File ID 206778

Filename Chapter 3: Researching rape: Where have all tales of the field gone?

SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type Dissertation

Title Rape experiences and the limits of women's agency in contemporary post-

reform Vietnam

Author T.T.H. Nguyễn

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences

Year 2011 Pages xiii, 289

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

http://dare.uva.nl/record/368938

Copyright

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use.

Researching Rapees:

Where have all tales of the field gone 16?

Trăm bó đuốc cũng vớ được con ếch

[Vn.: Burn a hundred torches and you will catch a frog]
A Vietnamese saying

Introduction

The first part of this methodological chapter deals with the challenges inherent in finding participants for rape-related research. The problem, as pointed out by Elizabeth Stanko and Raymond Lee (2003), reflects the complex nature of researching rape in the sense that investigating violence "usually introduces into the research process contingencies less commonly found in other kinds of study" (2003:2). Section two describes the facilities and the tools I used for gathering information for analytical purposes. Section three provides insight into the impact of researching rape on the researcher, and those associated with the project in distributing flyers, transcribing research interviews as well as reviewing secondary sources such as court files and cases reported in the printed media.

1. Setting the stage for recruiting research participants

At the outset, I should mention that in approaching a highly sensitive and taboo-laden subject such as rape, I paid attention particularly to the ethical dilemmas inherent in this study. Doing fieldwork based on intensive participant observation with an entrenched, culturally based community (in terms of physical space like a territorial or geographical area) has long been the established model for a working anthropologist. Perhaps some aspects of this are relevant in every ethnographic fieldwork, but these generalities do not

24

¹⁶ I have deliberately borrowed this phrase from the title of an article written by George Marcus (2006), "Where have all the tales of fieldwork gone?" *Ethnos*, 71 (1): 113-122.

seem to apply to the study of rape. Why? Firstly, because a unique problem in studying crime, especially the crime of rape, is the general reliance on data that are usually secondary accounts of the phenomenon under study. Secondly, rapees making up the target group are often geographically scattered and socially isolated (Campbell *et al.* 2004). Literature elsewhere has indicated a number of places researchers can turn their attention to find respondents, for example police departments (Gregory & Lees, 1999), medical clinics or rape crisis centers (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979; Koss and Harvey, 1991). However, these "recruitment sites" are out of bounds in the context of my research setting. In my experience no woman would be willing to discuss such matters as rape with a researcher in the presence of a police officer. And at the time I conducted this research there were no rape-crisis centers or something similar in Vietnam.¹⁷

Then how to tackle these rather formidable obstacles? In the following section I will describe in detail the methods employed in carrying out my research among twenty-three rapees in Hà Nội during 2007.¹⁸

The counseling office

I have opted for a channel, which I thought would be convenient under the circumstances to approach the rapees by way of a counseling office. In reality, this office was a contact address to receive responses from the flyers that I planned to distribute later on.

Regarding the facilitation of this research project, I managed to reach an agreement with a Hanoi-based NGO called Research Center for Family Health and Community Development (CEFACOM for short¹⁹). This concerns legal aspects of the leaflet distribution campaign and the re/activating of the counseling office for sexual abuse that I

11

¹⁷ This is to say that there is an internationally and state supported counseling shelter, *Ngôi nhà bình yên* [Vn.: Peaceful House], for victims of trafficking and domestic violence, in particular battered women and their children in Hanoi. Further information is available on line at: http://www.women-bds.com/english/Modules.aspx?file=details&ID=1106. Accessed on June 25, 2010. Although the shelter has run a pilot program since January 2007, it has not explicitly considered women and children who are victims of rape or sexual abuse as its primary target group. When I returned to Hanoi for field research in early 2007, we (CEFACOM and I) managed to reach an agreement with the person in charge of the shelter that they would refer to us cases of sexual violence that they might come across.

¹⁸ I also draw on the results from earlier work that I conducted in Hà Nội in 2005 (research funded by the Toyota Foundation).

¹⁹ More information on: http://cefacom.vn. Accessed on June 20, 2010.

had started in 2005 when conducting a rape research project funded by the Toyota Foundation.

At a practical level, a CEFACOM staff member who specialized in teaching handicapped children was assigned extra duties in running the counseling office. This person had received some training in handling sexual abuse problems. Her task was to provide prospective "clients" with information such as where to go for medical examination and/or psychological help, how to bring the case to court and where to find safe accommodation or temporary shelter if necessary.

Furthermore we networked with several women's NGOs which supported victims of trafficking and gender-based violence as well as government agencies dealing with reproductive health care for adolescents. It should be made clear at the outset that I personally was not involved in counseling tasks at the Hanoi "office." CEFACOM had taken over all the activities from my previous work such as my initial program on sexual assault prevention, which was a part of my Master's thesis in 2003, and a follow-up research project funded by the Toyota Foundation in 2005. When the victims first came to the office seeking help, they would be provided the necessary assistance as mentioned above. Only after a decent interval, usually one or two weeks after the first contact, would they be informed of my current research and asked whether they would take part in it. If they were willing to see me, I would arrange a meeting. Then the process of making rapport would begin. The length and depth of my interactions with individual informants varied from case to case. We made clear at the beginning that all women who chose to come to our office would be offered the possibility of counseling without any obligation.

The flyer

In terms of content, the flyer highlighted the purpose of the research, stressing such matters as the confidentiality of personal information, the voluntary nature of participation, and the free -of- charge counseling services offered by CEFACOM under whose umbrella this research was conducted (see Figure 1). Well aware of the fact that those who sought help might not be interested in taking part in the research, we pointed out that everyone would be welcome without any obligation. All in all, we distributed

50,000 flyers mainly around Hanoi, but some were distributed in Lào Cai as well, a northernmost province on the border with China.

The content and layout of the flyer were designed in close consultation with CEFACOM staff, legal experts, social workers and other researchers. It should be mentioned that a notion of gender neutrality was intentionally included in the flyer through the use of the words *những ai từng bị xâm hại tình dục* [Vn.: those persons who have experienced sexual assault], which imply that both females *and* males could be victims of rape. It was an attempt to obtain a "linguistic equality" of the sexes by minimizing or disregarding gender-specific expressions and constructions, making the reader aware of the possibility that male rape may actually take place. As it turned out a number of male respondents later contacted our counseling office for emotional support. Nevertheless, from the public reactions we received there was an overwhelming perception that women are victims of sexual violence while men are perpetrators.

