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Factors Impacting the Decision to Report Sexual

Assault: A Qualitative Study

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Departmental Honors Thesis Proposal

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Abstract

The present study aims to understand the reasons behind a survivor's decision to report or not report their experience(s) of sexual assault and identify themes involved in the decision-making process. While there are numerous quantitative studies that examine the factors around a survivor's decision to report or not report their sexual assault account(s), the qualitative perspective on this topic is lacking among the literature. Using a qualitative approach, the purpose of this study seeks to answer the following research question: what factors influence sexual assault survivors' decision to report or not report their experience? We hypothesized that individuals who reported their sexual assault experience(s) would be more likely to benefit from access to resources and support for coping. We also predicted that individuals who did not report their sexual assault experience(s) would be more likely to experience negative consequences due to a lack of resources and support for coping. Our aim was to identify predictors delineating those survivors who decide to report from those who do not. Participants in this study were asked to complete the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) followed by a researcher-conducted qualitative interview. The interview, which was administered through an open-ended questionnaire and virtual one-on-one interviews, assessed the actual factors involved in the survivor's decision to report or not report their experience. Our results showed participants were most likely to disclose when they felt emotionally safe (i.e., would not be judged) and supported, whereas participants were least likely to disclose to avoid judgment.

Introduction

The present study investigated the factors involved in the decision a survivor of sexual violence makes to either disclose¹ or not disclose of their experience(s). We begin by discussing the extent to which sexual violence occurs, why it happens within the context of the United States, and how it is reported. Following this discussion, we introduce prior research on this topic which has explored reporting sexual violence and the barriers survivors may or may not face when disclosing. Additionally, we explore the limitations of these investigations (i.e., being primarily quantitative by nature). While past research has provided insights into the plethora of variables involved in a survivor's decision of choosing to report or not report (e.g., relationship to perpetrator, social support, safety), this study seeks to expand on these discoveries, but through a qualitative lens, in order to provide what we believe is currently missing from the literature: more in-depth data, which consists of discussing the exact factors involved in these decisions *with* survivors themselves. Within these discussions with survivors, we examine the precise components, whether internal or external, which either encouraged or discouraged their disclosure decision.

Sexual Assault within the United States

Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence that consists of unconsented, coerced, forced, and unwanted sexual acts; this can be penetrative or nonpenetrative, and can consist of nonphysical acts (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Approximately 17-25% of women and 1-3% of men will be *reportedly* sexually assaulted at some point during their lives (Black et al., 2011; Dworkin, Menon, Bystrynski & Allen, 2017). In the United States, a potential explanation for the prevalence of sexual assault has been attributed to *rape culture*, which Zerlina Maxwell from

¹ In this proposal, we use the term “disclosing” and/or “reporting” to specify disclosures of sexual assault to anyone (e.g., family members, support services), not just to law enforcement and/or legal counsel.

Time (2014) defined as “a culture in which sexual violence is the norm and victims are blamed for their own assaults” (Maxwell, 2014; Zaleski, Gundersen, Baes, Estupinian & Vergara, 2016, p. 923). Rape culture seeks to normalize sexual violence against individuals, specifically women, while also encouraging sexism, false perceptions of rape and survivors, and victim blaming (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Zaleski et al., 2016). *Rape myths*, or false claims used to justify sexual violence by blaming the victim and relieving the perpetrator of any responsibility, have been used to describe these false perceptions aimed at survivors (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Phipps, Ringrose, Renold, & Jackson, 2018). Common rape myths state that consent is ambiguous, or has “blurred lines,” and the victims of sexual violence wanted, liked, and/or “asked for it” (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Phipps et al., 2018). Indeed, the United States’ rape culture has cultivated the presence of rape myths, and furthermore, a culture which views the victim as the one at fault and the perpetrator’s actions as a nonissue.

