

Sexual Assault Incident Characteristics and Confidante Responses

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of legal, political, and cultural reform, sexual assault victimization continues to affect women and men from all age groups. However, college-age females (between the ages of 18-24) are at the greatest risk for sexual assault victimization. Past research has established that sexual assault survivors rarely seek help from formal support sources, such law enforcement or medical personnel. However, most choose to disclose sexual assault to informal support sources, especially to friends. The reactions a survivor receives can have a significant impact on subsequent recovery, including acknowledgement of the event as sexual assault, decisions concerning future disclosures, choices about formal help seeking.

Prior research has uncovered the content of reactions to sexual assault disclosure, yet no published study has examined confidantes' specific reasons for reacting in one way or another. As a result, the perspectives of disclosure recipients are poorly understood, leaving a large gap in the development of a holistic understanding of the disclosure process. Using data gathered from 38 semi-structured interviews with male and female undergraduates, this dissertation builds a grounded theory addressing two important aspects of responding to sexual assault disclosure. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how their interpretations and responses are influenced by perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. A better understanding the perspectives of disclosure recipients could highlight for researchers and practitioners aspects of sexual assault victimization that are misunderstood by college students, and which contribute to the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors, the underreporting of sexual assault, and the lack of social support for survivors more generally.

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Dan Beachy-Quick, in his fascinating book-length love poem, *A Whaler's Dictionary* (2008), best expresses my sentiments as I look back over the course of this project. He states:

‘I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive – and yet I think I perceive it –’ writes John Keats. I hope to give fair warning to the reader, before this book is begun, that its pages are full of dim perceptions scarcely expressed. What follows is the mad task I found within myself after more than a decade spent reading the same novel. I meant not to exhaust *Moby Dick* of meaning, but to exhaust myself of the meaning I found in it. (2008: xi)

Setting aside my own fixation with Melville's oeuvre, Beachy-Quick quite accurately captures the sense one has, when finishing an enormous project and preparing to step away from a years-long obsession, of the need to apologize for the inability to articulate ideas as clearly in writing as they appear in the mind. Moreover, his final sentence well-illustrates my take on the concept of theoretical saturation. The topic of sexual assault disclosure certainly has not been exhausted through the work presented in this dissertation. Rather, I hope that this effort will make evident additional areas that likeminded researchers may want to address. I, however, may have exhausted myself of the ability to discover any further meaning on this subject.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite decades of legal, political, and cultural reform, sexual assault victimization continues to affect women and men from all age groups. However, college-age females (between the ages of 18-24) are at the greatest risk for sexual assault victimization. Definitions of sexual assault vary by state and by agency, but generally include a range of behaviors and tactics. For example, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) defines sexual assault as an attack or attempted attack involving unwanted sexual contact between the victim and offender, including grabbing, fondling, and verbal threats, and which may or may not involve force (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). The NCVS distinguishes sexual assault from rape, which it defines as forced sexual intercourse, including both coercion and physical force, through vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by the offender or a foreign object (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). The Office on Violence Against Women, however, defines sexual assault as any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient, including forced sexual intercourse, fondling, and attempted rape (“Sexual Assault,” 2014).

Just as sexual assault can include a wide range of behaviors and tactics, it also can result in an array of emotional, physical, and psychological trauma for survivors. Moreover, the repercussions of sexual assault can extend beyond the primary victims of this crime and can have an effect on family members, friends, intimate partners, and society as a whole.¹ Such

¹ A note about terms: I will use *victim* and *survivor* interchangeably. I also will use female pronouns to refer to those who have experienced sexual assault since the majority of sexual assault victims are female. The terms sexual

reverberations of trauma are related to survivors' disclosing their experiences to others. Although sexual assault has been referred to as a "disquieting secret," most survivors choose to disclose this secret to friends, family members, and other trusted individuals (Fisher, Daigle, and Cullen, 2010).

When a survivor of sexual assault chooses to tell another individual about their victimization, this is known as *disclosure* (Campbell, Greeson, Fehler-Cabral, and Kennedy, 2015; Ullman, 1996a). The ways in which confidantes react to sexual assault disclosure can influence the survivor's subsequent recovery and actions (Ahrens, 2006; Littleton, 2010). There are many possible reactions to a sexual assault disclosure. Does the disclosure recipient support the survivor? Advise her to seek medical attention or psychological services? Help her report to law enforcement? Does the disclosure recipient instead blame the victim or make light of the situation, urging her to forget it happened? Is the survivor even believed in the first place? Such reactions to sexual assault disclosure are just some of the many positive and negative responses reported by sexual assault survivors (see, e.g., Ahrens and Campbell, 2007; Campbell et al., 2015; Edwards, Dardis, and Gidycz, 2012). What accounts for such variation in reactions? This dissertation fills a large gap in sexual assault disclosure research by using findings from a qualitative multi-case study to develop a grounded theory that explains variations in responses to sexual assault disclosure.

This chapter begins with a summary of the context and background framing the study. This summary is followed with the problem statement, the statement of purpose, and the accompanying research questions. Also included in this chapter is an introductory explanation of

assault and rape will correspond with those used in an original source document and will be clarified for the reader as appropriate.

this study's research approach. This is followed by a discussion of the proposed rationale and significance of this research study. The chapter concludes with a brief description of how the remaining chapters will be arranged.

Context and Background

Sexual assault victimization affects women and men from all age groups, yet research has repeatedly found that the highest incident rate is among college-age females (Cleere and Lynn, 2013; Fisher et al., 2010; Paul, Walsh, McCauley, Ruggiero, Resnick, and Kilpatrick, 2013; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). College-age females are an important population for examining sexual assault victimization not only because of the high incident rate, but also because this population can experience unique mental and physical health consequences as a result of sexual victimization (Turchik and Hassija, 2014). College-age female sexual assault survivors are more likely to engage in dangerous health-related behaviors, including greater substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, and suicidal ideations, as well as experiencing other harmful outcomes such as an increased likelihood of dating violence (see, e.g., Gidycz, Orchowski, King, and Rich, 2008; Messman-Moore, Coates, Gaffey, and Johnson, 2008).

Perhaps the most common finding from studies concerning sexual assault is that victims tend to exhibit few, if any, formal help-seeking behaviors (Ahrens, Campbell, Thernier-Thames, Wasco, and Sefl, 2007; Rickert, Weimann, and Vaughan, 2005; Ullman 1996a). Help-seeking behaviors include seeking assistance from formal support sources, such as law enforcement, medical personnel, mental health professionals, rape crisis counselors, religious authorities, or on-campus services (Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, and Townsend, 2005). Victim help-seeking behaviors also include disclosing sexual assault victimization to informal support sources, such

as friends, parents, other family members, or romantic partners. Like other populations of sexual assault survivors, college-age females often do not report their sexual victimizations to formal support services (Fisher et al., 2010; Hart, 2003; Nasta, Shah, Brahmanandam, Richman, Wittles, Allsworth, and Boardman, 2005; Paul et al., 2013; Thompson, Sitterle, Clay, and Kingree, 2007).

The most apparent consequence for sexual assault survivors who do not seek assistance from formal support sources is the preclusion of their receiving tangible aid (James and Lee, 2015). Reporting to law enforcement could result in a sense of justice for the victim if the offender is punished through the criminal justice system. It could also result in aid from various victim services that can be arranged through law enforcement contacts (Davis, Lurigio, and Skogan, 1999). Aid could also come in the form of mental health support. The psychological consequences of sexual assault have been well documented, yet less than 30% of all sexual assault survivors seek mental health services (George, Winfield, and Blazer, 1992; Ullman and Brecklin, 2002). Many sexual assault survivors display maladaptive coping behaviors following victimization, such as avoidance behavior, which may contribute to the failure to seek support from formal services (Leiner, Kearns, Jackson, Astin, and Rothbaum, 2012; Valentiner, Foa, Riggs, and Gershuny, 1996). Maladaptive coping behaviors also have been shown to be related to increased symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Boeschen, Koss, Figueredo, and Coan, 2001). According to Ullman and Filipas (2010), those who most need such services are often those who do not seek them.

For the interest of criminologists and victimologists, though most likely less of an immediate concern for survivors, the low reporting rate of sexual assault victimization negatively skews official crime data. It inflates the “dark figure of crime” and results in a large discrepancy between the actual number of sexual victimizations and the reported number (Kruttschnitt,

Kalsbeek, and House, 2014; Miller, 2010). Additionally, underreporting has larger consequences for society. It both perpetuates misinformation about sexual assault and reinforces a lack of awareness about what constitutes sexual assault (Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, and Townsend, 2005). Since the true extent of sexual assault victimization is not reflected accurately in official data sources, the scope and magnitude of sexual assault is misrepresented. This has larger implications in terms of resources for survivors, criminal justice policies, and prevention and education efforts (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner, 2003). The misrepresentation of the extent of sexual assault in our society undermines attempts to develop adequate resources and responses to assist victims of this crime.

Sexual assault research has repeatedly found that, although most survivors do not seek formal support, the majority disclose their sexual assaults to informal support sources (see, e.g., Ahrens et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2010; Sabina and Ho, 2014). The most consistent finding from studies exploring sexual assault disclosure is that friends are the most common confidantes for sexual assault victims, followed by family members, then other informal sources, such as romantic partners (Ahrens et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2003; Rickert et al., 2005). Informal support sources are clearly important for survivors as they seek to make sense of their experiences and determine how best to respond to their victimizations. According to Ullman (1999), the survivor's choice of disclosure recipient may be the most important factor in the disclosure process due to the potential consequences that a confidante's reactions can have for the survivor.

Studies that have examined the disclosure experience from the points of view of survivors have uncovered a fairly consistent range of reactions given by both formal and informal support sources. Researchers divide these into positive social reactions and negative social reactions (see, e.g., Ahrens and Campbell, 2007; Edwards et al., 2012). Survivors typically

describe positive reactions to disclosure as those in which they are believed, feel as though they have someone to talk to, receive comfort and other emotional support, or else provide a neutral perspective. Such reactions are considered healing by survivors and are related to reduced distress (Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, and Barnes, 2001; Edwards, Dardis, and Gidycz, 2012; Ullman, 1999). Positive reactions also have been associated with various positive recovery outcomes, such as increased posttraumatic growth, greater perceived benefits, and decreased risk of future sexual victimization (Miller et al., 2011). Additional advantages of positive social reactions include decreased PTSD symptoms and reduced likelihood of post-assault problem drinking (Peter-Hagene and Ullman, 2013). In terms of more immediate benefits, positive reactions to disclosure can validate the victim's experience, provide her with a context in which to work through her feelings and trauma, and enhance her ability to find meaning in her experience (Ullman, 1999).

Negative reactions, conversely, are those in which the survivor is blamed for her victimization (Ahrens, 2006), the impact of the assault is minimized or denied (Ahrens and Campbell, 2007), or the confidante does not believe the survivor or else jokes about the assault (Edwards et al., 2012). Additional negative reactions include stigmatizing responses, controlling reactions, promotion of rape myths, violations of confidentiality, revictimization, and attempts to distract the victim (Filipas and Ullman, 2001). According to Ahrens (2006), negative reactions from friends and/or family are associated with reinforced self-blame, uncertainty about whether the experience qualified as rape, and the silencing of future disclosures. Some studies have uncovered the specific impact of certain negative reactions. For example, reactions that result in greater self-blame are associated with higher levels of PTSD and with increased perceptions of negative reactions during subsequent disclosures (Hassija and Gray, 2012), while reactions that

attempt to control the victim's decisions are associated with increased symptoms of posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression (Orchowski, Untied, and Gidycz, 2013).

Overall, research on disclosure indicates that the reactions a sexual assault survivor receives can have a significant impact on her subsequent recovery, including her acknowledgement of the event as a sexual assault and whether or not she chooses to disclose again in the future (Ahrens, 2006; Littleton, 2010; Pitts and Schwartz, 1997). The reactions given by informal support sources, in particular, can influence survivors' decisions to seek out formal support (Ahrens et al., 2007; Ullman, 1996a, 1999; Patterson, Greeson, and Campbell, 2009, Paul et al., 2014). As explained by Paul and colleagues (2013), a survivor's disclosure of sexual assault to an informal source is often a first step in connecting her to formal sources of support, such as medical care and/or mental health services, and also may facilitate formal reporting to law enforcement.

Many studies have uncovered the common reasons that sexual assault survivors give for their decisions not to report their victimizations to law enforcement. Some of the most common reasons include not thinking the sexual assault was serious enough, not having proof, not wanting others to know, and fear of retaliation (e.g., Fisher et al., 2003; Patterson et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2007). Additionally, researchers have found that specific characteristics of sexual assault incidents are associated with lower reporting rates. These include non-stranger offenders, victim alcohol use prior to the incident, lack of injury inflicted on the victim during the incident, and lack of weapons used during the sexual assault (e.g., Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr, 2003; Sabina and Ho, 2014; Starzynski et al., 2005). Despite the general reluctance to report sexual assault victimization to law enforcement, survivors are likely to disclose their experiences to informal sources, especially to friends. According to Paul and colleagues (2013),

the receipt of a sexual assault disclosure is a relatively common experience, particularly for college students.

Although researchers have uncovered much about the content of positive and negative social reactions to sexual assault disclosure, no published study has examined confidantes' specific reasons for reacting in one way or another. As explained by Starzynski and colleagues, "something unique about how society perceives sexual assault may lead people to make negative responses to women disclosing these experiences" (2005:418). Perhaps confidantes would provide reasons for their reactions that are similar to those that survivors provide for their decisions concerning formal reporting and self-help seeking. Perhaps, like survivors, confidantes consider the specific characteristics of the sexual assault when determining the best course of action. However, it is unclear whether or not this is the case because no published study to date has examined this issue.