There is an important reason for choosing the term $x\hat{a}m$ hai $t\hat{i}nh$ duc [Vn.: sexual violation] in the flyers for distribution in public places. This was to avoid possible trouble with the local authorities because "rape" [Vn.: $hi\acute{e}p$ $d\hat{a}m$] is still a sensitive subject in the political sense. Additionally, it might help protect potential research participants from social prejudices attached to this taboo-laden subject. The word $x\hat{a}m$ hai [Vn.: violation] may be understood in a "practical" way: when someone is robbed, his/her personal property is "violated" legally; likewise, in the case of rape, one's sexual integrity is considered as being violated. As described in Chapter 4, most of the (raped) women in this current study would prefer the term bi $x\hat{a}m$ hai [Vn.: subjected to a (sexual) violation] rather than the word bi $hi\acute{e}p$ $d\hat{a}m$ [Vn.: being raped] in their personal narratives.

Figure 1: The Flyer



Flyer distribution

With respect to the flyer distribution, I "employed" seven undergraduate students (mostly related to social studies) to hand out the flyers instead of pasting them in public places because this would require local authorization (and this would take time). It turned that handing out flyers directly was rather effective because most people were keen to read them - rape being seen as a "sensational" topic.

It is important to point out that by using the information-gathering technique of flyer distribution I pursued a double objective. Apart from trying to attract the attention of rapees for the case studies, I also wished to monitor people's reactions to the subject of rape, and the prejudices that women doing research on sexual violence had to face in the social-cultural context of Vietnam. While distributing the flyers, the students were to record the reactions of the people they met during their rounds. In fact, they were required to take field-notes, and write down in details about what happened in their day work including their own thoughts about it. These requirements were also applied to the young (female) assistants helping me with archival research and interview transcribing. I also warned them to be aware of potential problems that might arise from the sensibility of the topic. I met my assistants three times a week to discuss about their experiences, and to share their personal feelings about how this research might have an impact on them personally. In reality, the choice of a location was often made on the spot by the drift of the day. For instance, since most people are expected to spend their free time at public places such as zoos, parks, shopping malls, supermarkets, railways and bus stations the flyer distribution campaign would concentrate on these places during weekends and holidays. During weekdays, the focus was switched to "workplaces" such as secondary schools, university dormitories, factories, hospitals, market places, etc. Furthermore to monitor public attitudes on the subject of rape in terms of gender and age, I engaged a man and a woman, both in their middle age, to help in the leafleting campaign.

Taking the advice from several social workers and fellow researchers we also distributed the flyers among sex workers to get information on rape incidence among this group. This was based on the presumption that prostitutes run a high risk of rape because

of the nature of their "profession," having to make themselves sexually attractive to prospective "clients." Another reason given was that women practising the sex trade might be more open-minded to talk about "that thing" (meaning rape and sex-related issues). I managed to "infiltrate" a local network of sex workers made up mainly of migrants and successfully "recruited" participants who were victims of rape. Through "sisterly" chats I found out that one of them was sexually abused by her landlord when she first came to Hanoi to work as an $\hat{o}sin^{20}$ [Vn.: housemaid]; another recently suffered forced sex by her boyfriend whom she was now trying to get rid of. The latter also shared with me her "deflowering" experience by her ex-husband as a means to make her his wife.

Creating a blog

In order to gauge public opinion on the subject of rape, in particular among "bloggers," I created a web log for posting relevant information about my work using CEFACOM as a contact address. I included four case studies taken from my MA thesis, re-written as simple stories designed to test public attitude on this sensitive subject. I used to end my blog posts with a question for visitors. At the same time, the students (involving in this present research) were asked to post their experiences from their leafleting activities including their own feelings and the public's reactions to the rape problematic.²¹

Print media advertising

Instead of simply putting an ad in the press, I have "negotiated" with three columnists of *Gia Đình-Xã Hội* [Vn.: Family - Society], *Tiền Phong* [Vn.: Vanguard] and *Thanh Niên* [Vn.: Youth], three daily newspapers with focus on social issues, to publish a series of articles on the work of our counselling office and my own research project. Apart from publicizing CEFACOM activities, the articles were also designed to "test" public attitude toward the subject of rape. For instance, there was always a small space at the bottom of

²⁰ A slang for 'female servant' derived from the name of the main female character in a Japanese soap opera, *Ôsin*, broadcast on Vietnam Television during the early 90s.

For further information please visit the following link: http://blog.360.yahoo.com/blog-OysrEzI_RKXWHiN54qv5xA--; ylt=AsDi0MngFNQSvPolmwBan1q0AOJ3?cq=1. Accessed on July 12, 2007.

the articles inviting readers to "send your comments on the story, using the box below." Shortly after the articles had been published, CEFACOM was invited to comment on several cases of sexual abuse presented by the "Heart-to-Heart" program of the national radio station *Đài Tiếng Nói Việt Nam* [Vn.: Voice of Vietnam] and several newspapers such as *Gia Đình-Trẻ Em* [Vn.: Family-Children], *Phụ Nữ* [Vn.: Women], *Tiền Phong* [Vn.: Vanguard].²²

2. Multi-site fieldwork and data collection

2.1. Reactions from the rapees

With regard to the flyer campaign in 2007, the very first response we received was from a female undergraduate student (whom I call Lành) via the telephone five days after distribution had begun. Her early enquiry was about the risk of getting pregnant after having engaged in "unprotected sex" with her current boyfriend. The person-in-charge at the CEFACOM office provided Lành with necessary information such as general knowledge about pregnancy, as well as useful contacts for further help, for example the hotline counseling service coordinated by the *Ngôi Nhà Tuổi Trẻ* [Vn.: Youth House] of *Trung Tâm Chăm Sóc Sức Khỏe Sinh Sản Vị Thành Niên/Đoàn Thanh Niên Trung ương* [Vn.: Center of Reproductive Health for Adolescents of the Central Youth League]. Also we assured her that she could contact us whenever she felt like it. It was only weeks later that she told me about her experience of date rape by her current boyfriend during a face-to-face interview taking place in the intimacy of my office.²³

_

²² Some of the articles can be read on line at:

http://giadinh.net.vn/html/site/993870af78740a7bcfa705f7ada72c00.html?direct=455c6d31e7e5e49f8dea243641ca29f2&column=95&nID=7441&lang=Vn. Accessed on July 12, 2007.

http://giadinh.net.vn/html/site/9d29fa266a2483ab781c89df22be5baa.html?direct=455c6d31e7e5e49f8dea243641ca29f2&column=95&nID=7440&lang=Vn. Accessed on July 12, 2007.

http://giadinh.net.vn/html/site/40ade95fd82d44b40c25e258cce53cf6.html?direct=455c6d31e7e5e49f8dea243641ca29f2&column=95&nID=7478&lang=Vn. Accessed on July 12, 2007.

