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Disclosure Pathways Among Sexual Assault Survivors: An Exploration of the Survivors'  
Experiences of Informal and Formal Disclosures

by

Ashley Siler

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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Idaho State University

May 2022

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of ASHLEY SILER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE APPROVAL



September 9, 2021

Deirdre Caputo-Levine  
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RE: Study Number IRB-FY2021-187 : Disclosure Pathways Among Sexual Assault Survivors: An Exploration on the Survivors' Experiences of Informal and Formal Disclosures

Dear Dr. Caputo-Levine:

Thank you for your responses to a full-board review of the study listed above. Your responses are eligible for expedited review under FDA and DHHS (OHRP) regulations. This is to confirm that I have approved your application.

Notify the HSC of any adverse events. Serious, unexpected adverse events must be reported in writing within 10 business days.

You may conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to renewal on or before September 9, 2022, unless closed before that date.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. Contact Tom Bailey (208-282-2179; email [humsubj@isu.edu](mailto:humsubj@isu.edu)) if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP  
Human Subjects Chair

## DEDICATION

To my grandmother Dr. JoAn Falter Dilweg, in loving memory. You always encouraged me to further my passion in academia. Here I am following in your footsteps. I love and miss you dearly.

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Disclosure Pathways Among Sexual Assault Survivors: An Exploration of the Survivors'  
Experiences of Informal and Formal Disclosures

Thesis – Idaho State University (2022)

This study examined sexual assault survivors' experiences of informal and formal disclosures following a sexual assault. I explored what shaped participants' decisions to disclose to others and how they were treated by officials, family, friends, and community members. I also ascertained the extent to which these experiences are shaped by factors such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, rurality, and religion. Narrative interviews were conducted with 8 participants over the age of 18 to assess their lived experiences of disclosing sexual assault. Both standpoint and intersectionality theories shape the analytical lens of the study. Standpoint theory was used to analyze the participants' perspectives based on their experiences. Intersectionality theory was used to examine how social categories intersect with those experiences. Participants were recruited from sexual assault crisis centers, victim advocate centers, mental health facilities, community bulletin boards, and a college campus; these sites were located in the Mountain West region. The following themes emerged from the narratives: disclosure reasons, revictimization, shame and self-blame, and supportive interactions.

*Keywords:* sexual assault, revictimization, standpoint, intersectionality

## INTRODUCTION

A female survivor was sexually assaulted by her ex-boyfriend just days after the end of their relationship. The two detectives assigned to the case questioned her forcefully and presented a cold demeanor toward the survivor. They threw in comments such as, “why didn’t you hit him? Why didn’t you yell? Why didn’t you try to get away from him?” These questions made the survivor feel uncomfortable and guarded toward the detectives (Patterson 2011). The survivor felt re-victimized by those supposed to make her feel safe. Rather than building rapport with the survivor, the detectives drilled her for answers while simultaneously victim blaming her. The encounter with the detectives illustrates secondary victimization, a form of victim blaming carried out by community service providers. Victim blaming responses such as “whore” or “that’s not rape” can occur when a victim discloses to others, implying that the victim played a role in the assault rather than giving the perpetrator full accountability. Survivors of sexual assault can experience secondary victimization, victim blaming, or both due to interactions with community service providers (like the detectives) or disclosures to family/peers following an assault.

Sexual violence is defined as “acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration, and an array of types of coercion, from social pressure and intimidation to physical force” (WHO 2012:para 1). Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence in which a nonconsensual sexual act is forced on another individual or occurs when the individual is unable to consent (U.S. Department of Justice n.d.). Sexual assault is a serious public health issue. In 2019, 1.7 per 1,000 people 12 years or older experienced sexual assault, while only 33.9% of sexual assault incidents were reported to the police (Morgan and Truman 2020). Women experience sexual

assault and sexual violence at a higher rate than men, and the perpetrators are typically men. For example, 98.1% of women who were victims of sexual assault reported that the perpetrator was male, and 92.5% of women who were survivors of other forms of sexual violence reported that the perpetrator was male (CDC 2022a; Black et al. 2011). In 2015, researchers found that approximately 1 in 3 women experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetime, while findings in 2016 showed that 1 in 5 women experience sexual assault on college campuses (CDC 2022a; Office of Women's Health 2018). Men and LGBTQ individuals can experience sexual assault victimization as well (Stemple and Meyer 2014; CDC 2022a; National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2012). Approximately 1 in 4 men experience sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetime (CDC 2022a). In 2010, it was estimated that 1 in 8 lesbians experienced rape, and 4 in 10 gay men experienced sexual violence other than rape during their lifetime (NISVS 2010). Unfortunately, survivors of sexual assault can also experience a "second rape," more formally known as secondary victimization, when disclosing their trauma with legal, medical, and social services (Campbell and Raja 1999:261).

Sexual abuse is a form of sexual assault; however, it is directed toward minors who an adult has sexually abused. According to the CDC (2022b), sexual abuse is defined as "the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society" and that the child "does not fully comprehend, does not consent to or is unable to give informed consent to, or is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to." A 2009 study concluded that approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys experience sexual abuse sometime during childhood, and 91% of sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by someone the child or the family knows (CDC 2022b).

This study explores sexual assault survivors' experiences of informal and formal disclosures. The following research questions are investigated: 1) What factors shape sexual assault survivors' decisions to disclose to others (family, friends, and service providers), 2) how are survivors treated when they disclose to others (family, friends, and service providers) and, 3) how are these experiences shaped by factors such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, rurality, and religion? This study utilized a phenomenological methodology by focusing on the survivors' experiences with their disclosures to peers/family or community service providers.

The phenomenological approach is used to express the "essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it" (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019:91). The meanings of those experiences are fleshed out by questioning *what* phenomenon was experienced and *how* the individual experienced it. (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019). This methodology is rooted in detailed narratives and is used to gain the perspective of sexual assault survivors on their encounters with the individuals with whom they disclose. Themes and patterns involving supportive interactions, victim blaming, and secondary victimization were anticipated and were analyzed to gain an emic perspective of sexual assault survivors' experiences when they disclosed to others. The theoretical framework of this study is structured by Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory (Smith 1987; 1992; 2005) and intersectionality theory as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks (Crenshaw 2017; Collins 1998; hooks 1984). These theoretical perspectives analyze the survivors' standpoint based on their experiences and how interconnected social categorizations shape their experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Understandings of Sexual Assault*

*Definitions.* The terms *sexual assault* and *rape* are typically used interchangeably when cases of sexual victimization are brought up in discussions and social movements. However, these two terms have different legal meanings. In legal terms, sexual assault is defined as “any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by Federal, tribal, or State law, including when the survivor lacks capacity to consent” (U.S. Department of Justice n.d.:para 2). Rape is defined as “the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (U.S. Department of Justice 2017:para 1). Both sexual assault and rape are forms of unwanted sexual acts. The legal difference is whether penetration is involved or not; however, the lack of consent is emphasized in both definitions. Sexual violence can also include sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation (National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2010).

Often when an incident of rape occurs, the first inquiry from criminal justice officials, family, and peers is whether the offender is known to the survivor or a stranger. According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), approximately 41% of women and 52% of men reported having been raped by an acquaintance who was not an intimate partner or family member. Friends, neighbors, family friends, first dates, an individual that is briefly known, and those that the victim does not know well are considered acquaintances (Office of Justice Programs 2018). In addition, 51% of women reported that an intimate partner raped them, 13% of women reported having been raped by a family member, and 3% of women

reported being raped by an authority figure. Approximately 14% of women and 15% of men reported having been raped by a stranger. Regarding the percentages of reports of rape from an intimate partner, family member, and authority figure, the samples for men were too small to report estimates (Office of Justice Programs 2018).

The common misconception of a sexual assault/rape perpetrator is the “stranger in the bushes.” This misconception is portrayed as the stereotypical crime of rape (Drakulich 2015; Pazzani 2007). Despite the higher victimization rates by acquaintances, there is more fear surrounding stranger victimization. This fear is due to the overemphasis on “stranger danger” and random acts of violence, especially towards women (Drakulich 2015). The act of sexual assault itself is commonly represented by the stereotype of a vulnerable young woman walking down the street alone at night, and a frightening masked stranger jumps out and viciously assaults the survivor. Sexual assaults such as this do occur; however, they are not as common as assaults committed by individuals known to the survivor (Pazzani 2007).

*Consent.* Consent is a crucial concept when it comes to sexual assault. A particular long-standing understanding of consent is the belief that it is acceptable for perpetrators to “grab, fondle, and paw another person in a sexual manner” *unless* a defensive response by the survivor ensues (Decker and Baroni 2011:1082; Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Shaw 2016). Consent is defined as one’s willingness to agree to something; there are two forms of consent: explicit consent and inferred consent (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Explicit consent (also known as affirmative consent) is the use of direct statements when giving consent. For instance, an individual would explicitly (hence the term) state something like, “yes, I want to have sex.” Explicit/affirmative consent is also “continuous” and “ongoing” during sexual activity (Shumlich and Fisher 2020:1). Inferred

consent (also known as implied consent) is the indirect granting of consent by using behaviors, cues, and signals to indicate consent. For instance, an individual might nod in agreement to have sex when asked, which would prompt a mutual sexual relationship if there is no intimidation, force, or coercion involved (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). It is argued that both forms of consent during sexual activity should be “continuous” and “ongoing” to ensure that both parties are in a safe environment (Shumlich and Fisher 2020:1). Silence and a lack of protest during sexual activity are murkier subjects and can often be confused with consent. However, a “lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent” (Muehlenhard et al. 2016:459; Shaw 2016; Randall 2011). One common cause of lack of resistance or a silent response in a sexual assault is the body’s “freeze” response, where an individual becomes immobile and freezes in response to trauma and danger (Pinciotti and Seligowski 2019; Schiewe 2019).

*Types of services from community service providers.* Sexual assault survivors expect to receive proper services from those to whom they attempt to report or are directed to following an assault; however, survivors will often experience barriers to receive such services. There are two types of responses that survivors of sexual assault may receive from community service providers: responsive processing and unresponsive processing.

Responsive processing occurs when community service providers prioritize the survivor by providing needed services and resources for the survivor (Campbell and Raja 1999). For instance, responsive processing by criminal investigators would involve a proper investigation and prosecution of the perpetrator. Ideally, social services such as rape crisis centers would provide mental health resources and other referrals, and hospitals would provide transparent

information about sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, Title IX coordinators from universities would initiate a full investigation and provide mental health services.

Unresponsive processing occurs when community service providers do not provide survivors with the proper services and resources. Instead, unresponsive processing focuses on the service provider's needs (Campbell and Raja 1999). For example, criminal justice officials may be more interested in winning the case with "good" evidence, and hospitals may try to attend to patients as quickly as possible, thus leaving the survivor to receive minimal services. At the same time, universities would rather settle sexual assault cases as quietly as possible for the image and reputation of the school. Unresponsive processing toward rape survivors can lead to survivors being denied quality services and being blamed for the assault (Campbell and Raja 1999).

#### *Informal and Formal Disclosure Pathways*

A disclosure pathway is the disclosure course a survivor takes after the assault. When a sexual assault occurs and a survivor chooses to disclose their assault, there are two disclosure pathways: informal and formal. The informal disclosure pathway involves disclosing to anyone outside the professional service sectors (police, hospitals, social service), such as friends, family, and significant others (O'Callaghan et al. 2018; Ullman and Filipas 2001). The formal disclosure pathway involves disclosing to professional sources of assistance such as law enforcement, doctors, nurses, and social service providers (Ullman and Filipas 2001). Regarding informal disclosures, generally, survivors receive supportive reactions; however, the perception of the individual the survivor discloses to may impact how they respond to the survivor. This could impact the emotional state of the survivor (Kirkner et al. 2018). Compared to informal



disclosures, formal disclosure experiences report to be less supportive and include victim blaming attitudes (Ullman and Filipas 2001). Survivors report experiencing both positive and negative responses when they disclosed their assault. Positive responses such as emotional and informative support, believability, and assistance have little or no significance on individual survivors' trauma symptoms (Ullman and Filipas 2001). However, negative responses such as victim blaming and secondary victimization have strong adverse effects on a survivor's trauma symptoms (Ullman and Filipas 2001).