Impact of Sexual Assault on Survivors. The reported rates of sexual assault have been considered a “major public health concern” due to the negative effect it can have on an individual’s health (Dworkin et al., 2017, p. 65; Black et al., 2011). Since sexual assault is a form of trauma, it is likely to produce severe distress and is linked to a host of negative mental health consequences, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Dworkin et al., 2017). In fact, The National Comorbidity Survey discovered that PTSD diagnosed in women was most often attributed to rape: almost half of women and men who had experienced or witnessed sexual assault could endure lifelong PTSD (Dworkin et al., 2017). Truly, sexual assault is a pressing matter due to the significant occurrence of such acts and the potential of devastating results for victims. When sexual assault occurs in a country which embraces rape culture and endorses rape myths, the urgency and gravity of this

issue and the consequences associated are viewed as illegitimate (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Phipps et al., 2018). Hence, a rape culture only prolongs the devastating effects of sexual assault by placing the fault on the victim through rape myths.

Reporting Sexual Assault

Research on sexual assault has existed since the early 1970s and is certainly not a new research topic; however, it is critical to note *how* the research on reporting sexual assault has been conducted, and how the questions asked are typically performed through similar methodology: quantitatively (i.e., surveys and questionnaires assigning numeric values to responses) (Sable et al., 2006; Chen & Ullman, 2010). The prevalence of quantitative methods in sexual assault reporting is important to note because sexual assault statistics are primarily based around formally-reported cases (e.g., to a police officer), which only include those who made the decision to report in this way. Furthermore, those who have experienced sexual assault or other forms of sexual violence are less likely to disclose their experiences to police in comparison to individuals who have experienced other crimes (e.g., “violent crimes”) (Chen & Ullman, 2010). Because of this reality, the actual prevalence of sexual assault, and more importantly, the experiences of sexual assault survivors and the decision to report, remain incomplete for those survivors who do not view this type of reporting (i.e., to law enforcement) as an option (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005; Krivoshey, Adkins, Hayes, Nemeth & Klein, 2013; Sable et al., 2016; Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018).

Barriers in Reporting. There are a myriad of reasons why someone who has experienced sexual assault may not report their experience to another person (e.g., health provider, friend, law enforcement, etc.). For instance, Sable and colleagues (2010) explored the specific barriers women and men college students faced when reporting by administering The

Rape and Sexual Assault Awareness Campus Survey; their results showed that feelings of shame, guilt, and the desire to keep their experiences private from those close to them (i.e., friends and family) were the primary elements in preventing disclosure. Participants in this study additionally indicated that they felt worried about their identity being protected when disclosed, and lastly, the fear of their experience not being regarded as true. What these results showcase is that even when survivors disclose to individuals they know (e.g., friend, family member), it can be a difficult experience because of the negative emotions (i.e., shame, guilt, and fear) and worries about anonymity (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). Hence, reporting to a stranger, such as a law enforcement officer, can be even more challenging: additional studies reveal how reporting to law enforcement, specifically, poses challenges within a legal context, where a survivor will quite literally be questioned, and the outcome of their report depends on if they are believed or not (Chen & Ullman, 2010). Chen and Ullman (2010) discovered that survivors of sexual assault who make the decision to not disclose to police may do so due to the commonality of rape myths and the idea that rape can be excused. Additionally, this same study noted how survivors who anticipated and feared their experience would be uncredited or not believed were less likely to report, as well (Chen & Ullman, 2010).

To add an additional layer on the complexity of reporting, or lack thereof, survivors who have experienced sexual assault from strangers are more likely to report than survivors who have experienced sexual assault from someone they know (Chen & Ullman, 2010). This is problematic because over two thirds of survivors are sexually assaulted by someone they know, whether a friend, family member, an intimate romantic partner, whereas strangers to the survivor account for one third of reported sexual assault (Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, & Starzynski, 2006). Essentially, a survivor is more likely to have been sexually assaulted by someone they

know but is simultaneously less likely to report their experience (Ullman et al., 2006; Chen & Ullman, 2010).

These quantitative findings provide important insight into survivors' perspectives of what led to their disclosure decision. It is evident that survivors face an abundance of obstacles when reporting, whether those obstacles are internal (e.g., shame) or external (e.g., not being believed, victim blaming); however, it should be noted that internal and external factors do not exist independently from each other (e.g., victim blaming can cause shame, shame can cause self-blame) (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Sable et al., 2010). These studies provide a substantial sample of participants which allow for these common themes to be identified and explored, but as with any methodology, there are limitations to the means in which this data was collected.