²³ Since a student like Lành might ill afford the cost of a long phone conversation I arranged with CEFACOM about the possibility of returning calls after the first contact was made. We were also aware of the fact that a respondent might want to be anonymous when calling us from a public phone or from a prepaid cell-phone account with non-display numbers. Some might not want to be reached at home for fear of their "secret" being revealed to other family members.

Background of research participants

At the end of my research, I managed to follow twenty-three cases including four cases pending from the previous fieldwork conducted in 2005, three were brought to my attention by CEFACOM, and the rest came from the leafleting campaign.

The women were from fourteen to thirty-six years of age (see Figure 2). Regarding civil status, a large majority of the research participants were single. This may suggest the underreporting of marital rape due to lack of information regarding this type of rape, and the reluctance to say no when their husbands insist on sex (Phan Thu Hiền 2005). As regards education, three had college education, five had less than a secondary education, and the rest had high school or vocational school degrees. The participants worked as domestic helper, waitress/food server, assistant manager of a cosmetic franchise, shop assistant, etc. Four were students. With respect to rape locations, eight cases occurred in public places like open roads, hotels/guest houses; the rest occurred at the assailant's or the rapee's house. Based on the time of interview after the incident, the average length of time that elapsed since the assault occurred was 3.8 years, ranging from one month to thirteen years. Many of the assailants used no weapons to force themselves on their victims; the rapees were often coerced through psychological means by people they trusted or at least were familiar with. Perpetrators' relationship with their victims are as follows: adult stranger (one case), eighteen-year-old stranger (three cases), employer (two cases), dating partner (three cases), husband (one case), acquaintances living in the same neighborhood/ fellow villager(five cases), brother in-law (one case), father (three cases), stepfather (one case), father in-law (one case), uncle (two cases). Lastly, based on the number of assailants involved, there are three cases involving more than two assailants.

Given that fourteen out of the twenty-three participants were living in Hanoi, most of the interviews took place in the informants' houses, in my office at CEFACOM, at various cafés, tea houses and restaurants, etc. However, for those whose families lived outside Hanoi, I went to their villages to learn more about their social/cultural background. In this sense, the research was multi-sited as I did fieldwork in a number of provinces outside Hanoi: Quảng Ninh, Tuyên Quang, Hòa Bình, Hưng Yên, Hà Tây and in particular Lào Cai near the Chinese border.

Figure 2: Demographic and Rape Information of the Study Participants by Rape Category

Case ID	Age	Marital	Occupation	Ethnicity	Assault information		
Stranger rape (n=6)							
Ái	18	Single	High school student	Kinh	Intoxicated and gang raped by 6 teenagers in 2006; attempted suicide. Police notified;		
Mỹ	24	Single	Health staff	Mường	conviction of gang rape. Robbed and gang raped by 9 teenagers on a country road in 2007. Police notified and		
Hạnh	23	Single	Health staff	Kinh	case is pending; media coverage. Robbed and gang raped by 9 teenagers on a country road in 2007. Police notified and case is pending; media coverage.		
Hải	22	Married 02 kids	Housewife	Hmông	Raped while staying in a field hut at night in 2004. Police notified; conviction of rape.		
Phi	14	Single	Farm hand	Dao	Raped by a Kinh road builder in 2007. Police notified; case dropped.		
Thịnh	19	Single	Farm hand	Hmông	Raped while staying in a field hut at night in 2004. Police notified; conviction of adolescent rape.		
			Acai	ıaintance raj	•		
Diệp	19	Single	Farm hand	Kinh	Mentally retarded; raped by a neighbour in 2007, became pregnant; baby given for adoption. Unreported; but was known to the		
Diễm	23	Single	Sex worker	Kinh	local community. Sexually abused by landlord while working as housemaid in Hanoi in 2000; then intoxicated and raped by a 'client' while working in practitation in 2001. Harmontod		
Ly	25	Single	Seasonal worker	Mường	working in prostitution in 2001. Unreported Rape by employer in 2005; became pregnant and baby given for adoption. Unreported but was known to the local community.		
Nga	17	Single	High school student	Kinh	Mentally retarded; raped by a neighbor in 2003; also sexually harassed by a classmate; Police notified; conviction of child rape.		
Nghi	19	Single	Shop clerk	Kinh	Raped by a friend known at chat room, and coerced into second rape in 2006.		
Thu	17	Single	High school student	Kinh	Police notified but case dropped Raped by a neighbor in 2004. Police notified; conviction of having sex with a minor; media coverage.		
Nguyệt	36	Married 02 kids	Researcher	Kinh	Surviving attempted rape by an informant at research site in 2005; repeatedly forced to have sex with husband during early years of marriage. Underreported but was known to the local community (re. the attack).		
Lành	22	Single	Sophomore student	Kinh	Forced sex by boyfriend in 2007. Underreported.		
Vy	30	Divorced 01 kid	Part-time sex worker	Kinh	Raped by ex-husband who proposed to remarry her in 2000. Underreported.		

Family - relative rape (n= 5)							
Duyên	26	Married 02 kids	Small business owner	Kinh	Sexually abused (non-penetration) by father in-law twice in 2003. Disclosed to husband but received with disbelief.		
Khanh	18	Single	Shop clerk	Tày	Sexually abused (non-penetration) by step father in 2003. Underreported.		
Linh	17	Single	High school student	Kinh	Raped by uncle in-law in 2003. Police notified and convicted of child molestation		
Phượng	26	Married 01 kid	Housewife/ Ex-sex worker	Kinh	Raped by a relative on mother's side in 1998; left home; became involved in prostitution. Underreported.		
Yến	14	Single	Secondary student	Dao	Raped by brother in-law in 2007; rapist committed suicide. Police notified but case dropped.		
				Incest (n=3	3)		
Hồng	18	Single	High school student	Kinh	Repeatedly abused by father since age of 5 and raped at age of 13. Underreported but was known to family and local community.		
Giang	23	Single	Office clerk	Kinh	Repeatedly abused by father during childhood; left home. Reported to a newspaper (under anonymity) known to the family and local community.		
Minh	18	Single	Fresher student	Kinh	Repeatedly abused by father during childhood and raped at age of 14; left home and attempted suicide. Reported to a newspaper (under anonymity); known to family and local community.		