*Victim blaming and sexual assault.* Victim blaming behaviors and practices involve holding the survivor accountable for their sexual assault (Gravelin, Biernat, and Baldwin 2019). Victim blaming perspectives include but are not limited to the following attributes of an assault to justify the attack: the presence of drugs and alcohol, the attractiveness of the survivor, lack of the survivor's resistance from the assault, the clothing that the survivor was wearing, if the survivor and offender know each other, the survivor's reputation, and if the survivor has flirted with the assailant before the assault (Gravelin, Biernat, and Baldwin 2019; Landström, Alfredsson, and Strömwall 2015; Cohn, Dupuis, and Brown 2009).

There is a focus on scrutinizing the survivor's credibility and reputation rather than on the perpetrator's criminal act. The focus on the survivor's credibility and reputation arises from the concept of the *ideal victim type* - the positive stereotype of a survivor - in other words, there are specific criteria for survivors to meet in order to be viewed as "innocent" and deserving of justice from law enforcement and the courts (Karmen 2018).

The criteria of an *ideal victim type* require the survivor to be vulnerable and weak compared to the offender, the survivor is a respectable member of society and doesn't break any laws, the survivor is not a troublemaker, and the offender had no personal relationship with the survivor (Karmen 2018). The ideal victim stereotype can introduce bias and lead the justice system (law enforcement and the district attorney) to pick and choose which survivors to advocate for (Karmen 2018; Tuerkheimer 2017). Also, the ideal victim concept can impact the progression of cases when law enforcement officers and prosecutors only accept and prosecute the "obvious" cases such as stranger rape. It is difficult for anyone to meet all the requirements of the *ideal victim type*, and this stereotype can contribute to victim blaming.

Victim blaming stems from the *just world belief* concept—coined by Melvin J. Lerner—which implies people believe that they live in a just and fair world and that individuals "get what they deserve." This perspective contends that the person deserves their victimization if their actions or characters are judged in a negative manner (Lerner 1980; Landström et al. 2015; Grove 2019; Van den Bos and Maas 2009:1567; Russell and Hand 2017). For instance, an individual with a just outlook believes that bad incidents do not happen to good people. Their view would be that individuals who experience victimization put themselves in that position; therefore, they deserved the victimization because they were "up to no good," not respectable, or naive (Lerner 1980; Landström et al. 2015). This view contributes to the victim blaming perspective by labeling survivors as those who deserve consequences based on their character and actions. Humans tend to seek an understanding of behavior by using attribution bias. Attribution bias occurs when an individual places blame on another in order to determine a reason or cause for the incident (Grove 2019). A study reported that individuals with a *just world*

*belief* expressed victim blaming towards the survivors and portrayed less blame towards the perpetrator (Landström et al. 2015).

Rape myths normalize the acceptance of sexual assault, which promotes victim blaming (Russell and Hand 2017). Rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Iconis 2011:47). For instance, in relation to gender, rape myths against women would include statements such as “she asked for it” and “certain women are raped,” such as those with bad reputations. There is also the perception that the rape was insignificant and that the perpetrator’s behavior was understandable (e.g., “boys will be boys”) (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Men can experience rape myths as well. Such rape myths directed at men include statements such as “real men don’t get raped,” “a man can’t be raped by a woman,” “male on male rape is about homosexuality,” or “men getting raped is not serious” (O’Brien, Keith, and Shoemaker 2015). These myths portray the social norm surrounding masculinity, and the social norm for men revolves around toughness and not crying because it is a sign of weakness. Rape myths are directed at LGBTQ individuals as well. Common myths would include “a woman can’t rape another woman” and “gay men are sexually promiscuous and are always ready for sex.” Other myth examples include “bisexuals are kinky anyway, and sexual assault for them is just rough sex that got out of hand” and “when a woman claims domestic abuse by another woman, it is just a catfight” (Fredonia State University of New York 2020).

*Intersectionality and victim blaming.* An individual’s social identities can influence the ways that they experience victim blaming. One’s social class, race/ethnicity, disabilities, living in a rural/small community area, gender, and even religious beliefs within a community can play a

significant role in shaping how a survivor of sexual assault experiences victim blaming. These social categorizations of the victim can influence the attitudes of placing more blame on a victim than the perpetrator; somehow, the victim of sexual assault is at fault based on their social status.

Social class plays a role in victim blaming among sexual assault survivors. In a study conducted by Spencer (2016), a scenario of a woman who was raped was presented to participants. Findings revealed that participants displayed victim blaming attributes towards low socioeconomic status (SES) women more than towards high SES women; such attributes included minimizing language and indicating that lower SES women were more promiscuous. Poverty elicits stereotypes about poor people. People who victim blame sexual assault survivors view survivors as those who make bad choices; therefore, they claim that it is the survivor's fault for being in that environment (Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape 2007).

One's race/ethnicity contributes to victim blaming on the basis of racial discrimination. Black women were racially stereotyped as "Jezebel" during the era of slavery and were labeled as "unrapable" and "hypersexual" (Kane 2020:1). This stereotype has continued to exist, and Black women are more likely to be labeled as "excessively sexual [...] and promiscuous than white women" (George and Martínez 2002:110). Asian American, Latinx, and Native American survivors have also been found to experience victim blaming in relation to discrimination and poverty (Bryant-Davis, Chung, and Tillman 2009).

Those with a physical disability face victim blaming (Hughes et al. 2020; Browne et al. 2016). According to a study by Hughes et al. (2020:224), participants placed blame towards those with a physical disability on the same level as those without a disability. Victim blaming

statements such as “she should have been more careful” were accompanied by claims about how disabled survivors should have monitored their vulnerability.

Individuals who live in a rural/small community can face several challenges that can impact disclosing and accessing resources. Challenges can include isolation, social attitudes towards sexual assault, and limited resources (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Littell, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020; Lewis 2003). Rural/small communities are remote areas; when a sexual assault occurs, the survivor is far from others and social services due to the area being a greater distance from these services and other support systems (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020). Rural and small urban areas have clusters of small communities, which means that there is a higher level of acquaintance density.

Acquaintance density is defined as the “average proportion of the people in a community known by the community’s inhabitants (Wodahl 2006:34). In a community where everybody knows each other, there is less “social privacy” than “physical privacy” (Wodahl 2006:34). Therefore, there is a lack of anonymity and confidentiality when someone discloses sexual violence (Lewis 2003). Social attitudes within these communities are described as the “good old boys’ network” when men are usually the town leaders and hold beliefs that rape, sexual harassment, and even marital rape are not considered crimes, which can perpetuate tolerance and discouragement of disclosing sexual assault (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020). Rural areas often have limited resources for sexual assault, such as a lack of funding for rape crisis centers, low staff, and few social service agencies (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020).

Fundamental religious beliefs and gender can contribute to victim blaming attitudes toward survivors of sexual assault (Nagel et al. 2005). These views can perpetuate social norms surrounding patriarchy, traditional gender roles, and sexism, influencing negative attitudes towards rape victims (Heath and Sperry 2019). Patriarchal culture seeps into the daily lifestyles of individuals and can emphasize gender roles within those lifestyles. For instance, women are constantly told not to walk alone at night and to stay away from high-risk areas such as parties, bars, and proximity to potential offenders (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017).

This line of thinking is rooted in the routine activities theory, which has been criticized for placing blame on the victims (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013). Therefore, if a woman is sexually assaulted, they may be victim blamed with a “you put yourself there” attitude. However, males who participate in the same activities as women (such as partying and going to bars/clubs) are socially normalized in that they can participate in such activities. This reinforces patriarchal attitudes (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017). A study has shown associations between fundamental religion with violence against women, approval of rape myths, and the endorsement of patriarchal gender norms (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017). Another study revealed that clergy members who had high levels of fundamentalist religious and sexist views engaged in victim blaming behaviors towards survivors by focusing on their “perceived victim control” and characteristics of the victim rather than on the perpetrator (Miller 2018). Fundamentalist religious views can include emphases on social conformity, traditionalism, and authoritarianism which can influence normalizing patriarchal gender norms, thus influencing victim blaming attitudes (Miller 2018).

*Secondary victimization and sexual assault.* Secondary victimization is defined as the “unresponsive treatment rape victims receive from social system personnel. It is made up of the victim blaming behaviors and practices that community service providers may engage in that extend the rape event, resulting in additional stress and trauma for victims” (Campbell and Raja 1999:262). In other words, secondary victimization occurs when survivors of sexual assault experience trauma during interactions with criminal justice, medical, and social service providers (Campbell and Raja 1999; Campbell 2005; Orth 2002). Secondary victimization occurs when those expected to advocate and support a survivor of sexual assault act in ways that hurt the survivor. Criminal justice officials, medical personnel, and social service providers are expected to be the survivor’s voice; instead, there are instances where these providers place blame on and are unresponsive toward the survivor (Campbell 2005; Ullman and Townsend 2007; Campbell and Raja 1999). Community service providers can make rape survivors feel “re-raped” by displaying harmful behaviors toward the survivors or denying services altogether (Campbell and Raja 1999:261).

*Interactions with community service providers.* Survivors have had negative interactions with law enforcement when they first report their assault. They have indicated that law enforcement has “pushed” them “in 20 different directions” for answers on what happened (Patterson 2011:1362). The officers’ manner of questioning would be described as “grilling,” and survivors would feel that their minds were “boggled” when trying to describe their assault (Patterson 2011:1362-1363). In addition, survivors have reported feeling hurt by officers’ attitudes during interviews. Officers were described as “unapproachable” and “cold,” and survivors argued that they would have had an easier time providing information to officers if

they had been treated in a more supportive manner (Patterson 2011:1364). Survivors have also experienced negative interactions with medical personnel such as SANE rape examiners at hospitals. Some survivors noted that SANE nurses were “cold” and treated the rape examination like a “business”; they were trying to rush through their jobs to get the survivor “out of there” (Fehler-Cabral, Campbell, and Patterson 2011:3629-3630).

Despite survivors having negative interactions with community service providers, positive interactions are also experienced. For example, a police officer would “slow down” with questioning and “help” the survivor “through it” (Patterson 2011:1363). Many survivors of sexual assault find that SANE nurses are “compassionate,” “caring,” and “listened to them,” indicating that nurses took the survivor’s concerns seriously (Fehler-Cabral et al. 2011:3621). In addition, many survivors described mental health professionals and rape crisis center personnel as “healing,” indicating that these interactions were positive and quality services for the survivor’s needs were provided (Campbell et al. 2001:1250).

### *Gaps in Sexual Assault Disclosure Knowledge*

This study focuses on rural and small urban populations in the Mountain West region. The Mountain West region consists of the following six states: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah (Beavers et al. 2020). There is a lack of literature on trauma research regarding sexual assault disclosures that focus on rural and small urban areas since most of the research focuses on urban populations (Annan 2006). The Office of Management and Budget determines the term *rural* by using the categories: metro, micro, and counties outside of metro and micro (HRSA 2021). A metro area is considered not a rural area if there are 50,000



people or more. A micro area is deemed to be rural if there are 10,000 to 49,000 people. Any counties outside of metro and micro areas are considered rural (HRSA 2021). According to the OECD (2022), an area is considered to be *small urban* if the population is between 50,000 and 200,000.

Since the confidentiality of the participants is the first priority of this study, exact locations are not mentioned in this study in order to protect the privacy and safety of the participants. Population description of areas will only include the population ranges in accordance with the Office of Management and Budget's definition of what is considered a rural area. Flyers have been distributed throughout seven locations in the Mountain West region. Three of the areas are metro areas since they have populations of 50,000 or more people. These locations would be considered small urban compared to large urban areas with populations of over 200,000 people. Three additional areas are micro areas and would be considered rural because their populations are between 10,000 and 49,000 people. The final location is an area outside the metro and micro area, which makes this area rural.

There is also a lack in the literature on how standpoint and intersectional theories apply to sexual assault disclosures. Allowing survivors to provide their "standpoints" through narratives will shed perspectives on their views of the world based on their personal experiences of disclosing to others; survivors are providing subjective knowledge on their experiences of disclosing (Smith 1987; 1992; 2005). Intersecting social categorizations such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, disability, rurality, and religion may shape disclosure experiences. Analyzing how social and cultural identities overlap with one another and shape

experiences may ultimately shed light on societal power structures (Knudsen 2006; Collins 1998).

### *Narrative Analysis as a Method in Trauma Research*

The narrative analysis method has been used in various studies involving sexual violence disclosures such as sexual assault and sexual abuse to describe experiences (Heath et al. 2011; Gallagher et al. 2019; Yuen, Billings, and Morant 2019; Delap 2018; Fornari et al. 2018). This method is appropriate to grasp an individual's positive or negative experiences during the disclosure pathway. The individual's narrative provides details on another's behaviors and how those behaviors make that individual feel. The *story* of an individual is an effective way to describe one's experiences. Individuals can express their experiences through *storytelling* by laying out their perspectives; they lead the dialogue and choose what they feel is essential to discuss (Yuen et al. 2019). A story is a method of "personal" and "social" development; it is a way for an individual to provide "quality education" about their experiences for someone else (Clandinin and Connelly 1989:2).