Quantitative data typically lacks in exploring the "deeper underlying meanings and explanations" and explores variables in a specific way (e.g., Did the variable occur?; Rahman, 2020, p. 106). Qualitative data fills in these gaps by centering the participant's in-depth responses and the significance of them (e.g., What was experiencing that variable like?; Rahman, 2020). Indeed, qualitative data seeks to investigate and capture individual's encounters in precise circumstances to understand the outcome as a whole (Rahman, 2020). To our knowledge, there seem to be no qualitative studies to date which explore survivor's decision-making *process*, which highlights not only the factors which are barriers in preventing reporting, but also the factors which encourage survivors to report, i.e., what makes a survivor feel "safe" versus "unsafe". What is currently missing from the literature is the more detailed "why" regarding decisions surrounding reporting. Because all sexual assault statistics are based around police-reported cases, the actual prevalence of sexual assault, and more importantly, the experiences of sexual assault survivors and the decision to report, is not reflective of the true reality in which

sexual assault occurs, and furthermore, how this impacts survivors (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005; Holland et al., 2018). As such, the advantages in using qualitative data align with this specific research topic due to 1) sexual assault being underreported, 2) qualitative data being able to accurately depict what is involved in survivor's choice of reporting or not reporting, and 3) the results from this methodology revealing what makes reporting occur more or less.

The Present Study

The present study aims to investigate factors influencing a person's decision to report or not report their sexual assault experience. By utilizing a qualitative approach, our study seeks to understand *why* a survivor makes their decision(s) and the variables involved in *how* this choice or choices were made. Our proposed research asks the question:

“What factors influence survivors' decision to report or not report their experience?”

Additionally, we hypothesize that individuals who report their account(s) of sexual assault will be more likely to benefit from access to resources and support for coping. We also predict that individuals who do not report their sexual assault will be more likely to experience negative consequences due to a lack of resources and support for coping. We will further explore themes from qualitative accounts to understand factors influencing the decision to report sexual assault. Our aim is to identify predictors delineating those survivors who decide to report from those who do not.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 10$) were recruited through snowball sampling through social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit). The majority of the sample identified their sex as female (90%) and gender identity as woman (80%); only 10% of participants identified as genderqueer, gender

non-binary, or gender non-conforming, and 10% identified as a man. Most of the participants identified as heterosexual (60%), and 20% identified as bisexual and 20% identified as lesbian. 30% of the participants identified as White, 30% identified as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin (including 20% identifying as both White and Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish Origin), 30% identified as Black or African American, and 10% identified as Asian. Participants mostly identified with some form of Christianity (Catholic: 40%, Other: 30%). Forty percent of participants identified as extremely liberal, 10% identified as moderately liberal, 20% identified as moderate, and 30% identified as moderately conservative. Lastly, half of our participants indicated that they were between the ages of 18-24 (50%), 40% indicated they were between the ages of 25-34 and 10% stated they were between the ages of 35-44.

Materials

Sexual Experiences. During the initial portion of the study, the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) was distributed to measure participants general sexual experiences and was simultaneously used as a screening tool to ensure that participants were 18+ years old and were at least 18 years old at the time of when they were sexually assaulted. The Sexual Experiences Survey consisted of 14-items which asked participants about their sexual history (e.g., “Have you had sexual intercourse with another person when you both wanted to?”) and their history of sexual violence (e.g., “Have you had sexual intercourse with a person when you didn’t want to because they threatened to use physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) if you did not cooperate?”; “Have you ever been raped?”) (Koss & Oros, 1982). Participants indicated either “yes” or “no” to each question. Additionally, this survey allowed participants to indicate their willingness to be interviewed for the latter portion of the study by providing

their email address to be contacted by the researchers (their identities have and will remain confidential).

Demographics. Participants were asked questions about their: sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religious views, political affiliation, and age.