Involvement of research participants from ethnic minorities

It is worth noting that seven participants in this project belonged to minority groups such as Hmông, Dao, Tày, and Mường (see Appendix 3 for population distribution of these minority groups). Of these seven, three women belonged to the ethnic groups of Mường and Tày. They got to know about my research through the flyers while they were living in Hanoi as temporary workers. These women were fluent in Kinh (Vietnamese) language thus there was no language barrier as compared to the four cases of Dao and Hmông residents in Lào Cai province.²⁴

The involvement with participants from ethnic minorities created extra methodological problems. First there was the language barrier, since two Hmông participants (in this case Hmông Đơ in Lào Cai) did not speak the Kinh language. Because I myself do not speak the Hmông language there was an obvious need for an interpreter. Secondly, these women were living in an area officially referred to as vùng $s\hat{a}u$ vùng xa^{25} [Vn.: deep and remote area] near the Vietnam-China border. Generally those who wish to visit or carry out research in these frontier areas must receive prior permission from the local authorities. 26

With respect to local assistance, Anh [Vn.: "brother"] Sỹ, a middle-aged cán bộ [Vn.: cadre] of the Phòng Nội Chính [Vn.: internal affairs section] of the People's Committee of Rocky Way district, was assigned to accompany me throughout the field work, although originally I had suggested that my former female student now working at the provincial cultural bureau would help me out with the local scene. "Brother" Sỹ, a

-

²⁴ The reason for my one-month field trip to Lào Cai needs some clarifications. A former student of mine who had assisted me in distributing flyers during my pilot study on rape victims in 2003 in Hanoi was living in Lào Cai in 2007. As luck would have it she was working at the provincial cultural office and had close contacts with different ethnic groups locally. For instance, she handed out the flyers among local people whenever she had a chance to go to the communities for her work-related training courses or meetings in several districts of Lào Cai province. Through her introduction I was able to cover five cases of rape, four of which involved women and girls from three different Hmông and Dao villages, which I call White Peak, Red Slope and Blue Water in Lào Cai province.

²⁵ For a vivid discussion of the notion of *vùng sâu vùng xa*, see Salemink (forthcoming).

²⁶ For my part I used a "top-down" approach to get authorization to conduct field work in this sensitive area. Having obtained an official letter of recommendation from my home university in Hanoi I contacted the person in charge of Lào Cai province's Bureau of Culture, Sports and Tourism, who then made necessary arrangements with district level officials. These then instructed the communal cadres to facilitate my field work.

Kinh himself, was best qualified to help me, explained a provincial official, because he was knowledgeable about the rape cases within the district of Rocky Way since he was involved in delivering government support for "children in specific circumstances" including sexually abused children.²⁷ The head of the internal affairs section, Anh Sỹ's direct boss, also thought it would not be wise for two women to travel among the ethnic minority groups in the frontier area, often seen as a *nhạy cảm* [Vn.: sensitive] area and full of *phức tạp* [Vn.: complicated] problems, both socially and politically. Anyway "brother" Sỹ turned out to be an excellent "research assistant" as well as a reliable *xe ôm* [Vn.: motorbike taxi driver], without whom I could not have reached my research destination.

Consciencious of the fact that the presence of a male person might impede the conduct of my interviews, I discussed my concerns with Anh Sỹ. We agreed that he would leave me and the local interpreter to talk with the women at their homes and come back to pick me up at a certain time later. In case there were other family members or visitors around, he would stay to talk with them. As it happened, while I was interviewing the woman in the kitchen Anh Sỹ would sit at the doorsteps chatting away, getting useful information such as the family's attitude toward the rape incident.

At the Hmông village, I found an excellent interpreter in the person of a retired chairperson of the People's committee of the Moonshine commune who was proficient in the Kinh language. My fieldwork in the two Dao communities was somehow less challenging because my interviewees both spoke the Kinh language.

2.2. Ethnographic fieldwork among rapees and their social network Rapport development

Most of the respondents first got in touch with us by a phone call, citing "problems" that varied from worries about an unwanted pregnancy to somatic symptoms associated with a recent trauma. However, there were cases when the women were willing to discuss their ordeal even in their first contact with us. We tried to respond to their specific needs whenever possible given our limited resources. Above all, we avoided sounding "pushy"

-

²⁷ In accordance with Circular number 112/2004/TT-BTC of Ministry of Finance regarding guidelines on the management and use of the Vietnamese Children Protection Fund.

so as not to scare people off; "easy-does-it" seemed to be a good approach at this early stage of rapport building.

Interview

Since the aim of the research is to understand how larger social discourses have an impact on the micro context of the life of individuals - in this case the female rapees - data were collected through interviews with these women, as well as members of their social networks including family members, relatives, neighbors, friends, colleagues and social workers.

Among rapees

As the main interest of this research is to validate and give voice to women's experiences and their understandings of rape, I took up the biographic narrative interpretative method (BNIM) adopted by Tom Wengraft (2001) as the crucial interview style for studying life-stories. Broadly speaking, BNIM is a form of lightly structured indepth interviewing (from the interviewee's perspective), based on the method of asking just one open-ended, carefully designed narrative question that elicits improvised narratives of a part or whole life-experience from interviewees. I tried to find out the impact of rape on the woman's health, on her life cycle, and on the way she thought of other people's reactions to it. In addition, in the case the interviewee kept silent about the assault, I also explored what factors had influenced her decision not to report? Otherwise, if she chose to disclose her experience, whom did she tell first? And how did people around her react to the fact that she had been sexually assaulted? Were their responses mediated by age, race, and socio-economic background? Most importantly, how did she herself label/name the experience? What did she call herself after all? How did she see herself at the moment of being interviewed? What about her future prospects?

Among family members, friends and neighbors (i.e. in reported cases)

My main focus was to explore what this group think about what had happened to the woman/girl; how did they react on hearing of the rape incident? Did they think such an

incident could happen to the woman/girl? What did/would they do to support/help her? How was this going to affect them?