When an individual delivers a narrative, their description of feelings, senses, behaviors, and attitudes allow us to establish their worldviews. The interviewees have the freedom to "lead the narration, and decide what they prioritize when recounting their journeys" (Yuen et al. 2019:3). Allowing the individual to lead a dialogue recounting their experiences leads to richer data. A narrative analysis will allow me to delve into the lived experiences and stories of the participants who have experienced positive interactions, victim blaming, and secondary victimization while disclosing sexual assault.

*Risk of re-traumatization and ways to minimize risk in trauma research.* Although trauma research on sensitive topics is essential to study and understand, there are potential risks of participants experiencing re-traumatization. Participants are going to be sharing narratives about their personal experiences. Therefore, there is the risk of participants experiencing emotional distress and “unnecessary or unwarranted harm” while participating in a study that focuses on a trauma subject such as sexual assault disclosures (Griffin et al. 2003; Campbell et al. 2010; Corbin and Morse 2003; Lawyer, Holcomb, and Příhodová 2021:1; Draucker 1999). Although participants might have positive disclosure experiences, there is also the possibility of having negative experiences such as victim blaming or secondary victimization. Discussing a disclosure experience may risk reminding the participant of the sexual assault itself. Such experiences could initiate “powerful emotions” in participants since these experiences are sensitive (Corbin and Morse 2003). However, past studies have indicated that most participants involved in trauma research expressed positive experiences overall. These participants rated higher on personal benefits than on negative emotional distress (Griffin et al. 2003; Deprince and Chu 2008; Lawyer et al. 2021). Some examples of these positive experiences include: “catharsis, self-acknowledgment (validation of self-worth), a sense of purpose (helping others), self-awareness, empowerment, healing, and being heard” (Draucker 1999:162). In addition, interviews will allow participants to gain reflection, perspectives, and grasp an understanding of their “worlds” (Deprince and Chu 2008:45).

It was possible to minimize the risk of re-traumatization among participants. First, the recruitment flyer clearly stated the content of the study so that participants could make an informed decision to participate in the study. Avoiding “deceptive” or “vague” language in

research recruitment limited the potential for feelings of research betrayal (Campbell, Goodman-Williams, and Javorka 2019: 4769-4770). Second, the consent document was clearly written in lay language. I read the consent document to the participant, and they were given time to consider the contents. I emphasized that the participant had the option to stop the interview at any time, withdraw from the study, or omit certain elements from the interview. The goal was to enable the participant to exercise control over the information that they were sharing. During the interview, I used active listening techniques to build an atmosphere of “safety, respect, and acceptance” (Campbell et al. 2019: 4769-4770). The interview questionnaire was developed to avoid intrusive questions, such as those seeking details of the sexual assault itself, in order to limit the risk of triggering symptoms of trauma. At the end of the interview, I debriefed the participant to ensure that they were not in distress. I provided local low-cost and no-cost counseling resources and hotlines to participants to help with any emotional distress.

### *Standpoint and Intersectionality Theoretical Frameworks*

When a sexual assault survivor interacts with friends, family members, or community service providers, it involves engagement and communication, including body language, attitudes, words, tone of voice, and demeanor. A narrative—a story—will be molded from the memories of the survivor. Emotions, trauma, ideals, opinions, and attitudes are involved when survivors construct these narratives of their lived experiences. Feminist standpoint and intersectional theories can aid in contextualizing the sexual assault survivors’ lived experiences – positive interactions, victim blaming, secondary victimization– and what these interactions with others look like following a sexual assault.

*Standpoint theory.* Dorothy Smith is known for her theoretical approach to women's experiences in a male-dominated society (Smith 1987; 1992; 2005). Although Smith focuses on women's lived experiences, her theoretical approach of standpoint analysis can be applied to a diverse population of sexual assault survivors. Women are going to experience disclosure interactions differently than men. LGBTQ individuals are also going to have different experiences. Therefore, Smith's standpoint theory can be applied when exploring the different perspectives of survivors regarding their experiences of disclosing their sexual assaults. The concept of *standpoint* accentuates that an individual's knowledge is shaped by where that individual "stands in society" based on their experiences (Appelrouth and Edles 2016:376). To develop a standpoint on world views and the "other" (social groups), individuals would have to experience the world by themselves. Individuals' standpoints on the world and society stem from their ability to link everyday life to how social institutions shape that everyday life (Smith 1997; Appelrouth and Edles 2016). Smith argues that it is impossible to possess absolute objective knowledge of world views. Personal experiences shape an individual's perspective of the world, experiences of social structures, and everyday life; therefore, a person's standpoint is based on subjective knowledge (Smith 1992; Appelrouth and Edles 2016). Experience is a "method of talk" that revolves around social relations and the discourses in social relations (Smith 1997:394).

According to Smith, standpoint theory can be used as a method of inquiry to explore how social relations and the powers infused in the social structures of society play a role "beyond the scope of direct experience" (Smith 1992:89). In other words, the survivors of sexual assault in this study provide their experiences of disclosing and their subjective knowledge of their

worldviews. Smith expresses that “inquiry is directed towards exploring and explicating what she does not know – the social relations and organization pervading her world but invisible in it” (Smith 1992:91). These “standpoints” from the survivors could shed light on the invisible mechanisms of how power and social norms are silently playing in the background shaping their experiences. Smith emphasizes that we explored “our experiences as women with other women – not that we necessarily agreed or shared our experiences” (Smith 1992:89). This indicates that survivors of sexual assault can explore their experiences as survivors with other survivors, not necessarily agreeing or having shared experiences. This can allow us to ponder the various inquiries based on the unique experiences of survivors of sexual assault.

Standpoint theory is utilized in this research to explore the different disclosure experiences among survivors of sexual assault. Smith (1992:90) argues that “the standpoint of women situates inquiry in the actualities of people’s living, beginning with their experience of living, and understands that inquiry and its product are in and of the same actuality.” In other words, the knowledge of someone’s lived experience is needed to understand a phenomenon and inquire about it. Standpoint theory is an effective theoretical framework for studying disclosure experiences. To grasp someone’s lived experience allows them to tell it in their own words. This study is focused on the perspectives of survivors, where they “stand” in their worldviews based on their experiences, and allows us to begin to inquire how the social structure, social relations, and social institutions shape their experiences. This study requires rich data with significant detail that would be difficult to obtain in a survey. Narratives are limitless, and survivors will be able to openly express their lived experiences by disclosing their trauma to others. The same patterns and themes emerged in this study; however, each narrative will have different aspects

that will make it unique. Elements of positive interactions, victim blaming, and secondary victimization were analyzed in relation to the views of the respondents based on their experiences.

*Intersectionality theory.* Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks are known for developing intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 2017; Collins 1998; hooks 1984). This theory initially focused on the experiences of Black women to determine how race and gender intersect with one another and create an interwoven experience of oppression. However, this theory has expanded throughout literature as a foundation for understanding how one's social identities, such as gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, intersect with one another. The patriarchal societal structure impacts both women and men, especially as it relates to sexual assault. Women are slut shamed, and men are chastised for lack of masculinity. Intersectionality is used to shed light on the ways that differing standpoints are shaped by overlapping social categorizations such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, disability, rurality, and religion.

The term *intersectionality* refers to “a theory to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine,” such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, rurality, and religion (Knudsen 2006:61; Gopaldas 2013; Meyer 2012; Egner 2018; Monroe 2010; California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020; Nagel et al. 2005; Heath and Sperry 2019). These social categories intersect with an individual's experiences of social inequality and oppression by societal power structures (Collins 1998). Intersecting social identities are what makes an individual's experience unique. Individuals with overlapping social identities can experience interconnected social systems of discrimination and oppression. For

example, a woman will experience discrimination and oppression based on gender. Also, a person of color will experience discrimination and oppression based on race. Therefore, a Black woman will experience both sexism and racism.

Crenshaw argues that the intersectionality theory exposes the “single-axis” thinking in regard to the legal system, disciplinary knowledge, and thinking about social justice (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013: 787). The “difference and sameness” dynamics involved with intersecting social categorizations play a role in the context of anti-discrimination and social justice movements. Intersectionality can also be used as a theoretical method to explore the layers of society, from the individual to the institutional (Cho et al. 2013:787). This theory stemmed from analyzing and critiquing the civil rights movement and the broader feminist movement. It is the response to the needs of women of color; however, intersectionality can be used to address other marginalized groups and the dynamics of social power (Cho et al. 2013).

Collins argues that the matrix of domination is an analytical tool used to examine how intersectionality plays a role in shaping the power dynamics in social institutions. She describes the matrix of domination as “how political domination on the macro-level of analysis is organized via intersecting systems of oppression” (Collins 2017:22). In other words, it is the examination of how power dynamics and relations in society play out by analyzing the intersections of oppression such as gender, race, and social class. To fully understand social problems revolving around sexism, racism, and capitalism, one needs to examine how an individual’s intersecting social identities of gender, race, and social class play a role in these “ism” social problems.



Hooks argues that intersectionality must be included in the definition of feminism. The well-used definition of feminism revolves around the privileges of white, affluent women. These women do not consider how their race and social class influence their social standing compared to women of color who do not meet the same class privileges (hooks 1984). Hooks points out that feminism needs to include all of those who are oppressed, discriminated against, and exploited. The new definition for feminism, according to hooks, should be described as “the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000:ix). She clarifies that this new feminist definition is not focused on being anti-male, but instead directs its focus on sexism being the problem. Hooks notes, “It makes clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (hooks 2000:ix). This indicates that to address social issues such as sexism, we need to examine the intersections of other social identities such as race and social class to grasp how sexism affects certain social groups fully.

Intersectionality can be used to study issues such as poverty, gender and racial discrimination, discrimination on sexuality, discrimination towards those with disabilities, and the influence of rurality and religion. Intersectional feminism is utilized in this research to explore how social identities intersect to shape the experiences of survivors of sexual assault. For instance, a female respondent will have a different standpoint than a male respondent because the intersection of gender, social class, and race/ethnicity will shape these experiences and make them unique. Social categorizations will frame the different standpoints based on different lived experiences and shape how respondents are treated by peers, family, and community service providers.

To examine societal power structures of oppression is to identify social categorizations of an individual. The goal is to pinpoint how these social identities “intersect” with one another to create overlapping oppression. Regarding sexual assault disclosures intersecting social categories do play a role in their experiences in disclosing. Survivors may face certain stigmas toward their sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and disabilities. They may also face negative social attitudes from their small community and those with religious beliefs.

A survivor’s sexuality may play a role in negative experiences when disclosing to law enforcement. According to a study, gay and bisexual male survivors who reported their assault to the criminal justice officials would experience a negative response; the police would rationalize or dismiss the assault. The officers would also make the survivors recount the assault several times and did not follow up on their cases (Jackson et al. 2017).

A survivor’s identified race/ethnicity and gender may also play a role in negative responses from community service providers such as social workers and law enforcement. For example, a person of color may be seen as less credible and have a higher chance of experiencing secondary victimization than a white individual. At the same time, female survivors were blamed harshly for walking alone in a park, which was seen as “unwise” behavior based on gender roles. These social intersections can influence secondary victimization from criminal justice officials (Mulder and Winkel 1996; Hunter 2019).

In addition, social class, disabilities, rurality of a community, and fundamental religious beliefs may influence negative attitudes from community service providers toward survivors. Survivors of lower SES can face higher barriers in the legal system pertaining to secondary

victimization than those of higher SES (Spencer 2016). Survivors of crime who have mild intellectual disabilities and experience sexual assault were vulnerable to secondary victimization in the legal system. Survivors would also face barriers to accessing resources and support (Spaan and Kaal 2019). Survivors from rural areas are faced with a lack of resources and negative social attitudes towards sexual assault (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020). Survivors from religious environments can also face negative social attitudes (Heath and Sperry 2019; Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017). This study examines how social categories intersect and influence survivors' disclosure experiences.

## METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This exploratory and descriptive study utilized a qualitative design to collect and analyze data. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived, subjective experiences of the disclosed participants. The narrative analysis method was used to allow the researcher to analyze the story of a participant deeply. Participants' narratives can shed light on their struggles, their perspectives on the social world, and their views on social problems and how it affects their lives (Presser 2008; Smith 2017). Stories elicit the *meanings* that an individual attributes to their experiences, and *meanings* can potentially explain social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals who have lived through it (Presser 2008; Franzosi 1998; Sandberg 2016). I also used standpoint theory and intersectionality theory as frameworks to guide my study.

Data consists of interviews with eight participants. Out of the eight participants, seven identified as female, and one identified as male. All participants identified as white. Three

participants are in their thirties and forties, while the remaining five participants are in their twenties.

Participants were recruited from a Mountain West state. I posted recruiting flyers at sexual assault crisis centers, victim's advocate centers, mental health facilities, and a university campus in the Mountain West region. Flyers were also posted in other locations, such as community centers and community bulletin boards. The flyer asked for volunteers to participate in a study focusing on the disclosure experiences of those who had disclosed informally (to a friend or family member) or formally (to a police officer, medical professional, or social service provider). Exclusion criteria for those who could not participate included participants under 18 and sexual assault cases that were under investigation or in active court proceedings. I included my contact information using a separate email address so that participants could directly reach out to me to set up a confidential interview. I also used a burner cellphone for scheduling interviews and for conducting any interviews over the phone to ensure confidentiality for the participants. Email conversations and phone contacts were deleted after the interview, and I labeled the participant with a pseudonym. I secured audio and transcribed data in an encrypted flash drive.

The interview setting was in a private office space, and participants had the choice to bring someone else into the room with them for support if they wished. Participants had the option of having the interview in-person, over a password-protected Zoom meeting, or by phone. They were also provided with contacts for local low-cost and free service providers. The limitation of using the convenience sampling approach was the lack of racial and social class diversity in the Mountain West region in which the study took place. The racial identities of the

participants are white, which limits the analysis of the intersection of race/ethnicity. Early in the study, I initially asked participants about their socioeconomic status. However, I observed that this particular question made the participants feel hesitant and uncomfortable, which limited the ability to access information. The same responses occurred with the disability and sexuality questions. Since my focus was on the participants' narratives, I felt like directly asking demographic questions hindered the interviews based on the initial responses of discomfort. Because of the initial reactions to the demographic questions early in the study, I omitted them from the interview guide and replaced these questions with a question that allowed participants to think about how their social identities influenced their experiences. I included two separate questions that focused on the role played by rurality and religious views. Therefore, the analysis only focused on what the participant viewed as salient in their narratives. The theoretical frameworks played a role in the structure of the interview guide questions as well.

Interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. All interview audio recordings, notes, and transcripts were kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used to ensure that confidentiality was kept for all participants. An informed consent form was presented to each participant to inform them about the risks and benefits of participating in the study. A waiver of written consent was obtained for the study to ensure that participants would not be connected to the study due to the sensitive nature of sexual assault disclosures. I obtained permission to record the interview from each participant. Participants were informed that the recording would be destroyed after the transcriptions were complete. Before the interviews, I informed the participants that the interview was entirely voluntary, and they could stop anytime during the interview for any reason or no reason. Participants were also told that they had the right to

withdraw their consent for me to use the recording of our conversation, even if they had given me permission previously. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study altogether. I thanked all participants before and after the interview. At the end of the interview, I provided the participant with contacts for counseling services.

The interview guide consisted of a semi-structured questionnaire pertaining to the survivors' personal disclosure experiences and intersectionality elements. Questions regarding disclosure interactions included several open-ended questions focusing on experiences with informal and formal disclosures. The intersectionality aspect included a question on how their social identities influenced their experiences, as well as questions about rurality and religious views.

I used the Otter.ai software to transcribe interviews. I compared transcriptions with recordings and edited them to ensure accuracy. I manually coded the interviews using the in-vivo and open coding methods to reveal themes and patterns connected to theory. These themes and patterns entailed either positive or negative treatments from those to whom the survivor disclosed following the assault. I utilized Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory and the intersectionality theory—developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks — to guide the explanation of my findings.

Interpretations of the data are, to some extent, subject to bias. To mitigate the effects of bias during interpreting data, I used the triangulation method to verify my results. The triangulation method is an approach to test the validity of findings in a research study. I applied two approaches to verify my findings: investigator triangulation and theory triangulation (Carter et al. 2014; Wilson 2014). Investigator triangulation involves using at least another investigator

to analyze the data and draw conclusions; this allows me to compare interpretations of the data. I utilized this technique by collaborating with another scholar with a background in victimization studies, in which I was able to compare interpretations of the data. I was able to examine the data from various angles and perspectives to depict a rich description of disclosure experiences. Theory triangulation is when I use theory to interpret the data; this allows me to expand my perspective for knowledge (Carter et al. 2014; Wilson 2014). I utilized this technique by interpreting the data through the lens of the standpoint and intersectionality theoretical frameworks.

I also used analytical memos to maintain transparency of interpretation and to acknowledge my biases during the data analysis process. Analytical memos allow the researcher to organize thoughts and structure codes in order to get a clear understanding of the data (Snyder 2012; Gibbs 2018; Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008; Noble and Mitchell 2016). I utilized this technique by creating a memo document for each narrative to organize and structure out in-vivo and open codes. I then organized these codes from each narrative into a master memo document where I could visually establish patterns across the narratives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants provided rich narratives of their thought processes surrounding sexual assault and disclosure. Each participant tells a different yet impactful story that entails their “lived experiences.” I will provide a brief vignette of each survivor to provide a vision of who these participants are. Each participant is labeled with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and respect for their privacy. To truly understand their perspectives and experiences, we need to view them as “human” and not “numerical.” I will discuss the themes that emerged from these

narratives and demonstrate how the standpoint and intersectional theoretical frameworks ground their experiences.

Participants' narratives can be tied back to the standpoint and intersectional theoretical frameworks. Each participant gave their intimate perspectives on how the structure of society functioned in regard to sexual victimization. Each person also shared how intersectional elements influenced their experiences of disclosing. Many of the "stances" are focused on societal expectations surrounding gender and religion, the patriarchal society, the taboo on sex and sexual assault, rape myths and consent, and the broken criminal justice system regarding responses to sexual assault. These stances are all influenced by each participant's unique experience of disclosing their trauma and how these experiences stem to their worldviews on sexual assault. When a survivor of sexual violence receives a poor response or revictimization from disclosing, they will reflect and think critically on *why* they got the response they did. The intersections that influenced each participant's disclosure experience included gender, religion, the small community/rurality, social class, and perceived sexuality.

Although the flyer was recruiting individuals who had experienced any form of sexual assault, I was not expecting to encounter several cases of sexual abuse or sexual assault by offenders who were also minors when the offense was committed. Six out of eight of the participants fell victim to sexual abuse or experiences of sexual assault as a minor by another minor offender. These accounts only opened the door for further research on sexual assault/sexual abuse toward minors.



## Vignettes

### *Lilly*

Lilly is a white female in her thirties who was sexually abused as a minor by her father. She disclosed the abuse to her mother around age twelve. During basic training, Lilly was also sexually assaulted in the army by another soldier. She disclosed this to her drill sergeant not long after the assault. Lilly experienced negative interactions that involved victim blaming from her mother and secondary victimization from her drill sergeant during her disclosures.

### *Ella*

Ella is a middle-aged white female whose former abusive boyfriend sexually assaulted her during college. Ella was extremely depressed after the assault to the point that her parents noticed that there was something wrong, in which they had her see a child psychologist. She was forced to disclose the sexual assault to the child psychologist and experienced a negative interaction that involved secondary victimization. Several years after her encounter with the child psychologist, she disclosed to her sister. After this disclosure, Ella found support.

### *Tina*

Tina is a white female in her 20s who was sexually assaulted as a minor by a family member who was also a minor. She disclosed the assault to her best friend in high school sometime later. Tina had a supportive interaction with her disclosure to her best friend.

### *Royce*

Royce is a white female in her twenties who was sexually abused as a minor by an athletic coach. The abuse lasted approximately a few years. She disclosed this to a close friend a few years after the abuse stopped. The case was under investigation, and she was questioned by law enforcement, but she chose not to make the disclosure due to feeling “terrified.” However, a few years after disclosing to her close friend, she went back to law enforcement and formally disclosed the abuse. The case then went to trial, and she experienced the trial proceedings. Royce experienced both support and secondary victimization/victim blaming from her disclosure pathway.

### *Jackie*

Jackie is a white female in her twenties who was sexually assaulted as a minor by another minor. She disclosed to her mother some weeks after the assault. Jackie found support in disclosing to her mother. She also reported the assault to the school principal to be in a “safe class environment” away from the offender. Her mother encouraged her to see a therapist to help with her trauma. Jackie then disclosed the sexual assault to a therapist who was supportive.

### *Paula*

Paula is a white female in her 20s who was sexually assaulted as a minor by another minor. Her sister noticed a marking on her lower back and told her mother out of concern. Paula was first approached by her mother a few days after; however, she “brushed off” her mother’s inquiry of concern. Sometime later, Paula approached her mother and attempted to disclose; however, the conversation turned emotional and “uncomfortable” for Paula, and she described

the conversation as “not even a conversation.” The only information that her mother gained from the encounter was that Paula was involved in sexual activity. Paula does mention that she was able to disclose to her mother years later after attending therapy and received support and understanding from her mother. Eventually, she disclosed this to her father and initially experienced a negative interaction; however, her father came to an understanding and became supportive as well. Paula also received support from disclosing to her sister and other close loved ones.

### *Kay*

Kay is a white female in her 20s who was sexually assaulted by a former boyfriend. She disclosed this to her co-worker, father, close friends, and other family members. As a result, Kay experienced a negative interaction with her father; however, despite her feelings of hurt from his response, she states that he is a “very loving father.” Kay also experienced support from disclosing to her co-worker, friends, and other family members.

### *Ben*

Ben is a white male in his 40s who was sexually abused as a child by a coach. He disclosed the abuse to his wife and close friends after several years. He received therapy and found it to be supportive. He also expressed that his close friends were supportive. Ben experienced a negative interaction with his wife; however, despite his negative feelings from her response, he expresses some level of understanding as to why she reacted the way she did. Ben’s wife later came to a better understanding of his trauma and became extremely supportive. He even states, “we’ve gotten really close through the process.”

### Emerging Themes Across Narratives

Eight survivors of sexual assault opened up to me about their disclosure experiences. Each conversation sheds light on what parts of the experience were salient to them. Out of these conversations, four themes emerged across the narratives: disclosure reasons, revictimization, shame and self-blame, and supportive interactions. Each theme provides an in-depth glimpse into what shapes the disclosing experience.

#### *Disclosure Reasons*

Disclosing any form of sexual violence is an emotional and personal decision for the survivor. There are several factors that shape why and when a survivor discloses their sexual assault/abuse informally and/or formally.

A victim of sexual abuse might decide to disclose because they want the abuse to cease, and they wish to receive protection/support from those with authoritative roles, such as in Lilly's case with her mother and drill sergeant. She disclosed to her mother that her father was sexually abusing her, and she "wanted it to stop." Lilly claimed that she knew that her father would revictimize her and that it "would keep happening." Therefore, Lily described feeling brave when she told her mother and hoping that her mother would protect her. However, that was not the case as her mother victim blamed her. Survivors are more likely to receive support during informal disclosures than when making formal disclosures. (Kirkner et al. 2018; Ullman and Filipas 2001). A parent's role is to protect a child from harm; however, Lilly experienced victim blaming attitudes from her mother instead.

As for Lilly's sexual assault during basic training in the army, she states that "they tell you that these are your brothers, this is your people," which gives a sense of false security. Cohesion and loyalty are valued in the military, which means that soldiers have to rely on and support one another (Holland, Rabelo, and Cortina 2016; Wood and Toppelberg 2017). Since military members preached loyalty among their "brothers," Lilly hoped that she would be taken seriously when a "brother" soldier sexually assaulted her. Lilly initially believed she would receive support in both trauma occurrences, which played a role in her decision to disclose.

A victim of sexual assault might not want to disclose to anyone. However, loved ones might step in regardless of the victim's personal choice to disclose. Ella's case illustrates this circumstance. Ella became depressed soon after the assault, which prompted concern from her parents:

Well, I didn't disclose to anybody. I just, I got really, really depressed and kept it inside of me for a long, long time. And my parents didn't know what was wrong. So, they sent me to a child psychologist. (Ella)

Disclosing to the therapist was not a choice, but her parents insisted that she should see somebody because, according to Ella, "my parents loved me." Despite her parents' good intentions, Ella endured more damage during the interaction with this particular therapist than anticipated. There is a significant amount of research on the impacts that occur after informal disclosures (such as with loved ones); however, a situation like Ella's case should be examined further. Questions such as what impact does it have on a survivor when loved ones step in and make decisions for the survivor, regardless of good intentions?

