in large part based on the experiences of counselors working with victims and survivors of sexual assault and domestic abuse (Schauben & Frazier, 1995), vicarious trauma refers to the negative emotional and psychic impact on those “empathically engaged with clients’ trauma material” (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 31). Because intensive qualitative interviews can be similar to therapeutic interactions (Birch & Miller, 2000; Gale, 1992), ethnographers engaged in fieldwork with those who have been physically or sexually abused, particularly with those victims and survivors who have not previously acknowledged or disclosed their experiences to anyone, are perhaps as likely as actual counselors to become recipients of such trauma disclosures. The potential for vicarious trauma
among intensive qualitative researchers is just beginning to be addressed in the literature (Etherington, 2007).

Although the majority of sexual assault and domestic violence counselors do not become secondarily traumatized to an incapacitating degree, research suggests that significant numbers experience at least some formal symptoms of vicarious trauma (Bride, 2007; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). There is currently no information on the prevalence of vicarious trauma among researchers working with traumatized persons. However, the levels reported among counselors suggest that vicarious trauma is a potentially significant risk for ethnographers engaged in fieldwork with trauma victims or survivors. Recent work (see Etherington, 2007), as well as our experience on the Three-City Study ethnography, indicate that all research staff who engage intensively with narrative data on the trauma of physical and sexual abuse are potentially vulnerable to vicarious trauma. This includes data transcribers, coders, and analysts who may or may not themselves have conducted direct data collection or fieldwork. Within the Three-City Study team our data analysts, who did not collect data but were coding it and writing family profiles, frequently had “melt downs,” which included “having to pull off on the side of the road on the way home from work to have a good cry;” “staying in bed all day because I just couldn’t believe someone could do this to another person;” or “sitting on the curb with two ethnographers and crying my eyes out because I didn’t know what else to do.”

**Safety**

An additional ethical and potentially methodological dilemma posed by the emergence of physical and sexual abuse in data collection is the problem of safety. Through their privileged positions of confidence, fieldworkers may become aware of threats to the physical safety of informants, as well as others in the community who are vulnerable such as children. These
situations can generate ethical quandaries over whether and how to potentially break confidentiality and disclose threats of violence to outsiders, particularly in the context of mandatory reporting requirements in the event of child abuse or adult domestic violence.

Moreover, the safety of fieldworkers themselves may be threatened when they are present in homes where there is the potential for violence, or if they become viewed as an ally to someone who is the target of violence or abuse. Such incidents happened numerous times in the Three-City Study ethnography. For example, one ethnographer observed a drug deal in a respondent’s home and was threatened by the drug dealer (the respondent’s boyfriend) with murder. Another ethnographer discovered that a respondent was being abused by her husband and was informed by the respondent’s mother to “stay away and don’t tell anyone what you saw or our family will fix you.” Obviously, taking steps to protect the lives and well-being of those at potential risk is paramount, and any questions pertaining to the ethics of breaking confidentiality must be considered. Depending on the particular circumstances and the actions taken, the unfolding of such conditions in the course of data collection can create methodological dilemmas with respect to the nature of data collected, the relationship of the fieldworker to the informants and/or the setting, and implications for data analysis and interpretation.

**Conclusion: Research Design and Methodological Recommendations in Uncovering Abuse**

Using longitudinal ethnographic data from the Three-City Study we described the aspects of ethnography that render it a viable life course methodology for gathering accurate and detailed data about physical and sexual abuse in women’s lives. No method of data collection, of course, can ensure that people will disclose sensitive information or will be truthful in sharing their life course experiences all of the time. But good ethnographic research based on close-up, careful,
and detailed observation, participation in the flow of activities with those being studied, and the development of trust-based relationships makes disclosure all the more likely.

In describing the processes involved in uncovering women’s abuse experiences, ethnographers in the Three-City Study demonstrated the degree to which experiences of physical and sexual abuse permeate the lives of low-income mothers and present methodological and ethical challenges. Our process of uncovering abuse in women’s lives was characterized by distinctive respondent disclosure patterns evoked by certain trigger topics, recent crisis events, and ethnographers’ direct inquiries. The disclosure processes also involved ethnographers’ own experiences with vicarious trauma and safety issues.

Because the topic of physical and sexual abuse often emerges naturalistically in ethnography, and is rarely a starting point of inquiry, many ethnographic studies that uncover these issues may not, at the outset, address the consequent ethical and methodological considerations in the study design or planning. Like other studies, the Three-City Study principal investigators did not include extensive pre-planning to specifically address the potential for participants’ demonstrating a variety of patterns of disclosure of abuse and for ethnographers’ vicarious trauma experiences. Nonetheless, based on previous field work of the ethnography’s study director and several of the research staff, ethnographers did receive training to address potential safety issues related to abuse prior to entering the field. Despite this precaution, the extent, amount, and intensity of respondent experiences were significantly greater than the research team ever anticipated. Because the Three-City Study ethnography was premised on the concept of structured discovery (Burton, Skinner, & Matthews, 2005; Winston, et al., 1999), these issues were able to be considered and dealt with as priorities in the in the day-to-day operation of the study and also became a focus of inquiry in data gathering with
comprehensive protocols to address ethical and methodological concerns being instituted immediately. Based on our experiences, we offer the following recommendations to researchers as suggestions for practices that may be helpful when faced with the prospects and the realities of uncovering physical and sexual abuse in studies of women’s life course:

- Individuals who directly gather data from respondents should be provided with extensive training and supervision concerning physical and sexual abuse, variability in respondent disclosure patterns, and vicarious trauma before entering, during, and when exiting the field. That training should also be extended to those who are analyzing data, even if they do not have direct contact with respondents. Some researchers may be concerned that a training emphasis on abuse experiences would likely introduce bias in researchers’ interactions with respondents and in analysts’ interpretations of the data. Our experience suggests that it is better for individuals to have a comprehensive understanding of these issues before they enter the field. The potential for bias in data gathering and analysis is actually minimized by researchers being better informed about the realities of abuse in women’s lives and by forewarning that uncovering that abuse may impact them as researchers.

- It is critical that principal investigators and interviewer supervisors occasionally accompany interviewers and ethnographers into the field to assess potential dangers and provide “second opinions” on observed family behaviors that appear troublesome. Joint observations and field experiences provide an important level of support to interviewers and ethnographers and can move the onus for verifying and reporting abuse from those directly gathering data about the families to those who are directing the studies. We developed clearly delineated plans of action and protocols about reporting abuse and we
reviewed them regularly and revised them as conditions warranted. This approach effectively reduced uncertainty and concern among the ethnographers with respect to the project’s abuse reporting policies and practices.

- Developing site-specific lists of contacts for referrals to shelters and other support agencies is imperative for any study. Principal investigators and interviewer and ethnographer supervisors should also establish good working relationships with referring agencies and keep abreast of agencies’ capacities to accommodate the needs of respondents when referrals have to be made. We initiated and maintained such relationships with local agencies for the duration of the study. These relationships served our respondents well in instances when we had to report physical and sexual abuse.

- Any study that has the potential for uncovering abuse experiences should include research team members with clinical expertise in abuse and should make them available to staff and supervisors across the study for consultation. Having in place an “immediate response” strategy to address ethnographers’, interviewers’, and data analysts’ experiences with violence in the field or with vicarious trauma is also imperative. We put together a reporting and safety committee on the Three-City Study ethnographic team that comprised clinical psychologists, social workers, and lawyers who were able to convene in person or via conference call within 24-hours to address ethnographers’ or data analysts’ issues concerning abuse. We also scheduled frequent project-wide conference calls devoted to issues of abuse, as well as local site-team meetings to ensure consistent peer-support and debriefing.

To our knowledge, none of the published literature from ethnographies that have explored domestic and sexual abuse addresses these methodological and ethical challenges or
describes how the research staff addressed them in either planning or practice. The literature
does indicate that sexual and domestic abuse are very likely to continue to emerge as issues in
any ethnographic or intensive qualitative research conducted with women and families in low-
income communities (e.g., Dodson, 1998; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Kurz, 1996; Scott, et al., 2002).
And, the use of intensive qualitative methods in the study of poverty in sociology and policy
studies is likely to increase (Newman & Massengill, 2006). Given this trend, and based on our
experiences in the Three-City Study ethnography, we argue that it is incumbent upon researchers
engaged in inquiry in low-income communities to take issues of physical and sexual abuse into
account in study design and planning. Particularly when studies involve the collection, analysis,
and interpretation of narrative life course data, it is critical to address the ethical and
methodological challenges posed by the potential development of vicarious trauma and issues of
safety among all levels of project staff and among informants.
References


Dodson, L. and L. Schmalzbauer. 2005. Poor mothers and habits of hiding: Participatory


Gans, H.J. 1968. The participant-observer as a human being: Observations on the


Table 1: Sample Characteristics – Three-City Study Ethnography Sample (N=256)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>City</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity / Race</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
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<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ages of Primary Caregivers</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>110</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed high school or GED</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or trade school</td>
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<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TANF / Work Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TANF / Working</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANF / Not Working</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-TANF / Working</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-TANF / Not Working</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Children Primary Caregiver</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Responsible For</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Child</td>
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<td>2 Children</td>
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<td>3 Children</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>&gt;4 Children</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Ages</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 2</td>
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<td>5-9</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>88</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status / Living Arrangements</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married, not cohabiting</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, spouse in home</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, spouse not in home/separated</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting (any marital status)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. b There are missing data for five cases in the Marital Status and Living Arrangements category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History of Physical and Sexual Abuse</th>
<th>Percent Distribution&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual and Physical Abuse</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>Note: </sup>a Total ethnography sample N=256 (28 cases were not included in this analysis because of insufficient data).  
<sup>b</sup> Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.