The Interview. The interview questions were created by the researchers of this study and, to add an additional layer of protection for both the researcher and the participant regarding the sensitive nature of the questioning, we consulted clinical and counseling psychologists for guidance on the process (e.g., eliminating questions that may be psychologically triggering, reframing the wording of questions). The interview questions assessed the factors involved in the survivor's decision to either report or not report, such as to whom they disclosed (e.g., "Who, if anyone, did you disclose your experience to?"), how they made the decision to either disclose or not disclose (e.g., "If you did disclose, how did you make the decision to disclose to this person/these people *or* If you did not disclose, how did you make the decision to choose not to disclose?"), the amount of power/choice they felt in making their decision (e.g., "How much power and/or choice did you feel you had in making these decisions?"), their timeline of disclosure (if disclosed) (e.g., "If you disclosed, can you tell me about the timeline from when you experienced sexual assault and when you disclosed your assault?") their relationship to the perpetrator (e.g., "How well, if it all, did you know the perpetrator?") and a summary of their decision-making process (e.g., "If you could summarize what led to your choice on whether to disclose or not disclose, what were the main factors involved in your decision?"). Each question was open-ended and was asked either through a questionnaire or over Zoom with a researcher, depending on the participant's preference.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media advertisements. Participants in this study participated in two parts of this study: the initial survey (i.e., the Sexual Experiences Survey and demographic survey) and the interview. For the initial survey, participants were presented with an informed consent and stated if they would like to participate in the 15-30 minute survey. If yes, the participants received the Sexual Experiences Survey, the Demographics survey, and a space to leave their email address if they would like to continue with the 30-minute interview portion of the study.

During the interview portion of the study, participants who completed the initial survey provided their email address, and if they indicated that they wanted to be interviewed to discuss their reporting decision, were contacted for an interview. Participants who chose to interview via Zoom and the researcher who interviewed participants via Zoom had their cameras turned off for additional confidentiality. The informed consent for this study was distributed prior to the start of the interview to assure participants that their involvement in the study was completely voluntary and they could end the interview at any time; additionally, the informed consent was reiterated at the beginning of each interview. Participants were provided a copy of informed consent statement for their records. Once the interview was completed, participants were compensated a \$25 Amazon gift card for their time and efforts.

Results

Themes were identified from within each of the six interview questions; thus, how we organized these themes will be categorized by each individual question. The themes are

discussed by indicating the frequency each theme is presented and the percentages to illustrate each theme's prevalence.

Survivor's Decision to Disclose. The first interview question asked was, "Who, if anyone, did you disclose your experience to?" From the responses to this question, we indicated nine major themes involved in a survivor's decision on who to disclose to. The themes and frequency of each theme are the following: disclosure to a close friend (90%), a parent (30%), a family member who is not a parent (30%), a teacher (20%), a health professional and/or therapist (30%), a member of law enforcement (10%), an intimate romantic partner (20%), other (i.e., religious leader; 20%), and no one (10%). The majority of our participants reported to multiple people (80%), such as a family member, close friend, and an intimate romantic partner, whereas some participants reported to one person or no one (20%).

Our results clearly showed how the majority of our participants indicated that they reported to a close friend (90%). For instance, one participant stated:

"And, the last instance, was... again, I just shared it with some of the same friends who I had shared previous experiences with."

Only one participant in this sample reported to a member of law enforcement, and it should be noted that this participant reported to multiple people. During the interview, the participant described the following:

"Okay, so the first time I was not, or, I had actually just turned 18, but the first time I didn't tell anyone immediately and then I actually, uhm, the following morning, disclosed it with a teacher at my school that I was really close to who helped me to disclose it to law enforcement and my parents."