A survivor of sexual assault might feel safe to disclose to a close friend because there is already a sense of trust between them, especially if both the survivor and the close friend have experienced similar events. In Tina's case, her best friend had experienced a similar situation, which made Tina feel safer as she decided to disclose it. Tina claimed that she was "relating" to her best friend's trauma during their conversation:

Well, she's... she experienced similar things, so I wasn't like super afraid to bring it up [...] we were talking about probably similar situations that have happened to her, and I was relating (Tina).

Some survivors choose to disclose to those with whom they have a personal and emotional bond. Sometimes other support systems lack the familiarity and confidentiality that the survivor prefers; sometimes, all the survivor wants is emotional support (Holland and Cortina 2017; Ahrens et al. 2007).

Tina also shared her reason for choosing not to disclose the assault to her family. According to Tina, her family's religious beliefs include "convoluted" views on sexual assault, and she did not want to gamble with their response:

Um, in terms of why I didn't tell family and why I still haven't ... Because I feel like religious views, specifically being my family is a big part of the Mormon community. They have convoluted ideas about sexual assault. And it could go either way. So, I just did not discover which way I wanted to go. You know? [...] the views of no sex before marriage. And if you do that, like you're going to hell and all that nonsense, so just disclose in any form of sexual assault to something like that could be difficult because of

how it could be viewed. I think that perception comes with a lot of negativity towards any form of sexual activity, be it consensual or not. (Tina)

Religious beliefs can play a role in a survivor's decision to not disclose to certain individuals, such as family members in Tina's case. Fundamental religious beliefs can contribute to victim blaming attitudes toward a survivor of sexual assault. These attitudes perpetuate societal norms involving patriarchal attitudes, strict gender roles, and sexist attitudes (Nagel et al. 2005; Heath and Sperry 2019). There are associations between fundamental religious beliefs and acceptance of rape myths, as well as social conformity which can influence the normalization of patriarchal gender norms (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017; Miller 2018). Tina did not want to gamble on her family's response since they are heavily religious and have "convoluted" views on sexual assault.

A survivor of sexual victimization may feel the need to disclose informally about their trauma to someone else as a way to cope with their traumatic experience. Royce described, "there was a moment of like, I need to get this off my chest," which led her to first disclose her sexual abuse to a close friend. If the survivor realizes that there are other victims from the same offender that may share the same experiences and if those victims are acquaintances/friends, then it may influence the survivor to come forward and disclose formally. Royce's case is an example of shifting between both disclosure pathways. She felt the need to open up to someone about the sexual abuse. She later came forward to make a formal disclosure because she realized there were other victims like herself.

Royce was initially approached by law enforcement involving the criminal investigation of the sexual abuse; however, she claimed that she felt "terrified" and did not disclose the abuse

during her first encounter with police. Royce expressed that the second encounter with police occurred because she felt the need to go back and formally disclose to law enforcement when she realized that she was not the only victim of the same offender and that other victims shared the same experiences. According to Royce, because the same abuse happened to somebody else (who was also her friend), she claimed it “really pushed me to then disclose to law enforcement.” She describes a righteous feeling of “needing to help somebody,” which weighed on her decision to disclose. She also emphasized that she had to feel “ready” to disclose and if she did not feel ready, she would have potentially “backed out” of disclosing formally. There is literature on the decision to disclose based on survivors’ desire to share their stories, such as the #MeToo Movement. However, there is a lack of literature revolving around victims deciding to disclose based on the simple knowledge that there are other survivors from the same offender that may share the same experiences. Royce did not disclose to the police because other survivors before her disclosed. She disclosed because there were other victims like her. This can be an important distinction to offer the literature.

Survivors might also disclose because they experience triggering symptoms of their trauma, as in the cases of Jackie, Kay, and Ben. Following a sexual assault by another student, Jackie was feeling “scared” at school to the point that it was impeding daily activities. She felt like she needed help instead of “hiding it longer.” This led to her disclosing to her mother and later to the school principal and her therapist:

So ever since then. I was like, really, really jumpy anywhere I go. I wouldn’t eat lunch alone. I always have to have somebody with me. And I was scared to walk, like go anywhere alone for a very long time. (Jackie)



Kay was experiencing PTSD from the assault and “couldn’t figure out why” she was experiencing these triggers. She eventually disclosed to a co-worker who helped her realize that her former boyfriend sexually assaulted her since “no one talks about it being your boyfriend or loved one” who can sexually assault an individual. Kay claimed that “sometimes I would just start breaking down, and I needed to talk to someone,” which led her to disclose to close friends and others she trusted to receive support. She mentioned that it is easier for others to understand why sometimes she “just kind of get squirrely or just break down.” Ben disclosed to his wife that he was experiencing “emotional trauma” from moving back to the same location where the abuse occurred. He became depressed and suicidal, which prompted him to write his wife a note about his trauma. His wife was concerned, and they planned to talk and for Ben to disclose fully to his wife.

These survivors disclosed to family and friends as a way to help confront their trauma symptoms and, with the exception of Ben, received positive responses. Negative responses have adverse effects on survivors’ trauma symptoms compared to positive responses (Ullman and Filipas 2001). These positive responses did not affect Jackie’s and Kay’s trauma symptoms since each received assistance or emotional support instead of negative attitudes. As for Ben, his informal disclosure included a lack of support rather than support. Even though informal disclosures compared to formal disclosures are typically more positive than negative (Kirkner et al. 2018; Ullman and Filipas 2001).

Survivors may feel uncomfortable or not ready to disclose until they heal from their trauma. For example, Paula attempted to disclose to her mother after her mother had approached her earlier. She knew that her mother was “curious ... [and] that she had said that she suspected

something,” so she decided to try and disclose it to her mother since her mother initially displayed concern. However, the initial disclosure attempt with her mother went awry due to the emotionally charged and “uncomfortable” environment. Paula went back and disclosed the assault to her mother when she felt ready and more healed. Paula states that her father was “oblivious” about her being assaulted, so Paula decided to disclose it to him in college once she started “accepting” her trauma. Her decision to disclose to her sister stemmed from wanting desire to get a second opinion about “what happened” to her and “put a name to it.” Paula expressed that once she started healing from therapy and forming acceptance of her trauma, she felt more able to disclose to her loved ones.

Labeling the traumatic experience is another reason why a survivor might disclose, to figure out what happened to them, to put a label on their sexual assault, such as in Paula’s case. Survivors may struggle to put a label on the assault due to the rape myths surrounding acquaintance and stranger rape and the severity of violence involved. Because of these misconceptions, survivors are more likely to label their experience as “rape” when it involves a violent stranger as opposed to an acquaintance rape (Kahn et al. 2003; Bondurant 2001). This directly reflects to stranger victimization as the stereotypical crime of rape (Drakulich 2015; Pazzani 2007). Since Paula was raped by an acquaintance, this contributed to her desire to know if her experience was “real” rape.

The takeaway from the narratives on decisions to disclose to someone entirely depends on the survivors’ unique circumstances that led them to disclose. An individual might disclose because they want the victimization to cease, and they wish to receive support. Sometimes an individual’s loved ones will try to step in to help regardless of a survivor’s initial choice to

disclose to anyone. When there is a sense of trust between two people, and both have experienced similar events, it is easier to disclose to “relate” and provide support for one another. A disclosure can occur when the survivor feels the need to open up about their trauma and just wants to “have somebody other than myself” to know. The realization that other victims are being abused also plays a role in the choice to disclose. Disclosure can be an emotional and “uncomfortable” endeavor. For many survivors, it may take them time to heal and come to an acceptance of their trauma before they decide to disclose it in the first place. Reaching out to trusted friends and loved ones to disclose can be helpful when one is trying to cope with trauma symptoms and emotional triggers.

### *Revictimization*

Once a survivor of sexual violence discloses to someone, the hoped response is support and understanding. When an individual is sexually assaulted and/or sexually abused, they have already experienced severe trauma. Furthering that trauma with negative responses, such as victim blaming from peers/family and secondary victimization from community service providers, only re-victimizes the survivor. Lilly, Paula, Kay, Ben, Ella, and Royce all experienced revictimization from victim blaming, secondary victimization, or both when they disclosed their assaults.

Disclosing to family members can be a fraught situation in which people can experience revictimization. Lilly was still a child when she disclosed to her mother that her father was sexually abusing her. The expected initial response of a parent when a child is in danger is to provide some sense of protection. Instead, her mother “mocked” her for being a “whore” and shut down Lilly’s disclosure of victimization. Her mother did not simply neglect to do anything

about the victimization. She “refused” to do anything. Lilly’s mother reinterpreted her disclosure as her being ungrateful for her father’s “attention.” This response treats the victimization as unimportant. Years later, when Lilly confronted her mother again about her father’s abuse, her mother gaslighted her, claiming the disclosure “never happened” and that she was “making it up.” Such a response from a parent to a child involving victimization can cause further trauma. Lilly was homeschooled and in an abusive environment as a child, which made it impossible to report to anyone. She mentioned that she was not “aware” that she could report such victimization because she was a child; the only person to disclose it to was her mother:

My mother said that I was a whore trying to steal her husband [...] my mother refused to do anything about it and turned it into something that was my fault that if I didn’t want my father’s attention, I wouldn’t have them and so it was it was my fault. When I brought it up again years later, she said that it never happened that I was making it up, and at this point, my father was in prison for sexual assault. And even then, she wouldn’t make room for the possibility you know that one he had done this and two that it wasn’t my fault. And actually, it was it was more than just being told to shut up, with my mother she mocked me for being a whore and I got a horrible punishment afterwards. (Lilly)

Lilly’s home environment enforced that “girls were definitely second-class citizens,” which played a role in her abuse and how her mother responded to her disclosure. Typically, when one thinks of a second-class citizen, it means that this citizen is less than and does not have the same rights as those in the dominant class. Fundamentalist religious beliefs and gender shaped her disclosure experience negatively. The home was shaped by the notion that boys and men were patriarchs, and they hold the priesthood. The belief was that girls and women were

subservient to them. Her mother argued that if Lilly's father was raping her that it was because she was "coming on to him." Because Lilly was treated like a second-class citizen in her own home, she developed the viewpoint that girls and women are second-class in a patriarchal society:

My mother and my father are very, you know, boys are the patriarch, and girls are the servants that our home was very sex segregated. When it came to work, when it came to privileges when it came to anything. The girls were second class citizens, and the boys were blessed by God. It's very, very fundamentalist views going on there. And I think that's one of the reasons my mother did absolutely nothing when it was me, because I'm a second-class citizen. I mean, she even told me that boys will one day hold the priesthood. And so are allowed to do whatever to girls what they want to do, because there they hold God's priesthood. And so, I was just supposed to take it because, you know, and so if my father was raping me, it was because I was, I was dishonoring his priesthood. I was coming on to him, I was the one who must have been doing something. And it was my fault. (Lilly)

If a victim is viewed as a "second-class citizen" in their own home, it can greatly influence the response from a parent, as in Lilly's case. Rape myths utilize patriarchal attitudes to normalize the acceptance of sexual victimization (Russell and Hand 2017). In Lilly's case, her home held the social norms of patriarchal attitudes, traditional gender roles, and sexist attitudes; which influenced the victim blaming she received and the acceptance that Lilly's sexual abuse was insignificant (Nagel et al. 2005; Heath and Sperry 2019; Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017; Miller 2018). Her mother also fell into the trap of rape myths by treating the sexual abuse as

insignificant and that her father's behavior was acceptable, and that the fault was placed on Lilly if she did not want her father's "attention" (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994).