Starzynski and colleagues (2005:418) argue that "research needs to go beyond identifying who women tell about [sexual] assault to examining why women decide to tell particular sources and what reactions they receive." As the following chapter will show, researchers have responded to this call and have started to uncover information about survivors' disclosure choices and received reactions. However, only a handful of studies have taken this recommendation a step further to explore why particular sources give various reactions to sexual assault disclosure. As a result, the perspectives of disclosure recipients are poorly understood by researchers, leaving a large gap in the development of a holistic understanding of the disclosure process.

Understanding the thought processes and perspectives of sexual assault disclosure recipients is an important and unexplored area of sexual violence research. Previous research has uncovered that confidantes' reactions to survivors can have significant consequences for their recovery and reporting decisions (Ahrens et al., 2007; Ullman, 1996a). However, nothing is currently known about the reasons disclosure recipients respond in supportive or unsupportive manners. By illuminating the disclosure process from the point of view of confidantes, researchers can begin exploring the misconceptions college students may have about sexual assault victimization and how these misconceptions influence the level and type of support offered to survivors during disclosure.

Additionally, previous research has shown that disclosure recipients can experience distress during sexual assault disclosure related to uncertainty about how to support survivors or about the presence and benefits of formal support services (Christiansen, Bak, and Elklit, 2012). Exploring the disclosure process from the confidantes' perspectives could help identify areas of confusion articulated by college students in terms of formal reporting, medical attention after sexual assault, and other on- and off-campus formal support services. A better understanding of disclosure from confidantes' perspectives therefore could improve the educational efforts of researchers and practitioners through targeting the misconceptions and confusion held by college students. Overall, this can contribute to mitigating the harmful consequences experienced by survivors during or after sexual assault disclosure, as well as increasing general awareness about the extent and nature of sexual assault and the availability and benefits of formal support services.

Problem Statement

Research indicates that college females are among the age group with the greatest likelihood of sexual assault victimization. Although sexual assault survivors are not likely to report their experiences to law enforcement or to seek help from other formal support sources, the majority disclose their experiences to informal support sources, especially to friends. Researchers have gleaned limited information about the content of informal support sources' reactions to sexual assault disclosure, as well as the consequences of these reactions for victims. However, there is a dearth of information concerning confidantes' reasons for giving these reactions, including how and why they formulate particular reactions to a survivor's disclosure of sexual assault. This is an important area of research because a better understanding of the perspectives of disclosure recipients could highlight for researchers and practitioners aspects of sexual assault victimization that are misunderstood by college students, and which contribute to the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors, the underreporting of sexual assault, and the lack of social support for survivors more generally.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study of college students is to build a grounded theory that addresses two important aspects of responding to sexual assault disclosure. First, it aims to explore how recipients of sexual assault disclosure interpret sexual assault incidents and formulate their responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, it seeks to uncover how their interpretations and responses are influenced by their perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. By better understanding the process by which disclosure recipients interpret and respond to various sexual assault scenarios,

practitioners and researchers may identify areas to target for improved educational efforts. As a result, such efforts would potentially mitigate the harmful climate that many survivors face upon disclosure to both formal and informal support providers. More generally, informed responses to sexual assault disclosure could possibly reduce the negative toll of having experienced sexual assault.

To shed light on this problem, the following research questions are addressed:

1. Do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and subsequent responses to survivors change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident?
2. Which sexual assault characteristics are the most influential to college-age disclosure recipients when interpreting incidents of sexual assault and formulating responses to survivors?
3. Why do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and responses to survivors change according to these influential sexual assault characteristics?

The first two research questions aim to explore whether any sexual assault incident characteristics influence the interpretations and responses of disclosure recipients, and which specific characteristics are most influential. Answering these questions will shed light on what aspects of disclosure confidantes consider most important when interpreting sexual assault disclosure and how their responses to survivors are shaped by these considerations of importance. Interpretations and responses will be treated as separate, albeit related, outcomes in the discussion section. The third research question is intended to uncover information related to why these specific characteristics are considered important by disclosure recipients and

influential to their interpretations and responses to survivors. Understanding the reasons for this requires examining the ways in which social issues related to sexual assault victimization, such as the stereotype of “real rape,” miscommunication as an explanation for sexual assault, and the concern of false allegations of sexual assault, can affect disclosure recipients’ interpretations and responses.

The two areas of inquiry addressed with the above research questions are interconnected, since social issues can influence how an individual interprets sexual assault incident characteristics. Drawing upon prevailing misconceptions about sexual assault might relate to the likelihood of confidantes giving negative reactions to survivors in some instances of disclosure. The connection between these two areas of inquiry will be more fully explained in the literature review and their interrelation in the current study’s data will be addressed in the final three chapters. Answering these two sets of research questions will build a grounded theory that illuminates the reciprocity of incident characteristics and social issues in the sexual assault disclosure process.

Research Approach

The above research questions are investigated using a qualitative, grounded theory approach. A qualitative design is best suited for uncovering dimensions of a problem about which not much is currently known or understood, such as the rationale and social influences of the disclosure process from the perspectives of sexual assault disclosure recipients. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviors, their interpretations of events, and their perspectives on particular issues (Woods, 1999). Grounded theory methodology, a particular type of qualitative approach, is most appropriate for

research that endeavors to uncover the process by which actors construct meanings out of their intersubjective experiences (Suddaby, 2006). It is also appropriate for researchers who seek to *build theory*, that is, to generate new theory and/or to elaborate on theoretical concepts already linked with the research problem (Dey, 1999).

As discussed briefly above, and as will be described in greater depth in the upcoming literature review, very little is known about the process through which confidantes construct interpretations and responses to sexual assault survivors. A useful way of learning about this process is to talk in depth to subjects sampled from a relevant population. Doing so will permit the development of a plausible theory that helps to explain the process of responding to sexual assault disclosure. Since grounded theory is the most useful methodology for achieving this purpose, the present study will apply these methods to create a plausible theory on this topic, the validity and generalizability of which are unknown but testable.

With approval from the University of Cincinnati's Institutional Review Board, I conducted 38 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with male and female undergraduates in the Fall semester of 2013. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following the grounded theory approach, after each interview was conducted, the data were analyzed through initial coding. This process brought to light ideas and perspectives that were identified as important by the participants themselves, and that could be pursued in subsequent interviews. More advanced stages of the coding process, including the building of a grounded theory, took place following the prospectus defense in August, 2015. The information obtained from the interview data has formed the basis for the study's overall findings and resultant grounded theory.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study comes from the researcher's desire to better understand the social forces that contribute to the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors, as well as how and why certain characteristics of sexual assault incidents result in specific interpretations and responses by disclosure recipients. Social forces and incident characteristics are interrelated aspects in terms of how confidantes interpret and respond to sexual assault disclosure. Furthering an understanding of the issues shaping responses to sexual assault disclosure may assist researchers, practitioners, and members of society in general to better support survivors. Although the legal reform efforts of recent decades have contributed to a cultural environment in which discussions of sexual assault are no longer taboo, both formal and informal support sources still react to survivors in ways that can be detrimental to their recovery. Negative reactions to sexual assault survivors both demonstrate and reinforce the social milieu that contributes to survivors' fear of disclosure, reporting, and other help-seeking behaviors.

This detrimental social milieu, however, cannot be effectively counteracted without a better understanding of the process by which it is perpetuated and reinforced. This requires exploring the perspectives of the people to whom survivors most often turn following victimization. In the case of college-age female sexual assault survivors, confidantes are most often their friends and fellow college students. Several studies have revealed that college students receive sexual assault disclosures relatively frequently (Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, and Ward, 2010; Dunn, Knight, and Vail-Smith, 1999; Paul et al., 2013). Additional research has indicated that disclosure recipients often feel unprepared for such experiences and desire support and assistance (Ahrens and Campbell, 2000; Banyard et al., 2010; Christiansen and Elklit, 2012). A better understanding of the perspectives of disclosure recipients, especially

the issues that they struggle with during the disclosure process, may help researchers to formulate effective educational strategies. More effective education could contribute to empowering confidantes to respond to sexual assault survivors in a positive and helpful manner (Orchowski and Gidycz, 2015). The result of improved education and the empowerment of confidantes could help alleviate the harm survivors experience from negative reactions to sexual assault disclosure.

The primary goal of this study is to build a grounded theory explaining the sexual assault disclosure process. Currently, there is no published theoretical explanation for responses to sexual assault disclosure. The grounded theory resulting from this study will be developed from the qualitative data collected by the researcher. As such, this study does not involve theory testing, but rather theory building about a previously unexplored area of research.

Organization of Dissertation

The second chapter provides an in-depth review of the literature related to sexual assault victimization and disclosure. The prior research discussed in the second chapter will explain the scope of sexual assault victimization, survivors' reporting and disclosure decisions, as well as what is currently known about disclosure from the perspectives of confidantes. The literature review also will provide an overview of social issues that are related to sexual assault victimization and will address how and why these issues are related to the disclosure process.

The third chapter details the methodology used in this study, namely, grounded theory. After defining this methodology, specific techniques involved with this method are explained, as well as criteria for evaluating grounded theory research. This chapter also includes a description of the study's data gathering process and research sample, as well as an in-depth overview of the coding process used in this study and how grounded theory is built from data.

The fourth chapter will present the results from the study and address how the findings answer the first two research questions and provide a partial answer to the third research question. This partial answer consists of the identification of three specific social issues related to sexual assault victimization that appear to influence participants' interpretations and responses to various disclosure scenarios. As such, the findings in this chapter also will illustrate the interrelationship between the two sets of research questions, that is, the reciprocity between sexual assault incident characteristics and social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization.

The fifth chapter will present the study's grounded theory as a series of six cumulative propositions that constitute a complete answer to the third research question as to *why* specific characteristics of a disclosed sexual assault incident affect confidantes' interpretations and responses to a survivor. This grounded theory will not only synthesize the study's findings and relevant prior research, but will shed light on the reasons and ways in which the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors is perpetuated in our society, and perhaps may be useful for understanding third party interpretations and responses to other forms of violence against women and/or other types of sexual assault survivors.

The sixth, and final, chapter will present a conclusion based on the study's findings, interpretations, and grounded theory. It will address the ways in which this study has filled in gaps identified in prior literature, discuss the study's limitations, remark on directions for future research, and, finally, present an evaluation of the study and grounded theory,.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study of college students is to build a grounded theory that addresses two phenomena. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how these are influenced by their perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. Specifically, this study seeks to generate a grounded theory that illustrates the process through which college student disclosure recipients interpret and respond to sexual assault disclosure. This grounded theory aims to explain how the interpretations, responses, and perspectives of college student disclosure recipients are shaped by, and contribute to the shaping of, the often negative social milieu faced by sexual assault survivors. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to complete a critical review of contemporary literature that will establish the current state of knowledge regarding the scope of sexual assault victimization and disclosure, the limited information on disclosure recipients' perspectives, relevant social issues related to sexual assault victimization, and the major gaps in sexual assault disclosure research.

The following literature review is divided into four main themes: 1) sexual assault prevalence and reporting patterns; 2) sexual assault disclosure experiences from victims' perspectives; 3) sexual assault disclosure experiences from confidantes' perspectives; and, 4) social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. The first theme is reviewed to contextualize the current state of knowledge concerning sexual assault victimization, particularly among college females. The second theme is reviewed to illustrate what is known about the

disclosure process from the perspectives of sexual assault survivors. The third theme reviews the current state of research on sexual assault disclosure from the perspectives of disclosure recipients. The final theme considers several social issues relevant to sexual assault victimization and connects these to the disclosure process. Collectively, the findings from the studies in each of these themes will demonstrate that although previous researchers have uncovered much information about sexual assault victimization and victims' disclosure decisions, there is a dearth of knowledge about the perspectives of disclosure recipients and the roles they play in the disclosure process.

Sexual Assault Prevalence and Reporting Patterns

This section will review past research on the scope of sexual assault victimization and reporting patterns to establish the prevalence of sexual assault and the low likelihood of formal reporting, particularly among college-age females. It is organized into the following subsections: 1) sexual assault prevalence and reporting rates; 2) facilitators of reporting sexual assault victimization; and, 3) barriers to reporting sexual assault victimization. This review will establish that although rates of sexual assault victimization are high, especially among college-age women, rates of reporting are consistently low. Although reporting rates overall are low, reporting is higher for particular forms of sexual assault. The reasons women provide for deciding not to report are generally consistent across the different forms of sexual assault.

Sexual Assault Prevalence and Reporting Rates

Self-report victimization surveys such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) are able to capture the "dark figure of crime," that is, victimizations that were not reported to law enforcement (Cantor and Lynch, 2000). As such, comparing national rates from

victimization surveys to those of official reporting data, such as the Uniform Crime Report (UCR), reveals the low reporting trends for particular types of crimes. Although the UCR does not break down its estimates of forcible rape victimization by age groups, comparing its national incidence rate for 2012 to that of the NCVS illustrates the dark figure of crime for rape/sexual assault. According to the UCR, 84,376 forcible rapes of women were reported to law enforcement in 2012, a rate of 52.9 per 100,000 females (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). The NCVS, however, estimates that there were 346,830 rapes and sexual assaults in 2012, a rate of 1.3 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older (Truman, Langton, and Planty, 2013).