Survivor's Decision to Disclose: Who & How? The following and second question in the interview asked participants who disclosed, "How did you make the decision to disclose to this person/these people?" The majority of participants who disclosed did so when they felt the person they were disclosing to would not judge them and would understand (60%), wanted to process their experience with someone (30%), wanted to heal from the situation (20%), have peace of mind (20%), and/or receive validation (20%). One participant disclosed for the purpose of letting other people know they were not alone. The majority of participants specified that when they disclosed, they did so because the person in which they were disclosing to would not judge them and/or they would understand. An example of these responses is the following:

"Uhm, and then in the following instances, when I shared it with friends first... I think I just needed someone to process it with, especially because I think in all instances, I didn't really feel like I understood what was happening until after the fact when I had, like, processed it through, and was like, this is the full extent of this scenario."

In addition to these themes, several participants indicated feelings of obligation to report, whether from law enforcement (10%), for personal safety (30%), or out of preventative measures (e.g., sharing so the sexual assault would not happen again; 40%); one participant felt "compelled emotionally" to report (10%). One participant stated:

"Uhm, I guess, with the first time... I didn't really make the decision per say. My teacher had just asked me if I was okay because I was very clearly, like, upset, and she was required, I think, by law to tell the principal, and like, report it to our security or whatever after I had shared it with her. That one wasn't entirely my decision, but I did choose to share it with her."

Lastly, one participant stated their desire for justice as a factor in disclosing, sharing:

“...but, ultimately, reporting him just came out of this need for, I guess, like justice...I have this like, innate thing in me of like...justice needs to be served.”

Additionally, for participants who did not disclose, the question of, “How did you make the decision to choose not to disclose?” was asked. The themes involved in a participant’s decision to not disclose were fear (10%), a desire to not “ruin” the perpetrator’s life (20%), and they did not want others to judge them for reporting and/or sharing (30%). For instance, one participant shared the following about their experience:

“...and I knew the implications of, like, starting an investigation and how that could affect his life. Uhm, and...at the time, I was just really, really...I mean, throughout the entire healing process directly afterwards, I was struggling a lot with what he was going through and I was just really convinced that he was probably really upset about what he had done to me... and, uhm, which was not very helpful to my own healing, but anyways, that was, like, a really big conflict in my mind, and so I think the decision to have his name on file in case anyone ever reported him again, then they’d be forced to bring about an investigation, but I would not be the one to start the investigation myself. It felt like a nice compromise between, like, reporting him but not letting it go unacknowledged.”

Survivor’s Attitudes Toward Decision. The third question participants were asked in the interview was, “How much power and/or choice did you feel you had in making these decisions?” Participants felt a spectrum of power and/or choice, ranging from no power and/or choice to too much power and/or choice. The themes and frequencies of each response recorded are the following: no power and/or choice (40%), little power and/or choice (20%), moderate power and/or choice (10%), good amount of power and/or choice (50%) and too much power and/or choice (10%). The majority of participants (50%) indicated responses which aligned with

feeling a good amount of power; however, feeling no power and/or choice was the second most likely feeling participants displayed (40%).

We additionally wanted to note that some participants explained how their attitudes toward reporting changed over time (20%); for example, one participant felt no power and/or choice in sharing about their experience, but eventually felt like sharing their story “gave them power”:

“Initially, I didn’t feel like I had any [power and/or choice]. Uhm, and I felt like I was doing something wrong by sharing. And then, as time went on, I felt like it was almost a way to regain my power. So, I had all the power.”

Due to this, some participant’s responses indicated more than one theme as their perceptions of power and choice changed over time.

Timeline of Disclosure. The fourth question asked to participants was, “If you disclosed, can you tell me about the timeline from when you experienced sexual assault and when you disclosed your assault?” Participants who disclosed had varying timelines in which they chose to do so. The themes we found within the participant’s responses were the following: 0 hours - 48 hours (10%), 48 hours - 1 week (30%), 1 week - 4 weeks (20%), 1 month - 12 years (30%), 1 year – 5 years, (40%) and 5+ years (20%). These results show how some participants reported immediately after (i.e., 0 hours - 48 hours) while others did not disclose for a year or more (1 year - 5 years); indeed, some participants did not ever disclose to anyone (10%). One participant reported hours after they were sexually assaulted and did not disclose again till 5 years later. For instance,

“Initially it was...about two or three days after this incident that I told my best friend. After that, I didn’t tell anyone for...5 or 6 years?”