Sexual activity is stigmatized as taboo, and when rape myths are involved, more blame will be placed on the victim than the perpetrator. This occurred in Paula's case. When Paula felt ready to disclose the sexual assault to her father, she was met with a negative reaction. Paula's father responded with, "I raised you better than that," after she disclosed to him that she was raped. This phrase directly blames the survivor for initiating or playing a role in the assault (Gravelin, Biernat, and Baldwin 2019). As Paula continued to tell me how that particular response made her feel, her tone turned slightly sarcastic as a way to cope with her emotions. Each survivor of sexual victimization will display different emotional responses to their trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014). In Paula's case, she illustrated that the experience was "horrible" by using sarcasm in order to tell me about her experience. Her father's response was unexpected, and her response was her way of expressing her hurt:

I have no idea what I told my dad, I cannot remember what I told him. I remember telling him, though. And his response to me was and I quote "I thought I raised you better than that." And I was like cool, awesome, great. I'm gonna go, I'm not gonna go kill myself. I was like, Okay, great. Well, I hate everything [...] It was horrible. And oh, you know what, actually, I told him when I was in college, because I remember I got super defensive, and I was like that's not how you respond to somebody who's been sexually assaulted." (Paula)

Paula's main reason for not disclosing to law enforcement was that her parents were in the middle of a divorce, and she felt that reporting a rape to the police would be overwhelming. However, she also gave her perspective on reporting sexual assaults to the police and her view on how secondary victimization plays a role. She described the criminal justice system as broken and that it would be hard for the "average" victim to get justice for the "average" rape. The "average" sexual assault refers to the most common form of rape, which is rape by an acquaintance rather than from a stranger, and the rape does not always fit the "violence" criteria. Physically violent rapes do occur; however, not all sexual assault cases fit this description. Due to rape myths and the ideal victim type misconceptions, "average" rapes are not considered "real" rapes:

It just felt like it just felt like an inconvenience, because I thought about everything that it would mean, like everything that we know now about sexual assault reporting. I knew all that stuff. You know, this was in 2016. Like, I knew that nobody ever believed girls. And I knew that if you took your case to trial, you had to have a rape kit, you have to have photos of like physical proof that this person harmed you, you have to have other people saying that this happened, you have to have your own testimony. Like you have to have all these things just like a normal criminal case. It's just like taking somebody else to murder you have to be able to prove that this happened or they're not going to convict him [...] it's almost like another crime has to be attached to it, you know, there has to be a beating or you know, drugging or like something else has to be attached to it in order for just that one part of rape to be considered the crime because all rape is is sex without consent ... when you're unconscious or if he beats you into it or something like

that, you know, it can be in my case when you just froze, and you didn't say anything, and you didn't want it to happen, but it happened anyway. (Paula)

Similar to Paula's and Lilly's case, Kay's experience is another instance of receiving a negative reaction from a parent when disclosing. Kay's father engaged in victim blaming with his response that Kay "didn't fight back," which, according to her father, means the rape was not "real." This response can be related to the context of consent. Many believe that sexual activity is automatically consensual unless someone gives a defensive response, such as fighting off the offender. However, many survivors *freeze* in response to a sexual assault. Kay expresses that since "it was already happening," she just wanted to "get through it" as a way to not further escalate the danger she was already in. When a victim is in a vulnerable position with the perpetrator, a fight response could cause the perpetrator to escalate and cause more severe harm to the victim than what damage has already been inflicted:

Honestly, the only one that hurt was telling my dad because he doesn't want to believe it's real and to this day still doesn't believe it was rape [...] I was too scared to tell him so I put it in a letter and he later talked to me and was like that's not rape if you didn't fight back, because the daughter I know would have fought back. Just a lot of that. He was going on to tell me just make sure you know where to hit if it happens if something like that ever does happen. And the hardest part is when you didn't fight back because you just wanted to get through it. (Kay)

Kay shared some of her views on sexual assault relating to rape myths and reasons for not reporting to the police. She expressed that "no one talks about it being your boyfriend or loved one." This specifically relates to the misconceptions surrounding stranger rape versus the



common form of acquaintance rape. She mentioned that because of the controversy on consent and issues with reporting criteria, she did not feel comfortable reporting to law enforcement. The legality of consent is a grey area and is hard to prove in the criminal justice system, which can involve secondary victimization for the survivor:

By the time I found out it was too late anyways so plus, without it happening, it would have been you are consenting because you were alone with them, the usual BS. (Kay)

Fundamentalist religious beliefs and gender both play a role in shaping Kay's views and her disclosure. According to Kay, "where I grew up, women are expected to be subordinate, do as the husband says, very old Mormonism," which insinuates that a woman is subservient to the man. Kay expressed that sex is treated as a taboo and "it's all about image, not about taking care of you. So, if anything happens, you throw it under the rug and forget about it." Sex, let alone sexual assault, are taboo subjects that can make disclosing more difficult and uncomfortable.

Negative disclosure experiences may include victim blaming attitudes, but even a feeling of lack of support can be revictimizing. Ben's disclosure experience with his wife leans more towards a simple lack of support rather than victim blaming. However, a lack of support for a survivor disclosing a traumatic experience can be just as damaging to the survivor. His wife did not show him the best support during his disclosure to her due to her shock and worry about their children. She went into "protection" mode and only thought about preventing a similar situation from happening to their children. Although his wife had good intentions in reacting this way, she did not provide Ben the support he needed during an emotional moment. He described that there "wasn't a lot of empathy there" and that because "fear" was overtaking the conversation, Because of this, the interaction was not necessarily healing. He expressed that it was "terrifying"

and “really scary” disclosing. When a survivor of sexual abuse/sexual assault discloses to a family member or peer, it is a very personal and emotional decision to do so, and the focus needs to be on the survivor so that they feel heard:

She came up and asked if she could drive up and talk about it, she drove, she came up to a park and [we] just went for a walk and talked about it. And she, it was not the best kind of reaction, I think. She was more worried about, like how we protect our kids from something happening to them, not like from me, but just in general. Like, she was really worried about the kids, and how can we prevent them from getting in a situation like that, and it wasn't really the support I was looking for in the moment, to be honest. So yeah, it didn't go very well [...] I was in the spot where I needed someone to talk to. (Ben)

The majority of the literature focuses on negative responses such as victim blaming and secondary victimization, but what about the negative responses of lack of support or empathy simply because a loved one is not equipped to handle the situation, such as Ben's case? This opens the door to delving into other ways people respond to sexual assault disclosures.

Ben also shared his perspectives on disclosing in general and how the broken healthcare system plays a role in the ability to seek out mental health resources. He expressed that when a survivor of abuse or trauma discloses to someone that the support of another should involve listening and an “I'm here for you” kind of support because confronting your mental health after victimization “really requires specialty” and that nonprofessionals are “not equipped to do that.” In other words, an individual needs to provide moral support to the victim of abuse/sexual assault rather than trying to solve the problem. Ben emphasized that the primary purpose of disclosing should be to heal as a person. A factor that contributed to his decision not to disclose to his

parents the abuse was that his family “were really poor” and that there was a lack of money for resources when he was a child. He mentioned that his parents would have “felt awful” that he was abused, but he claims that they “weren’t equipped to handle it.” Therapeutic resources for victims of victimization are mainly available to those who can afford them. Ben stated that he is currently lucky enough to be able to afford counseling because his insurance does not cover the costs of counseling sessions. Social class influenced his decision not to disclose to his parents due to the family’s lack of finances. It also influenced his ability to receive quality services for his mental health. There is literature that focuses on how financial burdens (such as paying out-of-pocket costs) negatively impact the ability to access and afford quality mental health services. Those with mental health issues face high burdens of affording services, especially in a rural environment (Willging, Salvador, and Kano 2006; Zuvekas and Selden 2010). Mental health services are a resource that should be accessible to everyone, especially if it is helpful for survivors of sexual violence to get one step closer to healing.

Disclosing to authority figures/community service providers can also be an overwhelming situation in which people can experience revictimization. Lilly experienced secondary victimization when she disclosed to her drill sergeant that she was raped by another army soldier. She describes that no investigation came out of the case as they believed the perpetrator over her statement. Her interview was “buried,” and her case was essentially swept under the rug in order to save the image and reputation of the military. This is not the first case of sexual assault in the military; it is one among countless others (Bell, Stein, and Hurley 2017; Castro et al. 2015). The drill sergeant and other military personnel who were involved simply treated the outcry as an inconvenience:

He had to give his huff and gave me this piece of paper and told me to write it down. [...] And then after I wrote it down, maybe about 20 minutes later, they said that they had the guy write down what had happened, and they believed him, and they weren't going to do anything about it. And I needed to stop making the accusations. The investigation was not an investigation. (Lilly)

Lilly was told that reporting would “ruin” her career as an intimidation tactic to intimidate her. Not only was the drill sergeant trying to steer Lilly away from making an official report, he made a victim blaming comment implying that she did not fight back, but instead, she froze. His comment directly relates to rape myths in terms of what is considered “real” rape and an “ideal” victim based on whether the survivor fights back or not:

At first, he said, if it really happened, then I would have kicked him in the testicles, or hurt him in some way, instead of just kind of freezing. [...] that's when the first drill sergeant, the one who told me that I should have just kicked his ass. He told me that if I went forward and said this was a rape, then it would ruin my career. Then he looked almost like he was trying to do me a favor. (Lilly)

Kay encountered a similar situation when her father told her that she did not experience a “real” rape because she did not fight back. Paula did not disclose to law enforcement because of the same misconceptions. However, a lack of resistance or silence does not equal consent (Muehlenhard et al. 2016:459; Shaw 2016; Randall 2011).

Lilly's views surrounding sexual assault based on her experiences are that gender plays a significant role. She expressed that the army is a “man's game” and that simply having the status of a woman automatically subjected her to being raped. He is reinforcing the gender norms that

the military is a “man’s field” and implying that she is treading on that territory, which means she must abide by their masculine rules:

The army is a man’s game. You know, women aren’t really, still aren’t actually very welcome there. So, you know, one thing that my drill sergeant told me was that if I am going to be in the army, I need to expect what comes with taking a job where I’m around a bunch of men, this is the military. So that, you know, just to having the job in the first place, is, you know, in a man’s field, subjected me to being raped, and it was, you know, it was my choice. That’s what I chose. In joining the military, I chose to be raped. (Lilly)

Ella was revictimized by the child psychologist her parents sent her to see. Despite her parents’ good intentions of trying to help their daughter, the encounter with the psychologist was damaging. She described that the psychologist did a “ton of harm in a 30-minute session” and based on the treatment from the service provider, it reinforced the hurt and self-blame emotions that she was already feeling. The psychologist treated Ella “like a sexual predator” once Ella disclosed that she was sexually assaulted. The body language and demeanor of the psychologist were cold and aloof. It lacked empathy and compassion towards a sexual assault survivor who endured a traumatic experience. In addition to the negative disclosure experience with the psychologist, the choice of which service provider to see, let alone the choice to disclose to the provider, was entirely out of Ella’s hands. She was pushed to see someone by her parents, which left Ella with no control over her choices to disclose at all. The obligation of mental health service providers is to guide the survivor toward the process of healing. This only be accomplished if there is a sense of empathy and understanding in the room:

I told the psychologist, I disclosed it to the psychologist. And the psychologist told me that I should never work with children. Because now that I had been sexually assaulted, I was at great risk of sexually assaulting children [...] I got really offended. And I stood up and I said, ‘You don’t know me at all.’ And I walked out of her office, and I never went back. [...] Her body language changed. She stiffened up. She started tapping her pen. Her eyes shifted. She couldn’t get me out of the office fast enough. She just she started treating me like I was a predator [...] her interaction was extremely harmful. It would have been better for me not to go see her at all. It would have been better for me to just go sit in my car and cry and tell nobody. The whole thing “first do no harm than good.” She did a ton of harm in a 30-minute session. (Ella)

Ella experienced secondary victimization at the hands of her psychologist. She experienced less support from a formal disclosure (Ullman and Filipas 2001). The psychologist was supposed to provide professional mental health support to someone who experienced trauma. Instead, Ella was treated as a sexual predator, and the psychologist lacked compassion and professional training to provide services to her. Instead of the psychologist providing support, she deliberately placed blame and was unresponsive toward the victim (Campbell 2005; Ullman and Townsend 2007; Campbell and Raja 1999).