In total 110 in-depth interviews were carried out from March 2007 to February 2008 (see Table 1 and 2).

- * Sixty-one were conducted with rapees. Nineteen of these sixty-one interviews were tape-recorded, whereas the rest were carried out in informal settings such as cafés, teahouses, restaurants, etc.
- * Twenty-six were conducted with the rapees' parents. Fourteen of these were tape recorded including three involving mothers and fathers of the victims simultaneously.
- * Twenty-three were conducted with other family members of the rapees (brothers, sisters, aunt, grand mother, mother-in-law), three of which were tape-recorded. Besides I also spent time talking with friends, neighbors, teachers, social workers and other people involved in the rapees' experiences. Each interview lasted from one to three hours. The longest was four hours.

Table 1: A summary of the interviews (Fieldwork 2007)

Interviewees	Numbers of interviews						
Thici viewees]	Non-	Total			
	No	Duration (minute)		Average length per interview (minute)	recorded		
Rapees	19	29.3 1.758mins	hrs/	92.5 mins/1.30hrs	42	61	
Rapees' family members, social network (i.e. friends, neighbors, social workers)	17	35 hrs/ 2.102mins		123.6 mins/2hrs	10	27	
Institutional staff (social workers, scholars, language experts, journalists, lawyers)	07	9. 52 hrs/ 571 mins		81.6mins/1.20hrs	15	22	
Total	43	73.82hrs/ 4.431mins	_	103mins/1.40hrs	67	110	

Table 2: A summary of interviewed cases relating to the legal procedure (Fieldwork 2007)

Category of rape/sexual abuse		Under-reported		
	Convicted	Dropped	Pending	
Acquaintance rape - by family members (i.e. uncle in-law; brother in-law; cousin)	01	01		
relativesfriend, employer, neighbor, client	05	01		01 03
Date rape				02
Wife rape				01
Stranger rape		01	02	
Gang rape			02	
Incest (i.e. father, step-father, father in- law)				05
Total	06	03	04	12

During the interviews, I took care not to go too deep into the rape scene itself, but tried to let the respondents talk about their experiences and express their feelings at their own pace and at the proper time. It turned out that they themselves quite spontaneously gave me detailed information related to the rape. It seemed that while they were trying to refresh their memory, these details came back quite clearly and quickly to their mind. There were some highly emotional situations I had to deal with, for example in the case of a girl I call Minh who had been raped by her father. She trembled and shook with emotion as she was relating the incident, how she stood outside her own home in the dark after she had been raped by her own father earlier in the day, realizing that she could no longer return to it. I comforted her as best as I could, trying to bring her from her painful memories back to the safety of my little office. My job was not only to bear witness to her story, but also to give her support and comfort. In this sense, my response to Minh was that of a fellow human being. As pointed out by Virginia Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007) the researcher has to be prepared to face human feelings in conducting in-depth interviews on sensitive topics though this often comes at a personal cost.

Data recording

At first, I was a bit reluctant to use the digital recorder for the interviews as I was afraid that this would make my informants feel uncomfortable, possibly causing undue anxiety to them and their immediate families. Therefore, the first time I talked to them, I took care not to record the conversation. The second time around, however, depending on the situation I did ask them whether I could use the recorder. To my surprise most people, in particular the rapees' parents, did not object to this after I had assured them that I would use their information only for my research and their names would not be mentioned. They told me they would not mind, since what they were going to tell me was based on the truth anyway. Some interviewees even shared with me documents and papers relating to the cases themselves.

It should be mentioned that there has been an increasing ethical concern on improving consent procedures in the research process, particularly regarding subjects with little education (Hill et al. 2008). As a researcher, I did my best to make sure that the would-be participants were provided with adequate information before making a decision whether to join my project or not. For instance, they were told in advance that their experience would be the main subject of the interview. In this way I was able to attract respondents who might feel the need to talk about their experiences. The respondents were also asked whether they would want to review the interview transcripts, in terms of accuracy of information and appropriateness of language. I was also aware that the effectiveness of this method largely depends on the educational level of the researched and the amount of time available to them beyond their daily chores and other domestic obligations. My intention was in a sense to empower the women involved in this research, turning them from passive informants into active participants. Furthermore, I was also aware that the openness and intimacy of the interview might lead them disclose information that they might later regret, in particular those with incest experiences. Five of the women accepted to check the accuracy of the interviews concerning them.

On the whole, I was surprised by the wealth and depth of the information my participants were willing to divulge. After each interview, the participants were asked about what impact this *nói chuyện* [Vn.: conversation] might have on them. Many of them reported that it was a kind of self-healing to be able to talk about their experiences

in a supportive, caring environment. Some respondents told me these sessions helped them reflect more deeply about their experiences and put them in some kind of perspective, helping them to see things that were unclear before, as observed elsewhere by Harry Hiller and Linda DiLuzio (2004). Thus, the interviews served to some extent a therapeutic function in alleviating their suffering.

Participant observation in everyday activities

As noted earlier, a unique problem in studying crime, especially rape, is the general reliance on data that is usually a secondary account of the phenomenon under study (Stanko and Lee, 2003). There have been observational studies of deviance such as cases of drug users, pick-pockets, or traffic offenders where the researcher is able to observe directly what happens when it happens. However, in most crimes of violence, it is almost impossible to collect data by first-hand observation (at least not in the conventional sense).

In the current study, I adopted a pro-active approach to participant observation by spending as much time with my participants as possible in order to learn more about their post-rape experiences. For those who were living in Hanoi I made plans to see them at least once a week for a period six months.

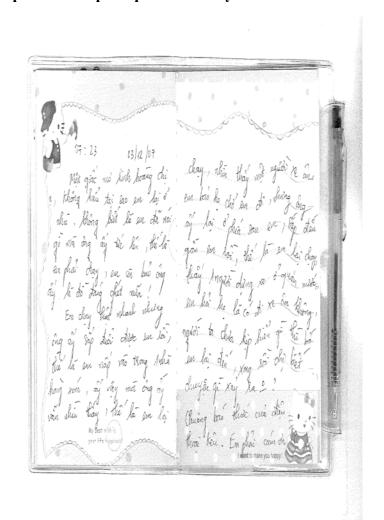
To get a better grasp how rape victims/survivors interact with their families and the surrounding social environment I arranged to join them on trips to their home village. These visits mainly coincided with occasions commemorating life cycle events, for example the death anniversary of a family ancestor. Through my conversations with their family members I tried to understand how their personal experience of sexual abuse/rape and its consequences were impacted by the social relations of everyday life. Moreover I could gain insights into how kinship relations influence the ways in which young women exert their "agency" in the aftermath of their experiences of rape.