Twenty percent of participants disclosed under specific circumstances, such as choosing to share their experience with a specific person(s) for a specific reason, but there was not an exact time indicated in which they disclosed. For instance, one participant stated how they made the decision to disclose at a specific moment due to the “impact” sharing could have:

"I didn't want to have to share that with anyone until, like, I felt like I didn't have a choice but to share or I felt like it was more impactful to share."

Relationship to the Perpetrator. The fifth question participants responded to in the interview was about their relationship to the perpetrator: “How well, if at all, did you know the perpetrator?” The themes and frequencies we found in this question are the following: a close friend (40%), a family member (10%), an intimate romantic partner (20%), a spouse (10%), an acquaintance (20%), and/or stranger (30%). The vast majority of participants indicated they were sexually assaulted by someone they knew (70%), but 30% of participants were sexually assaulted by a stranger. Two participants indicated multiple experiences of sexual assault, and their perpetrator may have been different every time or the same. An example of this is when one participant explained how they had been sexually assaulted by a stranger, two close friends, and an intimate romantic partner. Additionally, another participant stated,

“Yeah, I mean...I guess overall, thinking about it...I don't know like... the first time, it was basically like we met one night and then the next night, it, like, happened. And then, yeah, so basically like all of them I didn't really know.”

Main Factors Involved in Survivor's Decision. The sixth and final question participants were asked was, “if you could summarize what led to your choice on whether to disclose or not disclose, what were the main factors involved in your decision?” For participants who decided to

disclose, identified themes were how sharing could help others (30%), could raise awareness about rape and/or sexual assault (10%), and so that others knew about the perpetrator (10%):

“When it originally happened, I felt like it was my fault...that I did something to deserve this...and that...like it was just the way that things were going to be. And as I got more time, and older, and more experience, I realized that I was wrong and that’s not how it had to be or how it was supposed to be. And, sharing my story meant that I could possibly keep someone else from having the same experience. I felt obligated, especially with my children...especially with other young women who I saw in similar relationships that I was in. People always say, ‘That’s your husband, that’s your wife, and that’s how things are supposed to be and it’s not. And, since no one’s in school teaching, you know, there’s not a lot of community resources telling people, you know, spousal rape...domestic-partner or intimate-partner rape is a thing...someone has to. So, if it can’t be anyone else, it will have to start with me.”

Additional themes within participant’s responses when disclosing was validation (10%), relief/peace of mind (20%), wanting to be honest (10%), and a desire for justice (10%):

“I chose to disclose to relieve my mind of the burden of that assault, to be relieved.”

Lastly, participants described a fear of revictimization (10%) and their own well-being and/or safety being a factor in disclosing (40%). An example of a participant’s response which indicated that their own well-being/safety was a primary factor in their decision to report is the following:

“I chose to tell my professor that someone in the class had done something since I had a complete breakdown when I was forced into a room with my rapist.”

For participant's who did not disclose, the themes which emerged from their answers of why were due to the impact disclosure could have on their reputation (10%) and the impact on others (10%):

"I did not disclose because it was his word against mine and him and I had a lot of mutual friends. I did not want to be known as "the girl who got raped" or even worse "the girl who lied about getting raped". I did not want everyone to know, and I did not want boys to be scared to talk to me."

Fear was a prevalent theme which emerged, as well. Specifically, fear of judgement (30%), fear of not being believed (20%), and fear of retaliation (20%).

"Fear of people thinking I was lying, fear of judgement from others, fear of retaliation by my partner."

Fear of and/or for the perpetrator was also a consistently stated response; specifically, fear of ruining the perpetrator's reputation (10%) and fear of the perpetrator's safety and/or well-being (20%):

"I chose not to report his name to anyone since he has attempted suicide 3 times before and I did not want to feel at fault if anything were to happen to him."