Ella shared what she wanted from the service provider instead of the poor treatment she received. She expressed that she essentially wanted what a mental health service provider is obligated to provide: validation, listening, rebuilding self-esteem, defining healthy relationships, providing resources to aid the survivor, and helping her find her inner strength and power in

herself. If the psychologist was not equipped to provide service to Ella, then a referral to the proper resources should have taken place:

I would have loved to have somebody help me know what a healthy relationship was. I would have loved to have somebody help me find myself find the strength and the power inside of myself. I would have loved to have somebody advocate for me with the school to help me find a different pathway. [...] I was vulnerable. And I was in a situation where I needed somebody to step in. And I didn't have that. And maybe I needed to be directed to a social worker. I had, I mean, nobody told me that social workers worked with anybody other than, like, kids who needed to be removed from their homes. I don't know what I needed. But I certainly didn't get anything besides a kick in the ass. (Ella)

In addition to Ella's views on what she wanted from a mental health service provider, she shared how norms around sex and gender influence responses towards sexual assault and disclosure. Ella claimed that her parents were born in the 1940s, and she grew up in the 1980s. She describes that sex was a taboo subject. Conversations about sex, let alone sexual assault, were uncomfortable subjects; according to Ella, "you don't talk about sex, you don't talk about it." If an individual was sexually assaulted, then the blame would be placed on the victim and "it was your fault." Ella grew up in a Latter Day Saint (LDS) religious environment, which influenced her disclosure experience with the psychologist. At the time of her disclosure, she described that her entire worth as a person depended on her virginity, and because of the assault, her virginity "was gone." The aloof response from the psychologist magnified the self-blame and the degradation of worth in connection to the religious norms surrounding sex and virginity:

Sex is completely closed off. We don't talk about sex, we don't talk about our bodies. We don't talk about bodily functions. I didn't know what, I didn't know any, any. I didn't know very much about sex until I was like 20. And even then, you know, I hardly knew anything about it. Most of my... most of my education came from the internet. And so now, you know, that's ridiculous, but it's true [...] if you got assaulted, then you did something wrong. You were wearing something wrong. You were in the wrong place. It was your fault. [...] When I went in, she was very kind and compassionate. She was open. I was closed off I was aching. I felt dirty. I felt used. I was, I grew up LDS. I felt like my entire worth was in my virginity. And it was gone. So, what else did I have? I didn't have anything left. What, what man would want me? And as soon as I disclosed, her demeanor changed. Suddenly it felt like she felt like I was dirty too. (Ella)

Royce not only experienced secondary victimization from an investigation process, but she endured a trial proceeding related to the sexual abuse case. She shared her story of disclosing to law enforcement and the courts and her experience of victim blaming from members of the community. During her first encounter with law enforcement, she described the detective she spoke with as “aggressive” when it came to questioning her about the case. The same detective conducted the interview during the second encounter. He treated Royce like an adult even though she was still a minor. The mannerisms expressed by the detective contributed to her feelings of revictimization. Intimidating the victim with a “lie detector” and aggressively asking questions are tactics that potentially harm the survivor. In Royce's experience, there was a lack of rapport and training in interviewing a victim of sexual abuse:



But my detective came in. And he explained to me what a lie detector test was and how it works and said, ‘Now, if I hooked you up to a lie detector test right now, is it going to spike? Is it going to show me that you’re lying to me?’ And it was very, like aggressive about it. And I was 12. And he had taken me out of school. So, I’m in middle school, like in the principal’s office. And I’m like, no, no, no, nothing happened. I’m sure that nothing happened. So that was the first time that it had that I had an opportunity to disclose it. But I chose not to. [...] So, when I went to law enforcement the second time, I actually spoke with the same exact detective. And at that point, I’m 16. And I was much more mature and finally ready to talk about it. And so, it was an interesting experience, because he got to say, you know, ‘Why did you lie to me the first time I interviewed you?’ and it was more, it was still conducted as if I was an adult, as if I was like someone saying somebody stole my car. Like, it was interesting, but it was easy for me, I think because I individually was in the place to do it. (Royce)

Royce described that it was hard to prepare victims of sexual abuse to “have to walk through their abuse” and be “completely revictimized” during a trial proceeding. It may be hard to come forward to disclose, but according to Royce, it is harder to prepare for trial. She mentioned that during the trial, she experienced harsh reactions from members of the community and the court proceedings. The defense attorney tried to tear her to pieces as a credible victim in cross-examination. The attorney asked questions that implied that Royce “liked it” and that the victimization was somehow consensual (even though the victimization was towards a minor). Her physiological response to the sexual abuse was essentially used as a no rape case, which brings us back to the discussion on what is viewed as an “ideal victim.” Even though Royce

experienced a physiological response (which she had no control over), this was used against her in trial to imply that she consented to her victimization. Discrediting a victim during trial typically involves victim blaming questions during the trial to mitigate the actions of the offender:

Her attorney was horrible and as a victim it's, it's frustrating that you're I think so I am all for raising awareness on sexual assault and I want to advocate for victims to come forward because I think it's a hard decision to do but it's also hard when you have to prepare them for a trial where they are going to be completely revictimized to have to walk through their abuse and then if they're cross examined also be torn to pieces as a credible victim so as a credible person at all so I think it's the harshest and worst reactions I got were definitely during the trial. [...] But then when I went to testify, I was on the stand the person and for two hours over two hours. And the defense attorney was allowed to ask me anything and the judge would object. But the question still got out there. So even though the judge objects, you're still being objected to the question. And so he asked me a range of things like did I orgasm? Did I like it? Was I in love with her? Did I like what they're doing to satisfy? [...] there were a range of questions that ... the ones that weren't relevant to me, were really upsetting because I know, there ... any form of sexual abuse can feel good. Our bodies have physiological responses to anything. So, there's a range of responses during sex. There are even women who orgasm being forcefully raped. And that's not at all, that doesn't play into whether or not they were raped, whether or not they wanted it. (Royce)

Sexual arousal is treated differently between genders; essentially, if a man is sexually aroused, then “it’s not his fault,” but if she was aroused, then that “discredits” her as a victim. This reflects the ideal victim type in which she was discredited as a “real” victim on the stand. The defense attorney was trying to show the jury that Royce was not an “ideal” sexual abuse victim by trying to point out that she consented and played a role in the abuse (even though she was still a minor). One of the criteria of an ideal victim type is that the offender and survivor had no personal relationship with one another. Any deviance from this and the survivor is no longer an ideal victim (Karmen 2018). The defense attorney highlighted that Royce was having a consensual relationship with her abuser if she displayed any form of sexual arousal. This was also a form of secondary victimization in the criminal justice system where blame was placed on the victim by the professional sector (Campbell 2005; Ullman and Townsend 2007; Campbell and Raja 1999). Although Royce did experience support from close friends, family, and criminal justice personnel, she claimed that there are “awful” people in the justice system, which makes disclosing “like a gambling game.”

Community backlash was focused on Royce during the trial proceedings. There was pressure to make the case go away from the very start once the case became widely known. There were instances of victims being pressured not to disclose the sexual abuse committed by the same offender to the police, which caused other victims to back out from testifying. The environment of a tight-knit community with a religious background played a role in explaining why victims would back out. Since the offender was a female and the victims were also female, this led to the stigma of being labeled as gay in the eyes of the community. Royce noted that she was hesitant to disclose formally because at the time, she did not want to face the community

stigma of being labeled as gay. This stigmatizing view was seen as scandalous, which weighed more heavily by community members than the wrongdoing of sexual abuse:

When it comes to sexual identity, I think that I didn't... I was also dissuaded, like, I felt like I shouldn't come forward, because there's also the connotation of if I say that this happened, then I also have to admit that this was with a woman and I, very much at the time, didn't want to be seen as gay, throughout the trial, and later in my life, because it went on for, like two years. (Royce)

Since the offender was a female and she was also female, there is the stigma of being labeled as gay in the eyes of the small, religious community. Acquaintance density—the “average proportion of the people in a community known by the community’s inhabitants (Wodahl 2006:34)—plays a role in the community stigma Royce endures during the trial. When one discloses formally in a small community, there is a lack of confidentiality and anonymity. This is due to the lack of “social privacy” within a tight-knit community with a high level of acquaintance density (Lewis 2003; Wodahl 2006). Her community held strong religious beliefs on traditional gender norms, and her perceived sexuality weighed heavier than her sexual abuse. The community focused heavily on her perceived sexuality status rather than drawing their focus primarily on the actions of the offender. Those with strong fundamentalist religious beliefs may engage in victim blaming behaviors by focusing on the characteristics of the victim rather than the perpetrator and endorse patriarchal gender norms (Miller 2018; Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017).

In addition, most of the community members who victim blamed Royce during the trial and in the courtroom were “friends with the offender.” Royce illustrated that the offender’s

entire family and friends were present in the courtroom and behaved in ways to shame, blame, and humiliate her:

She had an entire group of people there who laughed when I walked in and snickered.

And it was very ... I don't want to say intimidating because I wasn't scared of them, but it was just very hurtful. In a court setting to have an entire room full of people make you feel like it's a joke or make you feel like, wow, like all of these people intentionally are here to make me feel badly about coming forward. (Royce)

These accounts of victim blaming and secondary victimization illustrate how harmful the impact can be. Because of the social norms, rape myths, and misconceptions surrounding sexual assault it can create a “gambling” or “hit or miss” disclosure experience. When a survivor of sexual violence decides to disclose informally or formally, they are “gambling” on what response they will receive. Will the response be supportive and reassuring? Or will it be negative and riddled with a lack of support and blame?

### *Shame and Self-blame*

Emotions of shame and self-blame may emerge after an individual endures sexual victimization. When one feels ashamed, unworthy, dirty, or unclean, these are the emotions of shame. When one feels like the traumatic event was their fault and they place blame on their actions, these are attributes of self-blame. Lilly, Ella, Jackie, Paula, Kay, and Ben shared their narratives of how they engaged in shame and self-blame.

Lilly described that she internalized that perhaps she was “asking for it” during both traumatic events. She blamed herself for being sexually abused by her father and sexually

assaulted in the army. She noted that if both her disclosures had been taken seriously at the time, she would have been able to understand that both incidents were not her fault. The negative response from her mother and the army only reinforced these feelings of self-blame:

And I really did that myself for a while, I thought that, in my childhood when I thought that that you know, maybe I was asking for it myself, maybe there was something that I was doing maybe it was you know ... I really did internalize that a whole lot. And you know, I think that continued, that feeling continued in the second one too [...] if somebody's taking me seriously or stood by me, I might have been able to really understand that it wasn't my fault. But because of the way that it was handled in those situations, it led me to really think that this situation was both my fault and that I was making something out of nothing. It was this underlying feeling of shame that I didn't feel at first but then I started feeling because there was so much shame on me for that.  
(Lilly)

Ella expressed that she was “too ashamed” to disclose to people that she was sexually assaulted by her abusive former boyfriend (aside from her disclosure to the psychologist her parents pushed her to see). The stigma surrounding sex and sexual assault in the '80s and her being raised in a religious environment contributed to her feeling “dirty, less than, unclean.” She illustrates that these feelings “gnaw at you” over time until she felt like nothing was left but “dust.” Her disclosure to the psychologist reinforced these feelings of self-blame:

I was too ashamed to tell people. [...] Somehow, it made you dirty. It made you unclean. It made you less than. So, you did your best to hide it. Problem is that when you hide something like that, it eats at your soul. And when you're trying to push it away, it just

gnaws at you. And it's incredibly hard to get over it. She completely reinforced all of the hurt, and fear and anguish that I was feeling. Because I was already blaming myself. I was already thinking that I was worthless, and trash. [...] Because for me, you know, this kind of thing, when you're in a situation like that, you get torn down, and it's like a crucible, you get, you get ground down over time until there's nothing left but dust.