The most important information I received did not necessarily came from planned meetings, but sometimes from unexpected moments such as during a stroll down a country road, or on an informal visit to the participant's family where the notebook or the recorder was not pulled out of the bag.

Diary: A method to access rapees' experiences

It is worth noting that alternative means of getting feedback could be effective when the rapees - especially when they were rather young - were reluctant to respond directly through normal conversations, for example in the five cases involving adolescent girls (aged 13-17). Accordingly I asked them whether they would prefer to tell their stories in writing; and they were rather keen on taking up this option. I gave each of them a notebook, asking them to write down their experiences and any other thoughts that they might like to share with me. I then came to see them and collect their "diaries" at the end of the month. This procedure was repeated for the next three months. With this approach, I was able not only to gain insight into their daily lives but also collect vital information related to the rape incidents that were not framed by the questions I had posed to them. These personal diaries turned out to be highly valuable for analysis at later stages (see, for example, Figure 3).

Figure 3: An excerpt from a rapee's personal diary



2.3. Analysis of printed sources

While my focus on the rapees' experiences as individual narratives is to provide a "bottom up" view, an analysis of court files and media reports, seen from institutional perspectives that shape the popular understandings of rape, can be characterized as a "top down" approach.

Newspapers

Since the media is a mirror of prevailing social/cultural attitudes, which in turn may have a direct bearing on the actual coping behavior of survivors, I want to explore what is the actual representation of rape (e.g., what kind of a crime is it: sexual, social-ethical or an act of aggression?); who is supposed to be a "deserving" rape victim in popular perceptions (e.g., a woman of undisputable sexual reputation?); What is the meaning of "honor" in this respect?; 3) who is held responsible for the rape?; 4) what are the characteristics of a "typical" perpetrator (e.g., economic status, stranger or family member?; 5) what are considered "best practices" in dealing with rape?

To illustrate how women are portrayed in the reporting of rape, I concentrated on four interviewed cases that had been covered in the media. Of these, two involved mentally retarded girls under sixteen living in low-income neighbourhoods of Hanoi, one involved incest, and one concerned a gang rape of two young women in a rural area. More specifically, these cases appeared in *An Ninh Thủ Đô* [Vn.: Capital's Security], *Gia Đình - Xã Hội* [Vn.: Family & Society], *Tiền Phong* [Vn.: Vanguard], and *Công An Nhân Dân* [Vn.: People's Public Security], and were not covered in other newspapers.

Apart from the case studies, I conducted a general review of three newspapers with rape-related cases (i.e. 687 articles to be precise) in the period from 1990 to 2006 at two major Hanoi-based libraries, the Vietnam National Library and the Library of Social Sciences. The review was necessary in order to examine how the state-controlled media looked at the problem of sexual violence over a period of great upheaval in contemporary Vietnam. Above all, it was to ascertain whether the loosening up of "socialist" control, freer mobility and an unfettered market economy might bring about more sexual violence, as one might hypothesize. I also tried to analyze the ways in which the media might transform rape as a "social evil" into sensational stories to boost newspaper sales.

The list of the newspapers that were scrutinized can be found in the appendix of this dissertation (see Appendix 4). It should be pointed out that I did not include *Công An Nhân Dân* (affiliated with the Ministry of Public Security) in my general review of raperelated articles. The reason was that *Công An Nhân Dân* provided less coverage of sexual assault cases, as compared with *An Ninh Thủ Đô*. ²⁸ In my assessment, *An Ninh Thủ Đô*, *Gia Đình - Xã Hội* and *Tiền Phong* consistently provided more coverage of sexual assault cases, compared to the bigger newspapers such as *Nhân Dân*²⁹ [Vn.: People], and *Lao Động*³⁰ [Vn.: Labour]. The reason for frequent rape coverage in these newspapers could be explained by institutional affiliation, readership make-up and editorial policy, a topic that will be discussed in Chapter 7. Regarding the representativeness of these newspapers, the two papers *Tiền Phong* [Vn.: Vanguard] and *Gia Đình-Xã Hội* [Vn.: Family & Society] are seen as having a nationwide readership whereas the Hanoi-based *An N inh Thủ Đô* [Vn.: Capital's Security] is a regional paper.

One research assistant was assigned the task of browsing through the two libraries to collect and sort out relevant newspaper articles on rape, which I then spot-checked for the accuracy of the newspaper articles.

Court cases

An important objective of this research is to explore how rape cases were adjudicated in court and whether the perpetrators were convicted; if so, were there discrepancies in the severity of the sentences in similar cases? What factors might explain these differential sentences? This will serve as a basis for comparison about the attitudes of rapees in the non-reported cases in my research.

The focus of this study is on the eleven interviewed cases involving child rape and gang rape. Of these eleven cases, which were brought to court, six led to conviction; three were dropped by the plaintiffs while the other two were still pending. It is complicated by the fact that seven cases involved girls aged sixteen and younger, one being mentally

²⁸ This was based on close consultation with several journalist friends working in Hanoi. In that sense I relied on these journalists to get an idea of the circulation of the newspapers and its coverage of raperelated issues

²⁹ *Nhân Dân*, which has a circulation of about 220,000 daily, is the official organ of the Communist Party of Vietnam. See: http://www.nhandan.com.vn/english/about.htm. Accessed on October 3, 2008.

³⁰ Lao Động is the mouthpiece of Vietnam Federation of Trade Unions. See: http://www.laodong.com.vn. Accessed on October 3, 2008.

retarded and one suffering from epilepsy. Among these eleven victims, two are from minority ethnic groups. Two of the cases involve gang rape.

In addition to the interviewed cases included in this research, I also collected statistics on cases involving sex-related crimes from 1995 to 2006. Although one may raise questions about the reliability of these data given the fact that the majority of victims were unlikely to file formal charges, the statistics are useful as an indication of trends over a period of tremendous social, cultural and economic changes. In this connection, data from the court survey provide a basis for my discussion on legal aspects in Chapter 6.