Comparing UCR and NCVS data is complicated since the UCR does not include sexual assault in its counts and since the NCVS combines its estimates of rape and sexual assault. However, their respective rates indicate that many rapes and sexual assaults go unreported. This is further supported by the NCVS estimate that only 28.2% (n=97,925) of rape/sexual assault victims reported to law enforcement in 2012, while 71.1% (n=246,751) did not (Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool).² Additional evidence of the low reporting rate for sexual victimization is provided by the National Women's Study Replication, executed in 2006. This study randomly sampled 3,001 women and found that of the 526 rape victims in their sample, 84% (n=442) did not report their victimizations to police (Cohn, Zinzow, Resnick, and Kilpatrick, 2013). Furthermore, data from this study demonstrate that the prevalence of reporting rape to law enforcement has not significantly increased since the 1990s (Wolitzky-Taylor, Resnick, McCauley, Amstadter, Kilpatrick, and Ruggiero, 2011).

According to Felson and Pare's (2005) analysis of data from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), the low rate of sexual assault reporting has remained stable

² 0.6% of respondents were uncertain, all of whom were in the 12-14 age group.

over time. In 1995-1996, the NVAWS collected data on the lifetime histories of women's violent victimization. The sample consisted of 8,000 men and 8,000 women; 1,787 women experienced sexual assault victimization over the course of their lifetimes.³ Felson and Pare (2005) compared the reporting trends for sexual assault across the decades covered in the NVAWS data, with the assumption that the reporting of sexual assault would increase in the 1980s and 1990s due to the legal, political, and cultural reforms of the 1970s. However, they found no evidence that sexual assault reporting trends were different than the reporting trends of other types of crime over the years covered by the NVAWS data.

According to Sable and colleagues (2006), the general barriers to reporting that were prevalent prior to efforts by the rape reform movement continue to be important to sexual assault survivors. Despite decades since the rape reform movement began, sexual assault continues to be the most widely underreported violent crime (Carretta, Burgess, and DeMarco, 2015). Underreporting is problematic from a public policy perspective since it contributes to the underestimation of the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault and results in the individuals who are most at risk receiving inadequate attention (Carretta et al., 2015).

Although sexual assault victimization affects individuals from all age groups, the risk for college-age women is particularly high. According to the NCVS, women between the ages of 18-20 are at the greatest risk for rape and sexual assault, followed by women between the ages of 21-24 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012). Data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) indicate that 79.6% of female rape victims experience their first completed rape before the age of 25, and that the majority of female rape victims (37.4%)

³ The NVAWS defines sexual assault as "sexual acts coerced by physical force or threat thereof or by power differential such as those that would exist between adults and children, employers and employees, or professors and students" ("Selected Research Results on Violence Against Women," 2007).

experience their first completed rape between the ages of 18-24 (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen, and Stevens, 2011).

Specialized victimization surveys, which focus on particular populations of victims, are better able to illustrate the extent of sexual violence among female undergraduates. Data from the Campus Sexual Assault Study, which nationally sampled 5,466 undergraduate women, show that nearly 20% (n=1,039) experienced some form of completed sexual assault since entering college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, and Martin, 2009). This study also found that the risk for incapacitated sexual assault,⁴ in particular, is significantly higher for women in college (11%, n=601) than it is prior to entering college (7%, n=383). The National College Women Victimization Study (NCWSV), conducted in 1997, further highlights the discrepancy between victimization and reporting rates for college women. This survey sampled 4,446 college women, 2.8% of whom reported experiencing completed or attempted rape, while 10.9% reported experiencing at least one completed or attempted unwanted sexual contact, both since the start of the current academic year (Fisher et al., 2010). However, across all forms of sexual victimization, only 2.1% of victims reported their experiences to law enforcement, with less than 5% of rapes reported and only 1.4% of unwanted sexual contacts reported.

The low rate of reporting sexual assault uncovered by the NCWSV is supported by other national surveys of undergraduates. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), only 20% of all rapes and sexual assaults of college women were reported to police between 1995-2013; this is lower than the reporting rate (32%) for nonstudent victims belonging to the same age group (Sinozich and Langton, 2014). Furthermore, Wolitzky-Taylor and

⁴ Incapacitated sexual assault is defined in the study as “Incidents in which victims are unable to legally consent to sexual acts because of incapacitation,” due to either voluntary or involuntary use of drugs and/or alcohol (Krebs, et al., 2009).

colleagues (2011) sampled 2,000 female undergraduates about their first experiences with forcible and incapacitated rape. They found that 11.5% (n=230) of their sample had experienced rape, but that only 27 women (11.5% of rape victims sampled) had reported their victimizations to law enforcement.

Smaller scale studies reveal similar patterns. For example, Miller and colleagues' (2011) survey of 144 undergraduate sexual assault survivors (who had been sexually assaulted at age 14 or after) found that only one participant had reported to police. Likewise, Thompson and colleagues (2007) surveyed 492 undergraduate females, finding that while 141 (28%) respondents had experienced sexual victimization, only two reported their experiences to the police.⁵

To summarize the findings of past research reviewed in this subsection, the risk of sexual assault for college-age women is particularly high compared to the risk for women from other age groups. The majority of sexual assault survivors from all age groups are unlikely to report their victimizations to law enforcement; however, women enrolled in college have lower rates of reporting rape and sexual assault than do non-college women from the same age group or women from other age groups. For the purpose of the present study, this information is important because it points to a specific population of women who are the most likely to experience sexual assault victimization, yet who are the least likely to report their experiences to law enforcement.

Facilitators of Reporting Sexual Assault Victimization

Despite significant changes in America's social, political, and legal climate over the past several decades, victims of sexual assault do not exhibit greater likelihood to report their

⁵ The authors do not specify whether this percentage is based on sexual assault histories from age 14 and up or from within the past 12 months, both of which are measured in the survey used (Koss' Sexual Experiences Survey).

victimizations to law enforcement (Felson and Pare, 2005). This necessarily raises two interrelated questions: (1) why do some sexual assault survivors *choose to report* their victimizations to law enforcement? And, (2) why do others *choose not to report*? In other words, what are the facilitators of and barriers to reporting sexual assault victimization? The current subsection examines facilitators of reporting to law enforcement, while the following subsection considers barriers to formal reporting.

Previous research has uncovered several patterns among sexual assaults that are reported to law enforcement, indicating that certain characteristics of sexual assault are associated with an increased likelihood of reporting. These include specific victim-offender relationships, victim characteristics, offender characteristics, and incident characteristics. Research on these characteristics strongly suggests that the sexual assaults associated with higher rates of reporting are those that more closely fit the stereotype of “real rape.” This stereotype involves the idea that a sexual assault is most likely to be considered legitimate if it is perpetrated by a stranger, outside the home, at night, with strong resistance on the part of the victim and violent force on the part of the offender (Williams, 1984; Estrich, 1987). The association between increased reporting likelihood and sexual assaults with characteristics that resemble the “real rape” stereotype is illustrated in the following studies.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of characteristics associated with reporting to law enforcement is Sabina and Ho’s (2014) meta-analysis of 45 empirical articles on formal and informal sexual assault disclosure, service utilization, and service provision. The most likely sexual assaults to be reported across these studies were those with the following offender-based characteristics: stranger offenders, multiple assailants, and offenders who were a different race or

ethnicity than the victim.⁶ Particular incident-based characteristics were also associated with increased reporting across studies. These included sexual assaults with the presence of a weapon, physical force, injury, peritraumatic fear, perceived fear of death or injury during the assault, and sexual assaults that occurred on campus. Increased likelihood of reporting was also found among sexual assaults in which the victim had not consumed drugs or alcohol prior to the incident.

Williams (1984) was one of the first researchers to examine the relationship between reporting and sexual assaults with stereotypical characteristics. She examined the cases of 246 rape victims who contacted a Seattle-based rape crisis center, 59% (n=146) of whom reported their victimizations to law enforcement and 41% (n=100) of whom did not. She analyzed victim-offender relationships and incident-based characteristics, such as setting, threat of and use of force, degree of injury, and need for medical treatment. She found that each of the characteristics of “classic rape” significantly increased the likelihood of reporting. Offenders who were strangers or acquaintances were more likely to be reported (63%) than those who were friends or family members (44%). The most likely rapes to be reported were those that took place in a home or car that was broken into, followed by an attack or abduction in public (72% combined). The least likely were those that occurred in a social situation, such as on a date or studying (47%). Additionally, rapes were significantly more likely to be reported when the victim was threatened with a weapon, subjected to a high degree of force (80%), and/or sustained serious injury (76%). Williams also found that victims who were subjected to a high degree of force were more likely to seek medical treatment and that 75% of the sample who sought medical treatment reported their victimizations to law enforcement. As explained by Williams, “The

⁶ The authors do not provide specific percentages for sexual assaults most likely to be reported, but instead summarize the most consistent findings from the articles they reviewed.

classic rape provides the victim with the evidence she needs to convince both herself and others that she was indeed a true rape victim” (1984:464).

Starzynski and colleagues’ (2005) research supports the contention that sexual assaults are more likely to be disclosed to both formal and informal support sources when the victim’s experience fits the “real rape” stereotype. In their analysis of a community sample of 1,084 sexual assault victims, the researchers found that 80% (n=867) of their sample had disclosed to either formal or informal support sources, while 59% (n=640) had disclosed to both. The sexual assaults that were most likely to be disclosed to both formal and informal sources were those in which the victim suffered physical injury (88%, n=563), the victim actively resisted (62%, n=397), a weapon had been used during the attack (37%, n=237), and the offender was a stranger (26%, n=166).

The relationship between “real rape” and victims seeking medical attention also has been documented. Millar and colleagues (2002) examined 1118 client records from rape victims presenting at a hospital-based sexual assault care center in Ontario from 1992-1999. They found that women were more likely to seek treatment within 12 hours of the assault when the offender was a stranger (38.3%, n=95), when the victim had been injured (25.3%, n=63), and when weapons had been used (21.3%, n=53). Additionally, victims whose experiences had these three characteristics were more likely to report their victimizations to police within the first 12 hours (63.4%, n=158). They also found that women who waited 49 hours or more to seek medical treatment typically knew the offender for more than 24 hours (64.9%, n=179).

Du Mont and colleagues (2003) support the findings of Millar et al. (2002). The authors analyzed reporting trends in sexual assault cases that presented at one Canadian hospital’s sexual

assault care center throughout 1994. Half of the 186 victims (50%) who sought treatment reported their victimizations to the police. Victims who reported were those who experienced more severe victimizations, characterized by injuries sustained by the victim (70%, n=172) and by the offender's use of physical force (35%, n=167). Victims whose assaults lacked these overtly violent components did not report to police and expressed fear that they would not be taken seriously.

A more recent study by Zinzow and colleagues (2012) also found that women who experienced "stereotypical rape" were more likely to seek medical attention. Their analysis of data from the National Women's Study Replication indicates that only 21% (n=93) of the 445 rape victims in their sample received medical attention. Victims who were most likely to seek medical attention were those raped by a stranger or a non-intimate acquaintance (68%, n=303), those who experienced forcible rather than incapacitated rape (95%, n=443), and those who suffered injuries during the rape (71%, n=316).

The relationship between "real rape" and increased reporting extends to college women, as well. Fisher and colleagues (2003) report similar findings in their analysis of NVAWS data. They found that only 6.4% (n=39) of the 605 undergraduate women who reported experiencing some form of sexual assault victimization within the past academic year had reported their victimizations to law enforcement. Sexual victimizations most likely to be reported were those in which the offender was a stranger and/or a different race or ethnicity than the victim, those that occurred on-campus, those that involved the presence of weapons, and those that resulted in injury. They also found that African American victims were more likely to report than were victims who were white or of another race. However, this finding has been disputed by other

studies; overall, research examining the relationship between victim race and reporting have produced mixed results (e.g., Sabina and Ho, 2014).

As indicated in the studies reviewed above, particular sexual assault characteristics can facilitate survivors' decisions to report to law enforcement, as well as to seek medical attention. Victims who are most likely to seek formal support are those whose sexual assaults involve characteristics corresponding with the stereotype of "real rape," such as stranger offenders, presence of weapons, victim injury, and active resistance. Accordingly, any sexual assault that does not resemble "real rape" is less likely to be reported, especially incidents involving a known offender, that did not involve physical force, and which did not result in physical injuries.

The relationship between "real rape" and reporting likelihood is problematic since, according to the NCVS, the characteristics associated with "real rape" are not the most common sexual assault characteristics. According to the 2013 NCVS, only 19% of rapes and sexual assaults were perpetrated by strangers, while 76.2% were perpetrated by non-strangers. The most common relationship category was acquaintances (40.3%), followed by other intimates (35.9%). Furthermore, most rapes and sexual assaults did not involve weapon use (88.4% involved no weapon), and only half of the victims were injured during the assault (50.9% were injured) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool).

To summarize the above points, NCVS data indicate that the stereotypical characteristics of "real rape" are the least common among rape and sexual assault incidents. Research consistently reports, however, that victims whose sexual assaults resemble "real rape" are significantly more likely to report to law enforcement or to seek medical attention. This information is significant because it reveals that sexual assault survivors are influenced by

specific characteristics of their experiences when making decisions about seeking assistance from formal support services. The types of sexual assault characteristics that facilitate formal reporting for survivors may correspond with those that confidantes consider when offering advice following a sexual assault disclosure.

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault Victimization

Many studies have examined victims' self-reported barriers to formally reporting sexual assault victimization. These barriers are related to victims' own perceptions of their sexual assault experiences, as well as to perceptions of how others will interpret such experiences (Sable et al., 2006). Research has demonstrated consistency in the reasons provided by victims for not reporting, indicating that sexual assault survivors share a common understanding of how society in general responds to this type of victimization and that they allow this understanding to influence their help-seeking decisions (Patterson, Greeson, and Campbell, 2009).