(Ella)

Jackie expressed that she felt “ashamed” that the sexual assault happened to her, and she was initially terrified to disclose it to anyone for fear of their reaction. She rehearsed several times before finally disclosing to her mother:

So after, I was absolutely terrified to talk to anybody about it, I had no idea how they were going to take it, I was ashamed that it happened to me. And so, it took me a solid few weeks and a few times of the same person doing it over and over for me to finally break down and talk to my mom about it. (Jackie)

Paula described that she felt “dirty” and “ashamed.” That she felt like a “horrible person” and a “whore” after the assault, which played a role in her failed attempt to disclose to her mother the first time:

I felt like this was something I had done. And as an extension that my mom was going to be disappointed in the choices I made. (Paula)

Kay pointed out that she blamed herself because of the lack of resistance during her experience of sexual assault. Due to the misconceptions about rape, the social stigma

surrounding the lack of resistance toward the attacker can influence the victim's engagement of self-blame. In Kay's case, her father's response reinforced this misconception of rape:

You do blame yourself a lot for it, especially when you don't fight back because you didn't know what was going on. (Kay)

Ben shared that he "felt dangerous" to talk about his sexual abuse trauma. He felt "dirty and wrong" and compared himself to the character Dorian Gray from the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by author Oscar Wilde. He felt like he was the portrait of Dorian Gray, which depicted a hideous image of the true self as compared to the attractive outward appearance:

He [Dorian Gray] looks like a perfect person. He's handsome, attractive, you know, successful, popular, all of those things. But like, in his own mind, he knows who he is like, really. And there's a portrait in an attic, which is the portrait for the which is the title of the book. And that portrait in the attic that's stored in this attic holds all of his like, what he knows are his sins and his bad qualities and his bad traits. And it's just this. And that's the true picture in his mind of who he is. And it's just this horrible, hideous view of who Dorian Gray is. And, and so this Dorian Gray is torture, because outwardly everyone thinks one thing of him and inwardly, he's like, 'no, I'm the person,' I've been this hideous portrait. [...] And I'm like, That's me. And I've got to make sure no one discovers like this hideous portrait of me. And so, I just had this horrible self-image of who I was, even though outwardly no one ever, ever, ever would have known that, you know, and I made sure of that. And that, that led into, like, these fugue states, where I would kind of dissociate... disassociate from reality in some, in some sense. (Ben)



Although Ben mentioned that he believed that society has gotten better at understanding sexual abuse since the time in which he grew up, the social stigma surrounding sexual abuse contributed to his feelings of self-blame. He did not want members of society to view him as a “bad person” because of the stigma that those who were abused would become abusers. He did not want others to be afraid of him or “think bad things” of him:

I, my fear was, and when I was so when I was abused as a kid, like at the time, abuse was talked about a lot differently than it is today. And I would catch snippets about, you know, kids that are abused become abusers. And maybe there's, there's, I don't know, maybe there's some truth, I haven't seen the studies, maybe there's some truth to it, but there's more of a tendency for that cycle to perpetuate. So that was one thing that was sad. It has never crossed my mind ever, ever, ever to abuse, or to put someone through the kind of hell that I went through during that time. And, and I was really worried about talking about it, because I didn't want people to be afraid of me in that way [...] you'd hear those things like in school and in church settings, and just in society, that's kind of that was what kind of penetrated my mind at the time. And so, it just got ingrained in me that if people found out that I'm abused, they'll realize like that, I'm this bad person, you know, for a society and they'll be afraid of me and think bad things of me. And I felt dirty and wrong. And so, it's just this secret that I kept inside of me, because of all those things, it didn't feel safe to do. (Ben)

Ben had to maintain a “perfect persona” of himself which he noted had “religious underpinnings.” He did not want others to find out about his abuse because he was afraid that it would disintegrate his relationships. This relates to his perspective on how society viewed those

who were abused. He had learned that people who had experienced abuse were seen in a negative light. He also noted that he was afraid of others labeling him as gay since, at the time, there were negative connotations surrounding sexuality and the misconception that if an individual is abused, then it would turn them gay:

I didn't want people that like really see into me, and I know if I, I had this fear that if I didn't maintain this perfect persona, you know, there's religious underpinnings to that. And there's, you know, there's just the way I was perceived, like I said, by teachers, at school, by coaches, things like that, that I had to maintain this persona, because I really was afraid that if people found out who I was, it would shatter every kind of relationship that I had. And I didn't, I didn't I didn't know how I would cope with that. [...] And then boys, especially that were ready to like I was, you know, will turn homosexual, and there's all this at the time, negative connotations about all of that. And, and, and so I was really afraid from a young age. (Ben)

Most of the participants had experiences of shame and self-blame in relation to their sexual victimizations and disclosures. When someone endures a traumatic event such as sexual victimization, it is only natural for the survivor to try and make sense of it in order to heal and move on. The sense of self and identity can be pondered throughout a sensemaking process of puzzling together the jigsaw pieces of the trauma itself and the paths to disclosing (Ven 2020; Park 2010; Zehr 2001). As survivors of sexual assault/sexual abuse are undergoing their own experience of sensemaking, emotions such as “uncertainty,” “doubt,” and “shame” might emerge during the process of trying to make sense of their experiences (Ven 2020:1826; Brison 2002). Ben felt shame in that he viewed himself as “hideous,” “dangerous,” “dirty and wrong” that he

was sexually abused. These feelings of shame are connected with the community stigma towards perceived sexuality and sexual abuse victims “turning” gay.

Kay, Lilly, and Paula engaged in self-blame, indicating that they somehow played a role or did something to initiate their sexual victimizations. Kay blamed herself for not fighting back against the offender, while Lilly blamed herself by questioning if she did something wrong for her father to abuse her sexually. Kay’s emotions were reinforced by misconceptions surrounding a lack of resistance (Pinciotti and Seligowski 2019; Schiewe 2019), while Lilly’s negative responses reinforced hers (Ullman and Filipas 2001). Paula felt like she held some responsibility for the rape while also experiencing shame, such as feeling “dirty.” Ella and Jackie both felt “ashamed” that they were sexually assaulted. Ella grew up in a religious environment involving stigma toward sex and sexual assault in the ‘80s, which influenced her feelings of shame. Jackie was afraid to disclose at first because she felt “ashamed,” and she was fearful of others’ reactions.

Shame and self-blame are common attributes among survivors of sexual violence. Survivors may criticize and blame themselves in order to grasp an understanding as to why the victimization happened to them. Shame is “a moral emotional response, in which the survivor feels deeply unworthy, defective, and debased in comparison to others” (Kennedy and Prock 2016:2; Bonanno et al. 2002; Negrao et al. 2005). Those who engage in self-blame may place blame on their own specific actions or assign blame to their character and traits as an individual (Hamrick and Owens 2019; Janoff-Bulman 1979). Shame and self-blame are influenced by social norms surrounding rape culture and myths, as well as the negative reactions of others (Hamrick and Owens 2019; Kennedy and Prock 2016).

### *Supportive Interactions*

There were occurrences of support and understanding during the disclosures as well. Feelings of being “believed,” “being there for me,” “accepting,” “understanding,” and “helpful” were present when disclosing to friends, family, and counseling services in contrast to experiences of revictimization. Ella found support when she eventually disclosed it to her sister. Her sister hugged and “believed” her while challenging Ella’s self-blaming feelings.

Tina immediately received support from her best friend by claiming, “she was there for me.” Her friend’s acts of listening and offering reassurance helped Tina feel heard. She eventually disclosed this to other close friends, and they also provided support. Tina described that her friends displayed “anger at the person but not at me,” highlighting that they believed her and had strong emotions to protect their friend. According to Tina, these positive and protective responses from her friends made her feel “comfortable” to share her feelings:

I’m just more comfortable with being able to talk about stuff because I haven’t encountered a negative response. (Tina)

Jackie received support from her mother, therapist, and the school principal. Her mother was “loving and accepting” and made Jackie feel “comforted.” She expressed that the school principal and school personnel addressed her request to maintain a “safe class environment” for her. Jackie described her therapist as “compassionate” and “accepting”; the therapist helped her with acceptance of her trauma and helped her grow. Because of the rurality of her local community, there was a lack of options for quality mental health services. As a result, she had to travel at least an hour outside the small community in which she lived in order to receive quality mental health services. Rural/small communities typically have limited resources for sexual

assault, such as mental health services; this is in part due to the remoteness of the area (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2010; Little et al. 2020).

Royce did experience a substantive amount of revictimization when she disclosed to law enforcement and endured the trial proceedings; however, she did receive support from her family, close friends, and criminal justice personnel:

I have family members that are supportive of me [...] As far as who I chose to go and talk to, I got a lot of support in disclosing and I think that was because I chose to talk to my closest friends about it and they were very supportive. [...] I also had a lot of experiences with prosecutors and other investigators who were extremely supportive and had more of a knowledge of like, hey, we deal with this, and we see this often. And so, we can, like, let you know that you're not in the wrong coming forward, we can give you the reassurance that it's okay. (Royce).

When Royce disclosed to her friend, she felt “relief,” and her friend provided support and understanding. In addition, prosecutors and some investigators provided her “reassurance” that her coming forward was the right thing to do and that she was “not in the wrong coming forward.”

Paula received support and understanding from her sister, close friends, and her therapist. She noted that her sister was “one of the easiest people to tell” and that she was able to confirm from her sister that she experienced rape. Her best friend and cousin expressed anger at the offender. Paula stated that they had a “mad aggressive, like aggression” reaction and “immediately just like, I’m gonna kill this guy. Like, let’s go find his car.” Her therapist helped her gain “clarity” of her trauma, and it made it easier for her to share her story with others. She

also noted that her mother and father came to an understanding of her experience and supported her.

Kay immediately found support from her co-worker, as her co-worker helped her realize that her former boyfriend had raped her. In addition, she mentions that other family members besides her father were understanding and helpful. Kay expressed that these supporters were “not beating me down or making me feel bad about it.”

Ben’s therapist, his close friends, and later his wife supported him. He started seeing a therapist when he was “in some really dark places” mentally, and his therapist was equipped to provide him the proper treatment, which he described as “helpful.” Ben stated that outside his therapist, his close friends were the “first ones that were like, really supportive” and “helpful in the fact that they weren’t trying to be helpful.” His wife was able to understand sexual abuse better, and she became more supportive. Ben even pointed out that he and his wife have grown closer with one another throughout his healing process, and if someone disclosed to her again that she “would handle it much differently than she did.”

As previously mentioned, generally, informal disclosures involve supportive interactions (Kirkner et al. 2018). Kay experienced support from friends and other family members by expressing that they do not make her “feel bad” or “beat her down.” Paula’s friends and family expressed their support by showing anger toward the offender.

There is some literature that points out that there are occurrences of professional service sectors providing support to survivors. For instance, there are instances of law enforcement helping survivors through the process of the case and providing support (Patterson 2011). Royce’s experience included supportive interactions with prosecutors and other criminal

investigators involved in her case. Mental health providers are generally described as healing and also supportive (Campbell et al. 2001). Jackie expressed that her interaction with her therapist was healing and helped with her “constant fear.”

## CONCLUSION

This study specifically focuses on disclosure experiences among survivors of sexual assault. Participants shared their narratives on what shaped their decisions to disclose, how they were treated, and how intersectional elements played a role in their experiences. The themes that emerged from the narratives focused on disclosure reasons, revictimization, shame and self-blame, and supportive interactions. These themes show that disclosing a traumatic experience such as sexual victimization is a complex ordeal and can be very much like a “gambling game.”

Dorothy Smith’s standpoint theory allowed me to analyze the narratives through a “standpoint” lens by connecting their experiences with trauma and disclosing their worldviews. The key “stances” that were prevalent across the narratives included: social norms on gender and religion, the patriarchal society, the taboo on sex and sexual assault, rape myths and consent, and the broken criminal justice system regarding responses to sexual assault. Participants were able to share their subjective knowledge on what trauma and disclosing felt for them and how it has impacted their views on the structure of society solely based on their experiences. To articulate where one “stands in society,” the individual needs to experience the world for themselves. One would then reflect on these experiences, which would shape their subjective knowledge of a particular phenomenon. Each survivor of sexual assault and sexual abuse hones in on their worldview “standpoints” on societal norms and institutions revolving around sexual victimization because they alone experienced it themselves. The survivors are able to share their

subjective knowledge on the subject based on their perspectives on where they “stand” in society.

Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks, allows me to examine each narrative through an intersectional lens by identifying which social identities were salient to a survivor’s narrative. The key intersections that were prevalent across the narratives included: gender, religion, the small community/rurality, social class, and perceived sexuality. Gender, religion, the small community/rurality, and perceived sexuality intertwined to influence the survivors’ treatment when disclosing to others. They also played a role in shaping the emotions of shame and self-blame. Small community/rurality played a role with the limited resources for mental health services, while social class influenced the ability to afford them.

There are questions that were raised by the finding of this current study. Further research could ponder on what impact does it have on a survivor when loved ones step in and make decisions for the survivor? In Ella’s case, the outcome was consequential; however, there may be evidence of positive outcomes. There is a lack in the literature on delving into the reason that victims may come forward formally to law enforcement because there are other victims from the same offender that may share the same experiences; also, if other victims are acquaintances/friends of the survivor coming forward. Another question that arose from the findings is the other ways people respond to sexual assault disclosures. Ben’s wife’s response was negative; however, it was not victim blaming. Instead, it was a simple lack of support because she did not know how to respond and was not equipped to handle the situation.



The limitations of this study consist of a small sample size and a lack of variety in intersectional elements from the narratives. All of the participants identified as white, which limited the analysis of how race/ethnicity could influence disclosure experiences. There was also a limitation of including survivors of the LGBTQ community. Further research could focus more on the disclosure experiences of people of color and the LGBTQ community. This would involve a more sophisticated sampling method to reach a diverse population. Although this study focuses on what intersectional elements are salient in the survivor's disclosing experience, further research could reveal additional social intersections and standpoints with a larger, diverse sample. Potentially this study will open up a dialogue to rural and small urban trauma research, particularly research on sexual assault disclosures.

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