2.4. Remarks about "post-data collection" arrangements

Regarding the idea of "reciprocity exchange" for research participants, I did not pay them any cash for their time and trouble. Besides the fact that the practice of paying research informants is not so common in Vietnam (cf. Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, 2010), it was not an option because my informants were already clients of the counseling service offered by CEFACOM. Thus, payment in such a context would have been unethical. At a practical level, my reciprocity took the form of offering courtesies such as inviting them to see a movie or taking them out for dinner. When I went to see them at home or paid a visit to their parents in their own villages, I always brought along some food, fresh fruits or cookies as presents.

On another score, I should add that there was some sort of emotional attachment that developed between myself as researcher and some of the women who participated in this research. We remained friends even after my return to the Netherlands to complete my PhD program and stayed in touch via email and phone calls.

Meanwhile I managed to reach an arrangement with CEFACOM about the eventual continuation of the "consulting office" after my research was over. CEFACOM could make use of the office furniture and other facilities that were acquired with the financial support from the Toyota Foundation (in 2005). Moreover, I continued my involvement as an off-site advisor for the consulting office and some research activities carried out by CEFACOM concerning rape and sexual violence.

Interview transcriptions

With respect to transcribing the interviews, I entrusted this task to a female graduate student in anthropology because she was competent and familiar with social sciences. Even though the standard transcription conventions used by many linguistic anthropologists have not been applied in the excerpts (Besnier 1994; Duranti 1997), the principal guidelines were to retain the maximum amount of data that is to keep the transcript as original as possible.³¹

As regards the cases involving members of the two ethnic groups of Hmông and Dao living in Rocky Way district of Lào Cai province, I relied on the help of experts on ethnic minorities in Hanoi. Specifically in the Dao case, I asked a senior scholar at the Institute of Anthropology - a Dao himself - to go through the transcriptions of the interviews done in Kinh language. In particular I wanted to check certain expressions in the interviewees' native tongue concerning the terms tiết khu-ủ paí tiết khốt [D.: virginity] and tchổm miền xía chẩu tiết [D.: rape] for instance.

With respect to the interviews with the Hmông, I secured the "service" of a Hmông student to help me with the translation of the interviews. By so doing I could double check the transcriptions as well as to use the RPA system to transcribe phonetically a number of crucial concepts peculiar to the Hmong language, such as *tsangx muas* [Hm.: shame], *plu* [Hm.: face, honor], *saiz tsiv txax* [Hm.: respect], *tsiv txax* [Hm.: well-mannered behaviour] and *tsi jông* [Hm.: bad people].

-

³¹ For instance, the student was required to transcribe the entire speech, including overlapping utterances, and interruptions such as TV sounds, noises from the surroundings, etc. If the pause in the speech lasted longer than five seconds, it was represented by [...]. If the interval was less than five minutes, the (unfinished) sentence was followed with three dots (...). All incorrect spellings and the interviewee's expression in the local dialect such as the mispronunciation of [n] and [l] were kept intact. When the student was unsure about a certain segment of the tape, she was advised to replay it up to four times. Any unclear sentence must be italized and marked in blue. As I also pay attention to the difficulties associated with transcription of research interviews on a highly sensitive topic, I asked the student to make personal comments after finishing each tape, what she was thinking and feeling during the transcribing process, which is more than a purely routine technical task. I shall comment on this further in the last section

³² This took place at my CEFACOM office two days a week for a period of two months. We went through the recorded interviews of the Hmông cases together. To facilitate reading, I asked the student to check the translation that I was provided in the field, and transcribe the speech again in the RPA system (I myself listened to the tape to get familiarized with the materials).

Research limitations

It is necessary to mention that due to the highly sensitive nature of the subject, the study is bound to encounter some problems of interpretation. First of all, the small number of participants imposes limitations on the generalization of research findings. Considering the social stigma attached to rape, it is generally expected that most rapees would remain silent in coping with their post-rape trauma, and those who venture to speak about their experiences might be considered as "atypical." Thus, those who choose to speak about their experience or seek professional assistance might represent a more "progressive-minded" minority among rapees.

The research participants varied in terms of age, occupation, ethnicity, education; their own experiences of the rape itself also varied (reported, unreported, type of rape, etc.). In addition, the time span since the rape incident occurred also differed for each woman: the oldest case dated back to thirteen years; the latest case was one-month old. Because of the limited number of participants I could not focus on a certain kind of rape (e.g., rape by strangers or by acquaintance); a specific age group (at the time they were raped); or occupation (i.e. migrant women).

In addition, several rapees who initially sought counseling did not want the researcher to have direct contact with their social network (family members, friends, etc.). Some preferred "interview-only" while others allowed me to conduct an in-depth ethnographic study. It should be pointed out that even though the number of case studies was rather limited, this was compensated by a careful examination of the participants' interactions with their social networks (i.e. family members, relatives, friends, neighbors) since the essence of this research calls for analysis, understanding and explanation about the relationship between social conceptions of gender and the actual embodied experiences of female rapees.

3. Experiences as rape researcher and reflections on "secondary victim"

While the problem of researching violence against women has received a great deal of attention in academic literature in the West (Salston and Figleys 2003; Collins, 2003; Campbell, 2002; Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1997), little has been known about the

effects of public attitudes on those researching rape particularly in a patriarchal society like that of Vietnam.

Despite an increasing awareness of sexual violence, researchers working on rape are subjected to significant stress and are vulnerable to becoming "secondary victim" (Davis, Taylor and Bench, 1995) with "secondary traumatic stress" (Figley, 1995; cf. Shah, Garland and Katz, 2007), or vicarious traumatisation (McCann and Pearlman, 1990; cf. Schauben and Frazier, 1995). Basically, while secondary victimisation refers to victims who are held to be responsible and blameworthy for their own situation, for example, the concept "secondary victim" includes the ripple effects of crime on those close to victims. This was evident in the responses that we received from the lay public during the flyer distribution. The most irritating reaction was that sometimes we were treated as sex objects. From Linh Anh's diary:

"Others made outrageous remarks about my physical appearance such as: 'why is a pretty girl like you doing something like this? It's strange (meaning lucky) that you haven't been raped yet'." (AN20071)

I myself became the subject of gossip and innuendo among my own peers and acquaintances; some even called me a "man hater," a lesbian or just someone with "liberal" views on sex. This unnecessarily caused extra pressure on the conduct of my work.