Cohn and colleagues' (2013) analysis of data from the National Women's Study Replication uncovered several common reasons among victims for not reporting rape to law enforcement. This survey randomly sampled 3,001 women, 17.5% of whom were rape victims; 84% of these rape victims did not report their victimizations to police. The researchers found that the common reasons given load into three factors, which account for 61% of the total variance: 1) nonacknowledgement; 2) others knowing; and 3) criminal justice concerns. The "nonacknowledgment" factor captures the reasons provided by victims when they have not interpreted their experiences as rape, as expressed through the following two reasons given for not reporting: 1) not clear that it was a crime or that harm was intended (51%, n=226); and 2) did not think it was serious enough to report (42%, n=186). The second factor, "others knowing,"

includes 1) not wanting family to know (59%, n=261); and 2) not wanting other people to know (57%, 253). The final factor, “criminal justice concerns,” contains the following four reasons for not reporting: 1) fear of reprisal by that person or other persons (68%, n=300); 2) lack of proof that the incident happened (51%, n=225); 3) fear of being treated badly by police, lawyers, or other parts of the justice system (43%, n=188); and 4) did not know how to report (44%, n=194).

Studies that explore non-reporting among college students reveal that college female sexual assault survivors provide similar reasons for their decisions not to report to law enforcement. Participants in the NCWSV Study gave numerous reasons for not reporting their sexual victimizations to police (Fisher et al., 2003). Recall that 13.7% of their sample of 4,446 college women reported having experienced some form of sexual assault victimization within the past academic year. Of these victims, 6.4% reported their victimizations to law enforcement, while 93.6% did not. The following reasons were given by victims who chose not to report, in order of commonality: 1) not serious enough (81.7%); 2) not sure a crime or harm was intended (42.1%); 3) police would not think the incident was serious enough (30%); 4) did not want other people to know (20.9%); 5) afraid of reprisal from assailant or others (19%); and 6) did not want family to know (18.3%).

Similar findings also are reported in Thompson and colleagues’ (2007) survey of 492 undergraduate females, 28% of whom had experienced sexual victimization and 1.4% of whom reported to law enforcement. The following reasons were given by non-reporting victims in their sample, in order of commonality: 1) not serious enough (79.9%); 2) did not want anyone to know (48.5%); 3) did not want police involved (47%); 4) ashamed or embarrassed (39.6%); 5) did not want offender to get into trouble (32.1%); 6) thought the incident would be viewed as victim’s fault (27.6%); 7) thought police could not do anything (21.6%); 8) scared of the offender (8.2%).

Sinozich and Langton (2014) analyzed NCVS data collected on college student sexual assault and rape survivors between the years of 1995-2013. They found that 80% of rape and sexual assault survivors during these years did not report their experiences to law enforcement. The most common reason given was that survivors believed the incident to be a personal matter (26%). This was followed by fear of reprisal (20%), not thinking the incident was important enough to report (12%), not wanting to get the offender in trouble with the law (10%), and thinking that police would not or could not do anything to help (9%).

Such findings reveal that sexual assault survivors express similar reasons for deciding not to report their experiences to law enforcement. Additional studies provide support for the most common reasons survivors give for non-reporting (e.g., Nasta, Shah, Brahmanandam, Richman, Wittles, Allsworth, and Boardman, 2005; Patterson et al., 2009; Sable et al., 2006; Roth, Wayland, and Woolsey, 1990). Overall, research indicates that the most frequently expressed barriers to a victim's help-seeking behavior are uncertainty about the nature and severity of the assault, concerns about others knowing of the assault, and mixed feelings about offenders being punished. It is possible that sexual assault disclosure recipients may consider similar barriers to those described by sexual assault survivors when deciding whether or not to advise seeking assistance from formal support sources. However, no study to date has explored this possibility.

Summary

Based on the research outlined above, several conclusions can be drawn about the prevalence of sexual assault and patterns in victims' help-seeking behaviors. First, college-age females have an increased risk of sexual assault compared to women from other age groups. Studies consistently show that women between the ages of 18-24 have the highest rates of sexual

assault and rape victimization. Second, like other populations of sexual assault survivors, college-age females are unlikely to report their victimizations to formal support services, such as law enforcement or medical personnel. However, women enrolled in college are even less likely to report their victimizations to law enforcement than are women from that same age group who are not in college. Third, the most likely sexual assaults to be reported to law enforcement or to receive medical attention are those that resemble the “real rape” stereotype, such as those that involve stranger offenders, presence of a weapon, and victim injuries. The least likely sexual assaults to be reported to formal support sources are those that do not resemble “real rape,” but are nonetheless the more common forms of sexual assault. These include incidents with non-stranger offenders, without physical force or weapons, and without victim injury. Finally, sexual assault survivors refer to several common barriers to help seeking, including concerns that the sexual assault will not be taken seriously or that they will be harshly judged by others who learn about the incident.

Altogether, the research reviewed in this section contributes to the current study in the following ways. The high rate of sexual assault victimization among college-age women and the low rate of formal reporting suggest that this population is particularly relevant to investigating issues concerning sexual assault victimization and help-seeking decisions. The strong consistency of findings regarding the facilitators of and barriers to seeking formal support among sexual assault survivors reveals the particular characteristics associated with increased reporting and the specific reasons given for not reporting. As will be established below, disclosure of sexual assault to informal support sources can either assist or impede a survivor’s subsequent decisions to seek formal assistance. It is possible that disclosure recipients’ considerations of sexual assault characteristics and their reasoning about the consequences of formal reporting may

correspond with those that prior research has established about survivors. However, no study to date has examined whether or not this is the case. The specific facilitators and barriers for victims that have been identified by past research provide a foundation for exploring the characteristics that influence disclosure recipients' responses to survivors, as well as the reasoning behind their responses.

Sexual Assault Disclosure Experiences: Victims' Perspectives

The above overview established several commonalities among victims' decisions to seek help from formal support sources. This section will examine victims' experiences with disclosure to informal support sources. It is organized into the following subsections: 1) disclosure recipient patterns; 2) reactions to sexual assault disclosure and victim acknowledgment; 3) positive social reactions; and, 4) negative social reactions. The first subsection will establish what is known about to whom sexual assault survivors disclose. The second will review how disclosure can affect acknowledgement of sexual assault victimization and what this means for survivors. The last two subsections will discuss the content of the most common positive and negative reactions survivors receive upon informal disclosure, as well as how these reactions can affect a survivor's recovery from sexual assault victimization.

Disclosure Recipient Patterns

Similar to other populations of sexual assault survivors, college-age females are unlikely to report their victimizations to formal support sources, such as law enforcement or medical personnel. However, they are likely to disclose their experiences to informal support sources, such as friends, family members, or intimate partners. Researchers have discovered that although the reporting of sexual assaults to formal support services is uncommon, the disclosure of sexual

assaults to informal support sources is quite frequent. Furthermore, there are clear patterns in precisely whom is the most likely to be disclosed to by a sexual assault survivor.

As demonstrated by the NCWSV Study, while only 2.1% of victims reported their sexual assaults to law enforcement, 69.9% reported the incident to someone other than law enforcement personnel (Fisher et al., 2010). Disclosure recipients were overwhelmingly friends (87.9%), with family members (10%) and intimate partners (8.3%) being the next most frequent categories. Smaller-scale studies focusing on college females have reported similar results. Littleton (2010) surveyed 262 college female sexual assault survivors, all of whom had disclosed to at least one individual, and examined their relationships to disclosure recipients. She, too, found that friends made up the majority of confidantes (83.3%), followed by romantic partners (55.5%) and family members (31.9%).

Dunn, Knight, and Vail-Smith (1999) have illustrated the frequency with which college students, in particular, receive sexual assault disclosures. They surveyed 828 male and female undergraduates on whether or not they had ever received a sexual assault disclosure. They found that about one third ($n=282$) of their sample had received at least one sexual assault disclosure. The majority of these individuals reported that they were friends with the victim (68%), followed by relatives (8%) and intimate partners (6.8%). Furthermore, these 282 individuals accounted for 396 separate disclosure experiences, meaning that some had been disclosed to on more than one occasion. Additional studies of disclosure receipt among college students have uncovered similar results (e.g., Amacker and Littleton, 2013; Paul et al., 2013). According to Sabina and Ho's (2014) examination of 45 empirical articles on formal and informal disclosure of sexual assault, across all studies that included this information, friends were the primary confidantes for victims, followed by family members.

Collectively, the above findings indicate that, following a sexual assault, survivors are most likely to turn to their friends for support. Friends are therefore an important resource for sexual assault survivors. Additionally, friends may serve as confidantes to sexual assault survivors on more than one occasion. However, it is unclear what type of support a friend can or will offer the survivor, especially considering that the confidante is likely of a similar age and background as the victim. Campbell and colleagues (2015) found, in their qualitative study of 20 adolescent sexual assault survivors, that their pathways to formal help-seeking differed remarkably according to the reactions of their friends upon disclosure. They suggest that peers often do not know what to say or do to help survivors, and that this can impede survivors from receiving the assistance they require. As will be discussed below, whether support is offered and the nature of the support given could influence the survivors' acknowledgement of victimization and subsequent reporting and disclosure decisions, in addition to impacting psychological recovery and even the likelihood of revictimization.

Reactions to Sexual Assault Disclosure and Victim Acknowledgement

Reactions to sexual assault disclosure can affect whether or not a survivor acknowledges that she is, in fact, a victim of sexual assault. This is illustrated in Pitts and Schwartz's (1997) survey of college females. Using behaviorally specific questions from Koss' Sexual Experience Survey (SES), the authors found that 288 women from their original sample were victims of completed rape.⁷ However, when asked specifically "Has a man ever raped you?" only 27% (n=58) of these women responded affirmatively. The survey also asked about whether the respondent had disclosed the rape and included an open-ended question about the most helpful

⁷ The size of their original sample is unclear from the brief write-up of their study presented in *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women* (1997). This text summarizes an article, "Promoting self-blame in hidden rape cases," from *Humanity & Society*, 1993. Unfortunately, the 1993 article could not be located online or in print through the University of Cincinnati library, nor through interlibrary loan or other search engines.

response received. The most common theme in these responses was that of blame: either appreciating not being blamed by the confidante or else conceiving of the confidante's blame as helpful. The significance of this finding, according to the authors, is that those who emphasized the helpfulness of not being blamed were the same respondents who acknowledged their rape victimizations. Conversely, those who found being blamed most helpful were those who did not acknowledge being rape victims. As explained by Pitts and Schwartz, women who are blamed by confidantes do not accept that they have been raped, which indicates that victim acknowledgement strongly depends on the reactions of friends.

Acknowledgement of sexual assault victimization on the part of survivors is important for several reasons, according to Pitts and Schwartz (1997). They claim that acknowledged victims are more likely to seek medical help, to report to law enforcement, and to seek an explanation for their post-rape trauma (see also Wilson and Miller, 2015). However, studies considering the connection between victim acknowledgement and greater help-seeking behavior have produced mixed results. The connection between acknowledgment and seeking medical attention has not been empirically established, while some studies have found that acknowledgement is related to greater likelihood to file a police report (Fisher et al., 2003; Orchowski et al., 2009; Patterson et al., 2009). For example, Kilpatrick and colleagues (2007) sampled 5,000 women about their experiences with drug-facilitated, incapacitated, and forcible rape. They found that victims' acknowledgement of rape was significantly related to reporting both in their general population sample of 3,000 women and in their sample of 2,000 college women. In their general population sample, 20.2% of women had ever experienced one of these forms of rape, and 63% of these women identified the incident as rape. Acknowledged rape victims were significantly more likely to report their victimizations to law enforcement (21.4%) compared to unacknowledged

victims (6.2%). Among their college sample, 12.6% of women had experienced rape victimization, yet only 37% of them identified the incident as rape. Acknowledged college victims were also significantly more likely to report their experiences (26.5%) than were unacknowledged victims (2.8%).

There is an extensive debate in the sexual violence literature as to the significance of acknowledgement and whether unacknowledged victims should be counted as victims at all (see Gavey, 1999; McMullin and White, 2006 for overviews of the acknowledgment debate). Nonetheless, acknowledgement is important for several reasons related to both victims and to the larger society. Victims who do not acknowledge their sexual assault experiences may be less likely to seek medical or psychological treatment to alleviate symptoms of distress (Harned, 2005). Additionally, some studies have suggested that unacknowledged victims have a greater likelihood of experiencing subsequent sexual victimization than do acknowledged victims (Layman, Gidycz, and Lynn, 1996; Littleton and Axsom, 2003; Miller et al., 2011). In terms of social repercussions, Harned (2005:410) argues that lack of acknowledgement impedes social and political change by preventing recognition of the pervasiveness of male violence against women and by keeping women from uniting to solve legitimate common problems.

Although Pitts and Schwartz's (1997) findings have yet to be replicated, they strongly suggest that confidantes play a major role in whether or not a survivor acknowledges her sexual assault victimization. Prior research indicates that despite debate on the particularities of its benefits, acknowledgement of sexual assault can be a powerful force both for individual victims and for the larger society. As such, confidantes' reactions to sexual assault disclosure can have widespread repercussions beyond the disclosure event. For the current study, the connection between reactions to disclosure and victim acknowledgement underscores the need to better

understand why some disclosure recipients react in ways that are beneficial to survivors while others react in ways that are detrimental.