Lastly, one participant noted how their prior experience with police impacted their decision to not disclose in the future, stating:

"I don't really know if I had disclosed it to someone else besides my teacher if I would have ended up disclosing it to law enforcement...I honestly was just so young at the time. I don't know what I would have done, but, uhm, I...that one definitely affected my choice to report it to the school later, as well, and that's actually a big reason as well that I chose not to investigate with the second instance because I was just very jaded from my experience with the police."

Discussion

The present study qualitatively examined the factors involved in a survivor's decision to report or not report their experience of sexual assault. Factors involved in this decision were identified through six, open-ended questions which participants answered during their interview. The factors examined were 1) if the survivor decided to disclose or not, 2) to whom and how the survivor decided to disclose, 3) how the survivor felt about their decision (i.e., specifically- did they feel power and/or choice when making this decision?), 4) when the survivor decided to disclose after their experience(s), 5) their relationship to the perpetrator (if one existed), 6) a summary of the overall factors involved in their decision. A sample of 10 participants indicated that 90% of participants made the decision to disclose and 40% made the decision to disclose because the person felt safe to discuss their experience with (i.e., would not judge them and/or would understand). Fifty percent of participants felt they had a good amount of power and/or choice at some point during their disclosure(s), while 40% felt they had no power and/or choice at some point during their disclosure(s). Forty percent of participants did not report their sexual assault experience until 1 year – 5 years after they were assaulted, and 70% of participants knew the/one of the perpetrator(s). For participants who made the decision to disclose, 40% of them did for their own well-being/safety, while 30% of participants who made the decision not to disclose did so due to fear of being judged.

Limitations & Future Directions

Future replications of this study should consider the limitations within our investigation. Our sample consisted of only 10 participants, which is relatively small. In addition to the sample size, the majority of participants identified their sex as female (90%) and gender identity as a woman (80%). Thus, future studies should include a larger

sample that is more diverse in participant's sex and gender identity. Perhaps a study focusing on factors involved in men-identifying survivors should be conducted since men are less likely to report than women (Russell, 2007).

In addition to finding similar themes as past studies, such as feelings of shame, fear, guilt, etc. (Chen & Ullman, 2010; Sable et al., 2010), our study found how important it is for survivors to feeling emotionally safe in order to disclose. For instance, our results showed that the vast majority of participants in this study decided to disclose to a close friend (90%), and their stated reason for deciding to disclose to these individuals is because they would not judge them and would understand (60%). Participants also indicated that their own well-being and/or safety being was a primary factor in deciding to disclose (40%), measures to prevent sexual assault from occurring again (40%), as well as personal safety (30%). Additionally, several participants decided not to disclose due to fear of being judged (30%). It is evident from these findings that survivors are typically more likely to report when they have access to a form of support in which they will not be ridiculed, judged, or shame for their experience. Thus, our research supports our hypothesis that individuals who reported their account(s) of sexual assault benefited from access to resources and support for coping (i.e., feeling emotionally safe). Simultaneously, those who did not report their sexual assault experience did not reportedly have access to this type of support, and as a result, did not view disclosure as a legitimate option.

These findings are crucial knowledge for those who work closely with survivors of sexual assault because this does not only highlight the barriers, but also the factors involved which could potentially encourage reporting. The issue at hand is that many survivors do not see reporting as a true option because when they do report, whether

formally or informally, they are oftentimes met with victim blaming and the endorsement of rape myths (Zaleski et al., 2016; Phipps et al., 2018). In fact, one study suggests that approximately 70% of survivors do tell someone (e.g., a friend), but do not formally report their experience (Krivoshey et al., 2013). In alignment with our findings, it seems that many survivors do wish to share their experiences, but only under the appropriate conditions in which they feel emotionally supported and secure (Krivoshey et al., 2013). Rape culture, rape myths, victim blaming, and the inward distress which survivors experience does not make reporting a simple process, and certainly does not make survivors feel safe in sharing their stories. In understanding the nature of disclosure of sexual assault, our study suggests that environments where reporting occurs, whether in a police station, a therapist's office, or at a school, must withhold blaming the victim and, instead, provide an emotionally safe environment in which reasons for disclosing, and reservations surrounding disclosures, and equally understood and validated.

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