Additionally the most frequent questions directed at my female associates were about their marital status and the reason of their involvement in the research project. An excerpt from Khuê's diary:

"They asked me why on earth I would want to do this kind of work. A middle-aged woman said: "A young student like you distributing these leaflets, aren't you scared? And you're not even married!" There's something bitter, cruel, and degrading in her words. What do people think? Do I have to keep silent about sexual matters because I am not married? Is it because I am single, talking about these matters makes me look like somebody with a problem? I don't really mind (about these attitudes) but sometimes I felt depressed and tense when people made jokes about my work, for example, when someone asked me leeringly whether it had something to do with population control and the use of condoms." (AN20052)

These perceptions emanate from social expectations that a good girl is not expected to speak openly about sex-related matters. Sex is a taboo subject in the context of Vietnamese culture, and a young and unmarried girl is presumed to be ignorant of sex. Here it appears to run counter to an increasing trend in premarital sex among Vietnamese youth (Zabin *et al.* 2009; Nguyễn Phương An, 2005). It is easy to make sex-related jokes in their daily conversations, but most people would shy away from problems such as sexual violence. My findings are consistent with a recent survey on sexuality in Vietnam (Khuất Thu Hồng *et al.* 2009) which concludes that *tình dục: dễ đùa khó nói* [Vn.: sex is easy to joke but hard to talk about].

Apparently the idea of a single girl engaged in researching rape is not easily accepted by most people even today. It is worth mentioning that two students in my original distributing team unexpectedly quit soon after the campaign had started because of parental disapproval. One of them explains:

"Once my father incidentally saw what I was transcribing on the computer screen. He found my work disagreeable." (AN20073)

The mother of the other student told her:

"Why do you distribute this kind of flyers instead of (handing out) commercial promotion leaflets? There are so many things you can do. For a girl to take up such a project may cause a lot of gossip." (AN20074)

Fortunately the rest of the team were enthused with their work, and imbued with a strong sense of activism.

It is worth mentioning that gender stereotyping was evident during the flyer distribution. As mentioned earlier, I included a male student and a middle-aged man in my team. Most people found a man distributing this kind of leaflet rather unusual since rape is regarded as *chuyện đàn bà*, *con gái* [Vn.: women and girls' affairs], something that ordinary men should not be bothered with. However these two males were not subjected to unkind jokes or distasteful remarks. A middle-aged woman in my team told me:

"People often show pity when they see me distributing these leaflets out in the street. They say that the young ones should do this kind of work instead of you. But they gladly receive the leaflets, maybe because of my age." (AN20075)

But there is no denying the emotional cost that we all had to bear, including those involved in transcribing interviews and researching archives. Personally, I found it hard to control my emotion - mainly horror and grief - when reading and re-reading the transcriptions even after some time had elapsed since the actual fieldwork or the interview took place. My associates involved in reviewing case records of rape in the printed media and in transcribing interviews underwent similar experiences despite the fact that they had no direct contact with the victims. For example, Chung told me she developed a phobia of motorbike taxi drivers after documenting the incidence of rape committed by this group. Another girl called Huyền spoke of her difficulty of concentrating on her transcription work after listening to some shocking episodes from the tapes. She further complained of nightmares. This emotional experience has been echoed among researchers who often listen to powerful stories regarding sensitive topics like rape (Warr, 2004; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009).

Generally speaking, most of my research associates expressed a sense of activism about their involvement in the project. As Hoài, one of the flyer distributors, wrote in her diary:

"People think the work I'm doing is useless, even boring. Maybe they think those who do such work are motivated by personal reasons. Worse yet the topic is about sexual violation. It seems they think that such a topic is too much for a young woman like me. I don't really know what people think. Having said this I am more determined to carry on. Maybe more people like me are needed to change public attitude and consequently public behavior." (AN20056)

Like Hoài, some of her colleagues used the term *làm việc nghĩa* [Vn.: doing charity work] to describe their work, talking about the enthusiasm and confidence they displayed in their work. Besides, taking part in this research allowed them to re-assess some of their preconceptions on rape and particularly child sexual abuse. Chung told me she previously thought that "these things only occur in remote areas where people are ignorant" and thus was shocked by the high incidence of rape in urban areas as revealed in her newspaper search. This has changed her view on gender (and ethnic) relations in a profound way, making her more alert to this hidden crime. Nhàn, a flyer distributor, said that she felt a sense of empowerment after taking part in the project as she recalled how she reacted to overt sexual harassment against her on a busy street.

"Last Saturday night I went out with my boyfriend. I was sitting on the back of his motorbike. The street was crowded as usual... Suddenly a guy grabbed my bottom violently, and then sped away. I mean this was not my first encounter with street sexual harassment. Normally I would let it pass even though I would feel very frustrated. But... don't know why... this time... I felt so angry... I urged my boyfriend to accelerate to catch the guy... We caught him finally... 'Do you know what you just did?' I asked the harasser. He was highly embarrassed by my strong, but calm reaction, the more so because there were bystanders around. He apologized for his wrongdoing, so we let him go. But you know, people in the street looked at me as if I was someone terrible, though they did not object to my behaviour. My boyfriend told me: 'I didn't know you are that tough." (Fieldwork AN20077)

On the whole these first-hand experiences, however fragmented and diffuse, reveal the taboo nature of the rape problematic that inheres in popular perceptions of sex and gender relations. This gives more than a foretaste of the difficulties that lie ahead in uncovering how rapees and their families deal with rape-related stigmas in the cultural-specific context of Vietnam.

Summary

In this chapter I highlight the methodological dilemmas and the social-cultural barriers in conducting research on a highly sensitive subject like rape in present day Vietnam. Unlike in the West and some Southeast Asian countries (e.g., the Philippines, Malaysia and Cambodia) where there are rape crisis centers to care for victims of sexual violence, the lack of such facilities in Vietnam makes it extremely hard in the search for project participants. This situation was overcome by a novel approach to methodology that included a flyer campaign, a consultation bureau, and newspaper advertisements.

From the researchers' perspective, my associates and I had to bear something akin to stigmatization stemming from popular perceptions on gender, sexuality and sexual violence. We were at times objects of ridicule and insult, not to mention threats to our personal safety. And there was the emotional cost of dealing intimately with the rapees through direct interviews or indirectly in transcribing them.

The question is that if researchers like us had to bear their share of emotional cost, which is part of the job, what would it be like for the rapees themselves having to cope

with their traumatic situation? This and other relevant questions will be dealt with in the following chapters.