Positive Social Reactions

Studies assessing social reactions to sexual assault disclosure have typically divided the range of reactions into positive and negative social reactions. Researchers have examined the content of such reactions, how they are interpreted by survivors, and how they are related to survivors' subsequent decisions and recovery. As explained by Ullman (1999), the disclosure recipient may be the most important factor in the disclosure experience since this individual has the potential to determine both the type of reaction that the victim experiences and the impact of that reaction upon the victim.

Survivors primarily describe positive reactions to disclosure as including the provision of resources and emotional validation, and report to receive them more frequently than they do negative reactions. According to Ullman (2010), positive social reactions are quite common during instances of disclosure and can be divided into three categories. These categories are 1) emotional support, such as empathy and understanding; 2) tangible aid, consisting of actions or assistance provided by others to the survivor; and, 3) information support, such as providing the survivor with useful resources or educating her about rape and its effects. Additional positive reactions reported by survivors, albeit less frequently than the above categories, include belief and validation, not being blamed, listening, reassurance, and sharing experiences (Ullman, 2010).

Several studies support Ullman's (2010) argument about the frequency and content of positive social reactions. For instance, Littleton (2010) relates that 67% of her sample of 262

college rape victims reported satisfaction with the level of social support given by confidantes, 83% of whom were identified as friends. Also, Campbell and colleagues (2001) surveyed 102 adult rape survivors about their disclosure experiences. They found that several positive reactions were experienced by most of the survivors and that the receipt of positive reactions greatly outweighed that of negative reactions. These included being believed (97%), being allowed to talk (83%), and being told it was not their fault (68%), followed by being helped to find information on coping (28%), being helped to get medical care (26%), and being taken to the police (22%). On a similar note, Ahrens and colleagues (2009) interviewed 103 female sexual assault survivors about 250 different disclosure experiences. Survivors most frequently reported receiving emotional support from confidantes (48.6%), which included supportive listening, expressions of care and concern, and assurances that the survivor was not at fault. This was followed by the provision of tangible aid (14.3%), which included a wide range of actions, such as research, child care, and advocacy.

Positive reactions to sexual assault disclosure have been associated with various positive recovery outcomes. These include increased posttraumatic growth, greater perceived benefits, and decreased risk of subsequent sexual victimization (Frazier and Berman, 2008; Miller et al., 2011). Additional advantages of positive social reactions include decreased PTSD symptoms and reduced likelihood of post-assault problem drinking (Peter-Hagene and Ullman, 2013). In a survey of 115 college female sexual assault survivors, Borja and colleagues (2006) found that positive reactions from both formal and informal support sources were associated with benefits in the aftermath of trauma, such as increased caring, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and family closeness. In terms of more immediate advantages, positive reactions to disclosure are considered to validate the victim's experience, to provide her with a context in which to work

through her feelings and trauma, and to enhance her ability to find meaning in her experience (Ullman, 1999).

Additionally, Paul and colleagues' (2014) analysis of data from the Nation Women's Study Replication reveals that women are much more likely to report sexual assault to law enforcement when encouraged to do so by disclosure recipients. Of their sample of 435 rape victims, 9.3% (n=40) were encouraged by disclosure recipients to report their victimizations to law enforcement, while 7.2% (n=31) were not; the remaining 83.5% (n=364) of the sample did not consult anyone about their reporting decisions. The researchers found that encouraged women were more likely to report to law enforcement (56.2%) than either non-encouraged (14.7%) or non-consulting women (8.7%). According to the authors, these findings indicate that differences in victims' decisions to report to law enforcement are most likely influenced by the reactions of disclosure recipients. Moreover, disclosure recipients can provide validating responses by assisting and supporting survivors in matters other than formal reporting, such as helping the survivor receive medical care or finding other resources and services (Paul et al., 2014).

In sum, research on positive social reactions to sexual assault disclosure demonstrates that their content includes several recurring themes and that the majority of disclosures are met with some form of positive response. Several studies indicate that positive reactions can have a beneficial impact on a survivor's recovery and can assist in validating her experience as meeting the criteria of sexual assault. Additionally, research has shown that positive social reactions to disclosure are related to increasing the likelihood of formal help-seeking behaviors. Engaging in formal help-seeking not only helps the survivor by providing quicker access to resources and

services, but can help society by making sexual assault less of a “disquieting secret” (Fisher et al., 2010) and potentially by bringing perpetrators to justice.

Negative Social Reactions

Conversely, negative reactions to disclosure are considered to include responses that are interpreted as harmful by survivors. As explained by Ullman (2010), negative social reactions can be divided into five main categories. These categories are 1) victim blame, in which the confidante indicates that the victim’s behavior led to the sexual assault; 2) distraction, when the victim is discouraged from talking about the sexual assault; 3) stigmatizing responses, in which the victim is treated differently after disclosing; 4) egocentric responses, wherein confidantes focus on how the assault impacts themselves and/or seek revenge regardless of the victim’s wishes; and 5) controlling responses, where the confidante removes the victim’s control over decisions. Several additional, though less common, forms of negative reactions include expressing rape myths, violating trust, minimizing the victim’s trauma, revictimization, and disbelief or denial. Research results consistently show that survivors receive negative reactions less often than they receive positive reactions (e.g., Campbell, et al., 2001; Dunn, Knight, and Vail-Smith, 1999; Hassija and Gray, 2012; Littleton, Axsom, Breifkopf, and Berenson, 2006; Littleton, 2010; Ullman, 1996a, 1999, 2010) or else that they receive both types of reactions equally (Filipas and Ullman, 2001).

It appears that the content of a confidante’s reaction is closely related to the identity of the support source to which the survivor discloses. Ullman’s (1996a) analysis of 155 sexual assault survivors shows that the sample considered friends and relatives most helpful (60.3%), followed by mental health professionals (43.2%), and rape crisis centers (11%), whereas only 5%

cited clergy, physicians, and police as helpful. Filipas and Ullman (2001) examined the positive and negative reactions received by 323 sexual assault victims who disclosed to either or to both formal and informal support sources and uncovered patterns in the content of negative reactions. Egocentric responses were most often reported as coming from friends (50%) or from romantic partners (27.3%). Family members were the most likely to distract the victim (31.6%) or to promote rape myths (29.7%). Only 26.4% of the sample reported the victimization to police, but the police were found to be the least helpful of all support sources and were the most likely to express disbelief, as well as being likely to promote rape myths.

Negative social reactions have been associated with a variety of negative recovery outcomes, including holding survivors back from future disclosures. According to Ahrens (2006), the impact of negative reactions is also related to the identity of the support source. She conducted in-depth interviews with eight rape survivors from a larger parent study and identified three ways by which negative reactions function to silence future disclosures. Negative reactions from professionals led survivors to question the effectiveness of future disclosures, whereas negative reactions received from friends and/or family reinforced survivors' feelings of self-blame. Finally, negative reactions from both formal and informal support sources reinforced survivors' feelings of uncertainty as to whether their experiences qualified as rape.

Additionally, negative reactions have been associated with increased self-blame and poorer psychological adjustment. Hassija and Gray's (2012) analysis of a sample of 68 undergraduate sexual assault survivors reveals that negative reactions to disclosure were related to higher degrees of self-blame among participants. Furthermore, participants with higher degrees of self-blame also demonstrated higher levels of PTSD. Similarly, Orchowski, Untied, and Gidycz (2013) examined the relationship between recovery and the receipt of negative

reactions among 374 undergraduate female sexual assault survivors. They found that participants who received negative reactions were more likely to exhibit increased symptoms of posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as reduced self-esteem and lower perceptions of reassurance of worth from others (see also Orchowski and Gidycz, 2015).

A recent study by Relyea and Ullman (2015) sheds further light on the relationship between the specific content of negative reactions to sexual assault disclosure and survivors' post-assault psychological outcomes. Their sample consisted of 1,863 women over age 18 who had an unwanted sexual experience since age 14 and who had told someone about their experience. They found that 94% of the sample had received a reaction from a disclosure recipient in which he or she acknowledged the sexual assault but failed to provide support. The authors labelled this reaction "unsupportive acknowledgement." They also found that 78% of the sample had received a reaction that was considered overtly hurtful, such as blaming or stigmatizing the victim. This was labelled "turned against reactions." According to Relyea and Ullman, "unsupportive acknowledgement" was associated with worse outcomes than "turned against reactions," since survivors who received "unsupportive acknowledgement" were more likely to engage in maladaptive coping, as well as experience increased levels of posttraumatic stress and depression.

Research on negative reactions to survivors suggests commonality among the types of reactions that survivors consider negative and indicates that particular support sources are more likely to endorse specific negative reactions. Negative reactions to sexual assault disclosure are harmful to survivors because they impact recovery and have detrimental influences on the

survivors' future help-seeking decisions.⁸ Moreover, they are harmful to our society because they promote silence surrounding violence against women and perpetuate the misconception that most instances of sexual assault are the fault of the victim.

For the current study, research on positive and negative social reactions is important because it illustrates the range of reactions survivors report most often experiencing after sexual assault disclosure, as well as the tangible effects these reactions can have on a survivor's recovery. However, it is unclear as to why disclosure recipients respond in supportive or unsupportive manners. Although past research has established the range and impact of positive and negative social reactions to sexual assault disclosure, nothing is known about the process involved in reacting one way or another or whether anything specific about the disclosed sexual assault incident affects the content of reactions.

Summary

A number of conclusions can be made about victims' experiences with sexual assault disclosure based on the prior research reviewed above. First, survivors of sexual assault frequently disclose their experiences to informal support sources. These are most often friends, followed by family members and intimate partners. Both male and female college students account for a large portion of disclosure recipients, according to research sampling undergraduate sexual assault survivors. Second, reactions to disclosure can affect a survivor's acknowledgement of victimization. Victim acknowledgement is considered important for

⁸ Although it is outside the scope of this dissertation, it should be acknowledged that there is some debate among scholars as to the precise content and impact of positive reactions, with scholars now generally agreeing that some survivors may interpret certain negative reactions as positive and that the long-term benefits of positive reactions are minimal to recovery (see, e.g., Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2001; Orchowski and Gidycz, 2015; Peter-Hagene and Ullman, 2013; Ullman, 1996b). However, it also should be noted that there is no debate surrounding the empirical evidence that negative reactions are often detrimental to recovery.

recovery and for subsequent help-seeking decisions. Finally, reactions to disclosure fall into positive or negative categories. Positive reactions are considered either neutral or beneficial for survivors, and can result in outcomes such as reduced PTSD symptoms, decreased risk of subsequent sexual victimization, and increased likelihood of formal reporting. Negative reactions are considered harmful for sexual assault survivors. Detrimental outcomes from negative reactions include increased self-blame, increased uncertainty about whether the incident was criminal, increased PTSD symptoms, and reduced likelihood of future disclosures.

These findings offer the following contributions to the present study. Research on the most likely disclosure recipients indicates that college students are the most relevant population for exploring reactions to disclosure among college-age sexual assault survivors. Research on the relationships between disclosure, victim acknowledgement, and positive and negative social reactions demonstrates that reactions to sexual assault disclosure can have widespread repercussions for survivors' recovery and help-seeking decisions. Furthermore, such research provides a starting point for examining the reactions of disclosure recipients, since it has uncovered which specific responses survivors are most likely to consider either helpful or harmful. It also indicates that research now needs to move beyond categorizing the types of reactions offered upon disclosure to formulating an understanding of the process by which disclosure recipients choose one type of reaction over another.

Sexual Assault Disclosure Experiences: Confidantes' Perspectives

The research reviewed above considers the disclosure process from the survivors' perspectives. It suggests that the types of reactions given upon disclosure generally fall into the categories of positive or negative responses and that the content of the reaction can have a

significant impact on the survivor's subsequent help-seeking decisions and recovery process. This section will examine the disclosure process from the confidantes' perspectives so as to begin assessing what is known about how confidantes process and interpret disclosures and how they formulate responses. It is organized into the following subsections: 1) disclosure recipients' experiences; 2) sexual assault characteristics and types of confidantes' reactions: scenario-based studies; and 3) sexual assault characteristics and types of confidantes' reactions: action-based studies. This discussion will establish that confidantes experience a range of emotions to disclosure and that they evaluate specific aspects of the incident being disclosed when formulating their reactions.

Disclosure Recipients' Experiences

The studies below examine confidantes' perspectives on their experiences with disclosure, among both the general population and the college student population. The results of these studies address confidantes' attitudes toward survivors, how receiving a sexual assault disclosure emotionally affects recipients, and the degree to which recipients believe themselves helpful or prepared during a disclosure situation.

Christiansen, Bak, and Elklit's (2012) study considers the experiences of disclosure recipients among the general population. They surveyed 107 "secondary victims" of both male and female rape survivors, recruited from Denmark's Centre for Rape Victims. The secondary victims included friends, family members, and intimate partners. They found that although most respondents attributed blame to the rapist, an ANOVA analysis revealed that friends were significantly more likely to blame the victim than were family members. Additionally, 66% of

respondents felt that they should have been able to prevent the assault and 77% found supporting the victim difficult.

Confidantes' experiences of difficulty generally fell into four main categories: 1) insecurities about how to help the victim (41%); 2) difficulty with the victim refusing the respondent's help (27%); 3) problems with the victim's reactions to his/her experience (15%); and 4) the respondent's own feelings, such as not wanting to think or know about the rape or being distressed by it (12%). Regression analysis revealed that significant levels of traumatization for secondary victims was associated the following aspects of the sexual assault: 1) a more recent assault ($\beta = -.26$); 2) greater efforts to support the victim ($\beta = -.28$); 3) recurrent thoughts about having been able to prevent the assault ($\beta = .25$); 4) a lack of social support for the respondent ($\beta = -.31$); and 5) feeling let down by others ($\beta = .19$). Christiansen and colleagues' (2012) study demonstrates the emotional complexity involved in receiving a sexual assault disclosure and in endeavoring to support the victim, as well as the characteristics of sexual assaults that most affect disclosure recipients.

However, according to Ahrens and Campbell (2000), the majority of undergraduate disclosure recipients experience validating, rather than distressing, emotions as they assist survivors in their recovery processes. They used their own Impact on Friends scale to survey 60 male and female undergraduate disclosure recipients on attitudes toward the survivor, subsequent changes in the friendship, ability to help the survivor, and the emotional impact of this experience. Their results indicate that, in general,⁹ participants did not blame victims for sexual assault, felt empathetic, and did not perceive their friendships as having suffered. Most

⁹ Percentages are provided where the authors provided them. Other results are based on means obtained from the scale used in their survey.

participants believed their efforts to help were effective and were not confused about how to help, although 68% (n=41) expressed uncertainty about what survivors needed and 40% (n=24) expressed uncertainty about how to help. Finally, most participants did not report feeling particularly distressed, although the majority did report experiencing several distressing emotions, including 1) feeling angry at the assailant; 2) feeling shocked by what happened; and 3) wanting to get even with the assailant. Unfortunately, the authors do not elaborate on the content of confidantes' responses or on how their responses were related to specific sexual assault characteristics.

Banyard and colleagues (2010) replicated Ahrens and Campbell's (2000) study with a much larger sample of 1,241 male and female undergraduates and using a shortened version of the Impact on Friends scale. Their findings reveal that 64.5% of the participants believed that they were a good source of support for the survivor, although the percentage of participants that felt they did a good job helping the friend (44.5%) was similar to the percentage that felt upset dealing with the friend's experience (43.1%). Overall, however, participants reported more validating than distressing emotions related to the disclosure experience, in line with Ahrens and Campbell's (2000) results.

Branch and Richards (2013) analyzed interviews with 10 male and female undergraduate disclosure recipients for patterns in the secondary effects of disclosure. They found that the most common reactions were anger, shock and disbelief, feelings of concern, and changes in worldview. Although most participants expressed anger at the perpetrator, a few also were angry with the survivor. Additionally, some participants blamed the survivor for the incident or felt betrayed due to the circumstances surrounding the incident. This qualitative study provides a more substantial glimpse into the emotions experienced by confidantes during disclosure and as

they seek to assist the survivor. Nonetheless, the study does not explore the content of responses participants gave to survivors, and so cannot offer insight into how their emotional experiences influenced their reactions.

The above studies explore the emotional experiences common among confidantes receiving sexual assault disclosures. Although Ahrens and Campbell (2000) report that most friends experience validating emotions, other studies uncover the various types of distress experienced by disclosure recipients. These include self-directed anger for not preventing the sexual assault, anger and blame directed toward the victim, discomfort, and uncertainty about how best to respond. This research demonstrates that sexual assault disclosure is generally stressful for both parties and that the degree of distress experienced by the recipient may affect the specific advice or type of support offered to the survivor.

The import of this line of research for the present study is the indication that even if a disclosure recipient considers him/herself to have been a helpful support source, this experience is still likely to result in various distressful emotions. Some feelings of distress are self-directed, while others are directed at the victim. Another form of distress experienced by disclosure recipients includes not having support in the role of confidante, not knowing how to best support the survivor, and not knowing what resources are available to suggest to the survivor. This area of research indicates that a better understanding of disclosure recipients' perspectives will illuminate ways to begin better assisting confidantes in their roles, and thereby better respond to the needs of sexual assault survivors.

Sexual Assault Characteristics and Types of Confidante Reactions: Scenario-Based Studies

In addition to identifying common emotions experienced by disclosure recipients, research on their perspectives also has advanced our understanding of which specific characteristics of sexual assault incidents may influence confidantes' interpretations and reactions. To date, five studies have used hypothetical scenarios to explore the relationship between sexual assault incident characteristics and disclosure recipient responses. These studies will be reviewed below.

Ruback and colleagues (1999) conducted one of the first published studies focusing on the types of advice that confidantes would offer victims according to varying hypothetical victimization scenarios. Their findings revealed that confidantes' recommendations to report victimization to law enforcement varied according to the type of crime, the age and gender of the victim, the confidante's age and gender, the identity of the perpetrator, and victim and/or perpetrator intoxication. Across all types of crimes, which included four property crimes and five personal crimes, respondents consistently viewed reporting as more appropriate for female victims, for victims who were 21 and over, and for victims who had not been drinking. Additionally, females were more likely than males to recommend reporting across all types of situations, while males tended to prefer some type of private action. Although this study did not focus exclusively on sexual assault, it did reveal that reporting recommendations vary considerably according to different sexual assault characteristics. Participants were most likely to advise reporting sexual assault when the victim was assaulted by a stranger or was sober, and least likely to advise reporting when the victim had been drinking or was assaulted by a boyfriend.

Ben-David and Schneider (2005) examined how undergraduate disclosure recipients might perceive varying sexual assault scenarios, with a particular focus on how these perceptions change according to increased levels of acquaintance between the victim and offender. The authors surveyed 150 male and female undergraduates from three Israeli universities; participants were first administered a gender roles questionnaire, then read one of three rape scenarios, and finally completed a rape perceptions questionnaire. The scenarios consisted of three different victim-offender relationships: neighbors, ex-partners, and current partners. This study did not examine the types of advice respondents would offer survivors, but instead focused on their beliefs about the appropriate punishment for the offender.

Ben-David and Schneider found that as the acquaintance level between the victim and offender increased, there was a greater tendency for respondents to minimize the severity of the rape. Closer relationships between the victim and the offender led participants to perceive the situation less as rape, as less violating of the victim's rights, and as less psychologically damaging. For example, the authors state that when the perpetrator and victim were a couple, it was easier for participants to minimize the severity of the situation since they could assume that they had sexual relations in the past. Closer victim-offender relationships resulted in recommendations of less severe punishment, although male respondents recommended less severe punishment across all relationship levels than did their female counterparts. This research demonstrates that victim-offender relationships are a significant factor in confidantes' interpretations of sexual assault disclosure. As such, this is one of the characteristics of a sexual assault disclosure that may influence disclosure recipients' reactions and help-seeking recommendations.

Untied and colleagues (2012) focused on how reactions to a hypothetical acquaintance rape change according to differing levels of victim and perpetrator intoxication. The authors surveyed 295 male and female undergraduates who read one of four acquaintance rape scenarios and were asked to 1) rate the scenario on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “not at all rape” and 10 being “definitely rape;” 2) rate the responsibility of the scenario’s victim and perpetrator on another scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “no responsibility” and 10 being “total responsibility;” and 3) complete a questionnaire about how they would respond to the victim’s disclosure of the scenario. The four scenarios involved different levels of victim and perpetrator intoxication, including neither party being intoxicated, both being intoxicated, and one or the other being intoxicated.

The authors found that participants attributed greater responsibility to the victim and less to the perpetrator in scenarios where the victim was portrayed as consuming alcohol. Additionally, participants indicated that they would be less likely to provide the victim with emotional support when only the perpetrator was consuming alcohol, as compared to the scenario in which both were drinking. However, participants were not more likely to react to disclosure by blaming the victim if she was intoxicated than if she was sober, nor did they rate perpetrators as less responsible when they were drinking than when they were sober. This study reveals that alcohol consumption can play a part in confidante’s interpretations of and reactions to a sexual assault disclosure. Regardless, the relationship between intoxication, attributions of responsibility and blame, and confidantes’ willingness to provide emotional support is not clear-cut.

Deming and colleagues’ (2013) qualitative study of female undergraduates participating in focus groups illustrates the negotiation strategies that disclosure recipients might employ as

they work to interpret a scenario and to determine how they ought to respond to the victim. The study included 33 total participants in two separate focus groups. Both groups were presented with three different vignettes, each of which met the legal criteria for rape but were potentially ambiguous due to varying levels of alcohol consumption, varying degrees of consent, and a known perpetrator.

Many participants stated that their responses to victims would depend on the timing of the disclosure and whether the victim attempted to resist either verbally and/or physically. Across all three scenarios, most participants recommended avoiding the perpetrator and sometimes recommended psychological counseling; reporting to law enforcement was only recommended in the scenario in which the victim and perpetrator did not have a prior relationship. Participants who indicated that reporting to law enforcement would be warranted in any of the scenarios also expressed reluctance to recommend it due to their perception of our culture's tendency to blame the victim and the sense that the victim would not be treated fairly by the criminal justice system.

Deming et al. argue that the general reluctance to advise reporting to law enforcement relates to participants' perceptions that the ambiguous scenarios used in their study are considered normative by college women. As a result, participants had difficulty defining such scenarios as rape, and this influenced their reactions and hypothetical responses to disclosure.

According to the authors:

If what occurred was not rape, the women stated they would advise a friend who experienced the incident to ignore the situation or avoid the male. Thus, the experience is normalized, the perpetrator is not held accountable, and the response of normalizing these types of sexual assault is perpetuated within the peer group (2013:18).

This study in particular highlights the difficulty disclosure recipients may have in interpreting sexual assault scenarios that do not correspond to the stereotype of “real rape,” how this influences the type of advice offered, as well as the repercussions associated with further normalizing and justifying sexual aggression between acquaintances.

Amacker and Littleton (2013) published the only study to date that explicitly examines possible factors contributing to positive and negative reactions to disclosure, in addition to considering the mechanisms of how these factors result in particular reactions. In their study, 167 female undergraduates listened to one of three audio recordings of a date narrative that ended in either sexual assault, consensual sex, or no sexual activity; the last two narratives served as controls. The participants then rated their perceived similarity to the female in the narrative, rated how much responsibility they attributed to either party, and completed a survey on their personal victimization histories.

The authors found that 31.1% (n=52) of the sample reported at least one experience with sexual assault and 57% (n=95) reported at least one previous experience with disclosure; these two groups rated themselves as more similar to the narrative’s sexual assault victim and assigned less responsibility to her than did participants with no history of sexual assault or disclosure. The authors conclude that an observer’s perceived similarity to the victim and/or the assailant functions as a mechanism through which positive or negative reactions are provided upon receipt of a disclosure. This study is noteworthy in that it is the first attempt by researchers to determine the mechanism through which individual characteristics contribute to reactions to disclosure.

These five hypothetical studies are important because they permit some conclusions about which specific characteristics of a sexual assault incident can influence reactions to

disclosure. The research reviewed earlier in this chapter indicated that victims' help-seeking decisions are related to characteristics of their sexual assault experiences. This suggested that disclosure recipients may likewise take incident characteristics into consideration when formulating reactions to disclosure. The above review of scenario-based studies offers several important insights into which specific characteristics of a sexual assault disclosure can influence disclosure recipients' interpretations and reactions. Victim-offender relationships and alcohol consumption are two particularly important factors influencing reactions to disclosure. Incidents of sexual assault that resemble normative heterosexual encounters are difficult for confidantes to define as sexual assault, and therefore present difficulty for offering advice or emotional support. These studies thus present a preliminary account of sexual assault incident characteristics deemed important by disclosure recipients. However, since these findings are based on hypothetical scenarios, it cannot be stated with certainty that these characteristics influence reactions to actual disclosure situations.

Sexual Assault Characteristics and Types of Confidante Reactions: Action-Based Studies

The action-based studies described below supplement the findings of scenario-based studies by revealing what types of reactions confidantes have actually given to disclosures in the past. To date, only two published studies have considered actual reactions to sexual assault survivors given by informal disclosure recipients. This information is important because it elaborates on findings from studies examining survivors' accounts of disclosure reactions and those gleaned from scenario-based research. These two studies will be reviewed below.

Dunn and colleagues (1999) surveyed 828 male and female undergraduates on their experiences with sexual assault disclosure. Participants were administered a questionnaire that

examined their disclosure experiences (whether they had been disclosed to and by how many women), characteristics related to the incident, victim, and perpetrator for up to four different disclosures, and open-ended questions about how the participant responded to the disclosure(s) and what, if any, advice they offered. Of the entire sample, one-third of participants (n=282) had been recipients of one or more sexual assault disclosures, accounting for a total of 396 separate disclosures.

Participants provided a variety of responses to the open-ended question of how they reacted to disclosures. Some simply indicated that they do not know or did not remember how they reacted (12%, n=47) or that they “did nothing” in response (4%, n=17). Half of the respondents (52%, n=205) offered a positive social response, such as listening to the victim, offering comfort, or giving advice. Respondents most often advised victims to seek psychological help, followed by urging medical assistance, and finally by suggesting reporting to law enforcement or taking another form of action against the perpetrator.¹⁰ Negative social reactions were less frequent, accounting for only 3.5% (n=14) of responses. These included challenging the victim’s decisions, questioning the validity of the victim’s experience, suggesting the victim was responsible, or disbelieving the victim.

Dunn et al.’s (1999) study is useful in identifying the most common types of reactions and advice offered by confidantes and shows that most confidantes report offering positive social reactions rather than negative ones. However, although the authors provide information on different aspects of the sexual assaults disclosed to their respondents (such as victim-offender relationship, degree of force or injury, or alcohol consumption, among others), they do not explore how, if at all, these factors related to respondents’ reactions. It thus remains unknown

¹⁰ The authors did not provide percentages for these responses.

whether any of the elements identified by scenario-based research as being influential to confidantes are confirmed as such in actual disclosure experiences.

Paul and colleagues (2013) surveyed 2000 female undergraduates and examined the incidence of disclosure receipt and the likelihood of encouraging reporting. The authors found that 41.5% (n=827) of their sample reported having received a disclosure and 72% (n=597) of the disclosure recipients reported encouraging the survivor to report the sexual assault to law enforcement. However, no information is provided as to whether or not victims followed advice to report, whether and what other types of advice were offered by respondents, or whether advice differed according to characteristics of the incidents being disclosed.¹¹

Very few researchers have focused specifically on disclosure recipients' perspectives of the content of actual reactions and advice they have offered survivors. Findings from these two studies suggest that confidantes' descriptions of their reactions largely match those described by victims in terms of content and frequency. The majority of disclosure recipients in these studies report offering supportive and helpful responses to survivors. This is significant in terms of the present study because the dearth of research in this area indicates that much is currently unknown about the content of reactions from the perspectives of disclosure recipients. The first study clarifies that recipients' descriptions of the content of their reactions generally corresponds with survivors' descriptions. The second study illustrates that most confidantes in the sample encouraged the survivor to report to law enforcement. However, questions still remain about how

¹¹ This is somewhat addressed in the authors' analysis of their National Women's Study Replication data (Paul et al., 2014), in which the authors found that sexual assault survivors who received encouragement from confidantes to report their victimizations to law enforcement were more likely to do so. Moreover, they found that there were no significant differences in the characteristics of sexual assaults for which reporting was encouraged versus those for which it was not.

confidantes interpret disclosures and the process by which these interpretations influence their various responses.

Summary

Based on the research outlined above, several conclusions can be drawn about confidantes' experiences during and following sexual assault disclosure, as well as their hypothetical and actual reactions to disclosure. First, most disclosure recipients believe themselves to be helpful and supportive to sexual assault survivors. Nonetheless, many report experiencing various forms of distress as a result. Distressing emotions are often self-directed, such as when a confidante blames him or herself for not preventing the assault. Less often, a confidante's distressing emotions are directed toward the victim, such as when the victim is blamed for the incident. Many disclosure recipients also report distressing emotions related to not knowing how best to respond or to help survivors. Second, scenario-based research uses hypothetical sexual assault vignettes to explore how disclosure recipients would advise survivors and whether their responses change depending on different incident characteristics. This line of research reveals that the advice given by confidantes is primarily influenced by two aspects of sexual assault incidents, specifically victim-offender relationships and alcohol consumption. Past research also indicates that disclosure recipients have difficulty interpreting incidents as sexual assault when they resemble heteronormative sexual encounters. Finally, action-based research confirms the general content and frequency of reactions to disclosure. Disclosure recipients sampled in these few studies report that they most often provided survivors with supportive and helpful responses.

The three types of studies reviewed above constitute the current state of knowledge about sexual assault disclosure from the perspectives of disclosure recipients. They contribute to the present study in the following ways. The first area of inquiry reveals that confidantes often find disclosures emotionally taxing and can experience uncertainty regarding how to assist survivors or what resources are available. This underscores the need for scholars and practitioners to consider how best to support future and current disclosure recipients in their endeavors to support survivors. The second line of research indicates that confidantes' interpretations of sexual assault incidents and their reactions to survivors are, in fact, influenced by specific characteristics of the disclosed sexual assault. The most influential characteristics appear to be the nature of the victim-offender relationship, alcohol consumption for both victims and offenders, and how closely the incident resembles a heteronormative sexual encounter. However, it is unclear whether these characteristics are influential in actual, rather than hypothetical, instances of disclosure. The final area of inquiry highlights that researchers have not yet considered how sexual assault incident characteristics are related to the content of actual disclosure reactions.

Social Issues Surrounding Sexual Assault Victimization

The research reviewed in the previous section suggests that confidantes' reactions to disclosure *are* influenced by specific characteristics of the disclosed sexual assault incident, despite the lack of clarity as to how specific characteristics relate to specific reactions. A related question is *why* would reactions to disclosure change depending on the characteristics of the incident? Unfortunately, past research on sexual assault disclosure has given limited consideration to this question from disclosure recipients' perspectives. It is possible that there are several larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization that can influence how an

individual interprets and responds to sexual assault disclosure. A better understanding of confidantes' perspectives on these issues will address the question of *why* reactions to sexual assault disclosure change according to specific incident characteristics.

One social issue, in particular, has been most frequently addressed as relating to sexual assault disclosure, namely the issue of rape myth acceptance. Rape myths are prejudicial, stereotypical, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rape perpetrators, which contribute to a climate that is hostile to rape victims (Burt, 1980). Although prior research has shown that greater acceptance of rape myths is linked to reduced support of sexual assault survivors, particularly through an increased tendency to blame the victim (see, e.g., Cowan, 2000; Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell, 2013; Paul, Gray, Elhai, and Davis, 2009), there are some shortcomings with this approach (see Hockett, Smith, Klausning, and Saucier, 2016, for an overview).

First, the majority of research on rape myth acceptance indicates that rape myths operate indirectly through other cultural issues. These include hostility toward women (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010), opposition to gender equality (Chapleau and Oswald, 2013), and just world beliefs (Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell, 2013). As such, it is difficult to parse out whether individuals are endorsing the specific constructs in rape myth scales or whether these represent other culturally-influenced attitudes. Second, much of this research has employed quantitative methods. The dearth of qualitative research means that there is a lack of information as to how participants specifically draw upon rape myths in formulating their attitudes, their reasoning for accepting certain rape myths while rejecting others, or their perceptions of how rape myths affect their attitudes toward rape and sexual assault victimization. By moving beyond rape myth acceptance and taking additional social issues into account, the present study will extend the lens of what is currently known about why the specific characteristics of a sexual assault incident can

influence the interpretations and reactions of disclosure recipients. Furthermore, doing so will contribute to building a complete grounded theory that addresses the interplay of how and why responses to disclosure can change according to incident characteristics.

This section will examine three social issues that past research has not yet explicitly connected to the disclosure process. It is organized into the following subsections: 1) the “real rape” stereotype; 2) miscommunication; and, 3) false allegations. The first subsection will establish what prior research has uncovered about “real rape.” It also will consider how adherence to the validity of this stereotype may explain why certain incident characteristics can influence disclosure recipients’ interpretations and reactions. The second will review past findings related to miscommunication as an explanation of sexual assault. Additionally, it will address how this misconception can affect disclosure recipients’ decisions to support survivors. The final subsection will discuss the issue of false rape/sexual assault allegations and how concern about the frequency of false allegations may impact disclosure recipients’ advice giving decisions.

“Real Rape”

Susan Estrich (1987) was among the first to call attention to the stereotype of “real rape” and the ways in which it affects how rape and sexual assault are conceived of in our society. The stereotypical “real rape” is perpetrated by a stranger, takes place in obscured public settings, such as alleyways and parking lots, and results in visible physical injuries to the victim from attempting to resist the attacker. Conversely, “simple rape” (i.e., acquaintance or date rape) is usually perpetrated by someone known to the victim and occurs in private settings, often without victim injury. Estrich (1987) argues that society only legitimates sexual assault incidents that

conform to the “real rape” stereotype. Furthermore, she contends that only survivors of “real rape” are considered worthy of personal sympathy and social action.

Although “real rape” may be stereotypical, it is not, in fact, typical. According to the NCVS, for example, only 19% of all rapes and sexual assault in 2013 were committed by strangers, while 40.3% were committed by acquaintances and 35.9% were committed by intimate partners. Hence, 76.2% of all rapes and sexual assaults in 2013 were perpetrated by non-strangers. Concerning the location of rapes and sexual assaults in 2013, only 13.7% occurred in public settings, such as commercial properties or parking lots, while 64.1% occurred at or near victims’ homes. Finally, victims of rape and sexual assault in 2013 were just as likely to be injured during the attack as not: 50.9% suffered some form of injury, while 49.1% did not (Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool). The NCVS and a number of other studies (e.g., Fisher et al., 2010; Koss et al., 1988; Orchowski, Untied, and Gidycz, 2013) provide evidence that none of the characteristics of “real rape” are representative of the typical sexual assault incident, which more often conforms to “simple rape.”

Despite these data, past research indicates that the “real rape” stereotype affects both sexual assault survivors and disclosure recipients. “Real rape” characteristics have been shown influential for survivors’ self-help seeking decisions (see, e.g., Sabina and Ho, 2014; Starzynski et al., 2005; Zinzow et al., 2013), as well as affecting both formal and informal disclosure recipients’ interpretations and subsequent reactions (see., e.g., Ben-David and Schneider, 2005; McMillan and White, 2015; Ruback et al., 1999). As explained by Deming and colleagues (2013), disclosure recipients can be conflicted in attempts to interpret as sexual assault encounters occurring between acquainted individuals that do not result in visible injury to victims. As such, they argue that incidents of “simple rape” are considered less traumatic for

victims and therefore not a valid social concern. A remark from UC Berkeley professor Neil Gilbert exemplifies the attitude that “simple rape” is unproblematic. He states, “Comparing real rape to date rape is like comparing cancer to the common cold,” (quoted in Raphael, 2013:16).

Prior research reveals that sexual assault survivors may be influenced by the “real rape” stereotype in their decisions to acknowledge victimization. For example, Kahn and colleagues (2003) conducted a mixed-methods survey of 504 female undergraduates concerning their experiences with rape (defined as vaginal penetration under threat, intimidation, inability to consent, and/or verbal or physical force). They found that 19.8% (n=97) of their sample had experienced rape. Among this group, 58% (n=56) did not label their experiences as rape, 34% (n=33) did, and 8% (n=8) were uncertain. According to the authors, women were least likely to acknowledge their experiences as rape when they did not match the “real rape” stereotype. Their qualitative data revealed that the least likely acknowledged rapes involved: 1) intimate partner perpetration; 2) victim impairment through alcohol or drugs; and 3) oral or digital sex. In contrast, the most likely acknowledged rapes included: 1) perpetrator force and victim injury; 2) nonromantic partner perpetrators; and 3) non-intoxicated perpetrators. Additional studies support these findings, suggesting that sexual assaults corresponding with the “real rape” stereotype are those most likely acknowledged by survivors (see, e.g., Anderson, 2007; Heath, Lynch, Fritch, MacArthur, and Smith, 2011; Koss et al., 1988).

Some scholars argue that the association between victim acknowledgment and the “real rape” stereotype is a reflection of women’s latent understanding of our society’s definition of sexual assault. As explained by Liebowitz and Roth (1994), women likely internalize culturally prevalent beliefs about rape and sexual assault. When a woman attempts to interpret her experience with sexual victimization, preexisting and unconscious beliefs are likely activated.

Hence, an experience will be labeled “rape” if it accords with the culturally predominate stereotype of rape, and otherwise labeled “not rape.” These culturally derived beliefs influence survivors as they try to make sense of trauma, even if the beliefs are not attributed to culture or actively endorsed (Liebowitz and Roth, 1994). Likewise, the authors argue that those who learn about a survivor’s experience will attempt to interpret it within the same framework of culturally prevalent ideas.

Gilbert’s comment, quoted above, is indicative of a primary misconception about rape and sexual assault; namely, that “simple rape” is less traumatic than “real rape.” This stance carries the assumption that date or acquaintance rape is less traumatizing for victims and thus results in fewer mental and physical health symptoms. However, past research has shown that both forms of sexual victimization lead to similar mental and physical health outcomes. For example, Koss and colleagues (1988) conducted a national survey of 6,159 male and female undergraduates, 15.4% (n=489) of whom were victims of rape. The authors compared victims of stranger rape (10.6%, n=52) with victims of acquaintance rape (85%, n=416), in addition to comparing the experiences of victims of different types of acquaintance rape. Among acquaintance rape perpetrators, 35% (n=147) were steady dates, 29% (n=122) were nonromantic acquaintances, 25% (n=103) were casual dates, and 10.6% (n=44) were spouses or family members. Although survivors of acquaintance rape, in general, were less likely to acknowledge their rape victimizations or to disclose these incidents, the authors found that there were no significant differences among any of the groups in their levels of psychological symptoms. Hence, all survivors, whether of acquaintance or stranger rape, experienced similar mental health consequences.

More recent studies have supported Koss et al.'s (1988) conclusions (see, e.g., Katz, 1991; Schwartz and Leggett, 1999). Overall, research on the physical and mental health outcomes associated with “simple rape” and “real rape” suggest that there is minimal difference in the severity of trauma experienced by victims. According to Abarbanel (2001), however, survivors of acquaintance rape may be at greater risk for longer-term psychosocial problems since they generally receive less support and validation from formal and informal support providers. Abarbanel (2001) considers the reduced support and validation experienced by victims of acquaintance rape to be a consequence of society's misconceived distinction between “real rape” and “simple rape.”

Overall, research on “real rape” indicates that this stereotype can influence both victims' and non-victims' interpretations of sexual assault incidents and therefore is an important social issue worth exploring in the disclosure process. The above discussion of “real rape” can be related to prior findings that confidantes' reactions to sexual assault disclosure are influenced by incident characteristics, such as victim-offender relationships and alcohol intoxication (Ben-David and Schneider, 2005; Deming et al., 2013). This suggests that disclosure recipients are less likely to interpret an incident as sexual assault the less it resembles the stereotypical rape. Thus, this stereotype and its accompanying misconceptions are possibly one of the social issues that confidantes draw upon when formulating their interpretations and responses to survivors. However, no study to date has specifically examined how this stereotype is influential to the perspectives of disclosure recipients as they formulate their interpretations and reactions to disclosure.

Miscommunication

Another social issue surrounding sexual assault victimization that may potentially influence reactions to disclosure is the idea that many instances of sexual assault are actually instances of miscommunication between the two individuals involved. In an instance of miscommunication, one individual believes him or herself to be refusing sexual activity but the other perceives that person to be consenting (Beres, 2014; McCaw and Senn, 1998). In this case, what occurred between them is not an incident of sexual assault, but instead of poorly communicated intentions (Felson, 2002). According to Jozkowski (2015), however, the concept of misunderstanding is usually drawn upon by individuals who lack an understanding of the consent process, which is based on a cultural misunderstanding of how consent actually works. The prevalence of the belief that sexual assault can often be explained as miscommunication has a number of implications for how society responds to sexual assault victimization, as well as for the interpretations and reactions of disclosure recipients.

Miscommunication is thought to occur as a result of female social conditioning to indirectly communicate their sexual interests and non-interests. Female indirectness creates ambiguity about their real desires, which results in increased male aggression in attempts to achieve an unequivocal reaction to their sexual advances (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997). Some scholars have claimed that miscommunication contributes to the incidence of date rape and that rape prevalence could be reduced if women were taught to communicate more directly (Felson, 2002).

Past research provides support for the contention that women typically employ indirect sexual refusal strategies. For example, Lannutti and Monahan (2004) examined women's sexual

refusal strategies by having a community sample of 76 women orally reproduce refusal messages to unwanted sexual requests from hypothetical friends and dating partners. They found that when women were refusing friends, the most common initial strategy was to say that it would be inappropriate for the relationship (43.3%), followed by avoidance, such as through trying to change the subject (26%). When refusing dating partners, the most common initial strategy was saying the request was inappropriate for the relationship (27%). This was followed by making an excuse (21.8%), suggesting an alternative, such as waiting until later (11.5%), and offering a compliment (11.5%). Women gave increasingly forceful refusals if the friend or dating partner persisted with the request, and only 1% of the sample indicated they would comply with the request after additional attempts. This study reveals that subtle demonstrations of reluctance are indeed common among women, but that more explicit refusals are nonetheless employed when indirect strategies are ignored. These findings suggest that women's refusal strategies are unlikely to be the source of sexual assault via miscommunication.

Research by Kitzinger and Frith (1999) lends support to the claim that female sexual refusals are effective despite being indirect. The authors conducted focus groups with 58 undergraduate females and found that young women exhibit a sophisticated awareness of culturally normative ways of indicating sexual refusal. They attribute women's indirect sexual refusal strategies to the fact that refusals, in general, are complexly organized conversational interactions. Accordingly, the authors state, "acceptances do, indeed, often involve simply 'just saying yes,' but refusals very rarely involve 'just saying no,'" (1999:300). Culturally normative refusal strategies indicate that the word "no" is not necessary for a refusal to be understood, even in sexual situations. Men who argue that an incident of sexual assault was actually a miscommunication are referred to by Kitzinger and Frith as "cultural dopes": "They are claiming

not to understand perfectly normal conversational interaction, and to be ignorant of ways of expressing refusal which they themselves routinely use in other areas of their lives” (1999:310).

However, the authors also found that women actively contribute to perpetuating the idea of sexual assault as a form of miscommunication. Their focus group data shows that women label incidents as miscommunication to preserve relationships with sexually aggressive males, as well as to maintain identification as non-victims (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997). The authors also argue that women may believe the label of miscommunication offers them a sense of control since it indicates that assertive communication can prevent instances of acquaintance sexual assault. Yet, according to Frith (2009), this sense of empowerment is illusory because it places the onus for preventing sexual assault on women and removes the burden entirely from men, in addition to excusing men from ignoring culturally normative refusal techniques.

O’Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen (2006) provide evidence supporting Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) supposition that males can comprehend culturally normative refusal strategies. The authors conducted two focus groups made up of nine undergraduate males. Their data showed that men have an equally refined ability to understand refusals that do not contain the word “no” and are capable of comprehending the subtlest of nonverbal sexual refusals. Focus group participants were able to identify the effectiveness of their own and their partners’ use of nonverbal sexual refusals. In fact, when asked to give examples of women’s sexual refusals, every example offered by participants was of a nonverbal refusal. This supports the argument that men recognize and understand women’s sexual refusals, regardless of their being indirect (see also McCaw and Senn, 1998). As explained by Frith (2009), Obyrne and colleagues’ (2006) research demonstrates society’s “different but equal” approach to male’s and female’s sexual communication: “...men [are] accorded the status of naïve mishearers left the impossible task of

making sense of women's baffling messages, while women [are] accorded the status of culpable and accountable deficient communicators," (p.113).

One consequence of attributing sexual assault to miscommunication is the implication that women could prevent sexual assault by learning to make use of more direct refusal strategies (Gray, 2015). According to Murnen, Perot, and Byrne (1989), the majority of sexual assaults by non-strangers are a result of women's indirect refusals. They claim, "If women could be taught to communicate disinterest, at least those negative situations where miscommunication occurred might be avoidable," (1989:104). Similarly, Felson (2002:131) states, "Misunderstandings occur, in part, because women often do not openly communicate about the level of sexual activity they desire."

This idea is at the heart of sexual assault prevention interventions that encourage women to "Just Say No," and which target college women, in particular (Beres, 2014). The emphasis on direct refusal places the responsibility for sexual assault prevention on victims rather than on offenders. This is problematic, according to Kitzinger and Frith (1999:310), because "it allows rapists to persist with the claim that if a woman has not actually said 'NO' (in the right tone of voice, with the right body language, at the right time) then she hasn't refused sex with him." Moreover, this strategy is unlikely to be an effective way to prevent sexual assault because it is impractical. Kitzinger and Frith (1999) argue that it requires women to engage in conversationally abnormal actions that breach conventional social etiquette.

Gunby, Carline, and Beynon (2012) explore the ramifications of the current emphasis on "Just Say No" among four focus groups of 21 total male and female undergraduate and graduate students. The participants were asked to evaluate a scenario in which a male and a female went

out on a date, the female became intoxicated to the point of incapacitation, and the male had intercourse with her, whereupon, the following day, the female reported the incident to the police. A number of participants focused on the female's lack of explicit verbal refusal, but did not associate it with her incapacitated state. Instead, these participants argued that by not clearly saying "no," the female did not demonstrate her non-consent and therefore cannot claim the incident was rape. According to the authors, female participants were especially emphatic that a sexual encounter is necessarily consensual unless someone says the word "no." They suggest that the message of the "Just Say No" campaign can be internalized in an unintentional way by students. One consequence of the recommendation for women to engage in more direct refusals is that it can exacerbate misconceptions about sexual assault and the communication of consent.

In conclusion, research on miscommunication indicates that its use as an explanation for sexual assault is likely based on misconceptions about sexual communication. Although women typically use indirect refusal strategies to resist men's sexual advances, studies show that explicit refusals are given if the indirect approach is ignored, and that men are capable of correctly interpreting culturally normative indirect refusals. Prior research suggests that the label of miscommunication is endorsed as a means to preserve relationships, to maintain non-victim identities, to excuse aggressive behavior, and to foster a sense of empowerment. However, the strategy of preventing sexual assault through direct refusals is unlikely to empower women and instead may result in additional misconceptions about sexual consent.

Scholars have not yet considered the issue of miscommunication as relevant to sexual assault disclosure. However, a number of scholars of sexual victimization argue that it is a common explanation for sexual assault in our society. It is possible that disclosure recipients draw upon ideas surrounding miscommunication when they attempt to interpret the information

learned from survivors, and that this might influence their advice-giving decisions. Connecting this to the issue of “real rape,” miscommunication may appear the best way to interpret sexual assaults that are considered ambiguous, such as those that resemble heteronormative sexual encounters or that involve non-stranger perpetrators.

False Allegations

The final social issue related to sexual assault victimization that may affect reactions to disclosure is the mistaken belief that many sexual assault allegations are untrue. False allegations occur when an imaginary rape or sexual assault is reported or when consensual sexual activity is later labeled rape or sexual assault. Lisak and colleagues (2010) explain that sexual assault is unique because it is the most controversial and political of all violent crimes and the greatest area of debate concerns the issue of false allegations. The authors state, “For centuries, it has been asserted and assumed that women ‘cry rape,’ that a large proportion of rape allegations are maliciously concocted for purposes of revenge or other motives” (2010:1318). As explained by Krakauer (2015:105), against the widespread contention that there is an epidemic of rape and sexual assault in America, others instead argue that society suffers from an epidemic of false allegations, “resulting in the wrongful conviction of many thousands of innocent men.” Taylor and Johnson (2007:372) exemplify this contention, arguing that the rape reform movement has gone too far and has led to wild exaggerations about the extent of male predation and female victimization, and is based on the “empirically untenable” view that false allegations occur infrequently.

A number of malicious or self-interested reasons have been offered for the occurrence of false allegations, such as revenge, covering up infidelity, and trying to elicit attention and

sympathy, among others (Felson, 2002). The negative social consequences resulting from misperceptions about the frequency of false allegations are summarized by Lonsway (2010:1367), who argues that this attitude is not only harmful to victims, but can encourage offenders: “The underlying skepticism that sexual assault survivors face when they disclose may be the single most damaging factor in our societal response. It may also be the most powerful tool in the arsenal of rapists because it allows them to commit their crimes with impunity.”

Social anxiety about the frequency of false allegations has deep historical roots and a long lasting influence on legal thinking (Gavey, 2005). Caution against blind acceptance of rape accusations was built into the American legal system, based on 17th Century English Chief Justice Matthew Hale’s warning that rape “is a most detestable crime” that ought to be “severely and impartially... punished with death,” although “it is an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved” (Hale, 1736; quoted in Gavey, 2005:17). It was not until the late 20th Century that American courts gradually began ruling that judges were no longer required to read Hale’s “cautionary instructions” to juries serving on rape trials (Gavey, 2005). Nonetheless, according to McMillan and White (2015:286), “the cultural mistrust surrounding those who claim rape is firmly embedded.” Recent scholarship shows that this cultural mistrust is even built into the evidence-gathering practices enacted by both law enforcement officers (Venema, 2016) and medical examiners (McMillan and White, 2015).

Despite the widespread and longstanding concern about false allegations, the incidence rate of false allegations of sexual assault is unclear. Logic would dictate that it is quite low, considering the low rate of sexual assault reporting in general. However, some scholars have worked to uncover the incidence rate and to provide concrete evidence that false allegations are not, in fact, “frequent enough to be worrisome,” as claimed by Felson (2002:190). Although

some researchers have estimated the percentage of false reports to be as high as 50% of all sexual assault allegations (Kanin, 1994), the most often cited statistic is 2% of all reported sexual assaults (Lisak et al., 2010; Lonsway, 2010). This figure is based on the percentage of unfounded reports for all index crimes collected by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR).

It should be noted that the term "unfounded" includes reports that are false as well as those that are baseless, both of which can mean several different things besides the intent to deceive. According to Saunders (2012), discussions of false sexual assault allegations typically do not take into account the various definitions of the term, which can be defined differently by police officers, prosecutors, and even psychologists (see Engle and O'Donohue, 2012), and can result in different estimates among these groups, as well as within them. As opposed to an unfounded report, a report of sexual assault can only be classified as "false" following a thorough law enforcement investigation that yields evidence that a crime did not occur (Lisak et al., 2010).

Additional research on false allegations reveals some patterns in the content of false reports. Lonsway (2010) points out the majority of false reports, i.e. those found to be made with deceptive intentions, involve descriptions of "real rape." He argues that this is likely because false victims presume that "real rape" is the most likely form of sexual victimization to be believed and taken seriously by members of the criminal justice system. In spite of this finding, disclosure recipients and members of the criminal justice system are most likely to question the veracity of descriptions of "simple rape" (see also Ellison and Munro, 2010; Gunby et al., 2012).

Although the issue of false allegations appears pervasive in popular thinking about rape and sexual assault, few empirical studies have investigated their frequency or the mechanisms

through which this issue persists in contemporary culture (Lisak et al., 2010). Some scholars have theorized that the emphasis on false allegations relates to the long-standing distrust of women in patriarchal cultures (Allison and Wrightsman, 1993; Raphael, 2013), while others claim that misconceptions about the frequency of false allegations is exacerbated by media sensationalism (Kitzinger, 2009). However, there is a consensus among sexual victimization scholars that society's emphasis on the possibility of false allegations is harmful to sexual assault survivors, reduces their willingness to interact with the criminal justice system, and can have additional repercussions, such as excusing the behaviors of perpetrators (see, e.g., Gavey, 2005; Lisak, 2010; Lonsway, 2010; Raphael, 2013).

The limited scientific inquiry on the issue of false allegations suggests that this issue may be an important area of inquiry to explore among disclosure recipients. The social concern with false allegations of rape and sexual assault may influence survivors' self-help seeking decisions since they may feel reluctant to seek formal support if they are uncertain whether they will be believed by law enforcement personnel or other formal support providers. They may base their decision on whether or not they are believed by an informal disclosure recipient. However, the individuals chosen as informal disclosure recipients are likely influenced by the same misconceptions surrounding sexual assault victimization (Lisak et al., 2010). To date, no published study has examined whether and how informal support sources are influenced in their interpretations and advice giving by the possibility of false allegations. Relatedly, there is no published information on the characteristics of a sexual assault disclosure that lead confidantes to question the veracity of the incident. This is an important area of inquiry because of its potential to uncover misconceptions that could be addressed in efforts to improve sexual violence

education. This would not only assist in clearing up such misconceptions, but also could help future disclosure recipients to better support survivors.

Summary

The research described above illustrates that these three social issues (namely, the stereotype of “real rape,” the idea of miscommunication, and the concern with false allegations) are likely relevant to sexual assault disclosure. Although scholars of sexual victimization have explored these social issues within the larger body of sexual assault literature, their implications for the disclosure process have not yet been examined. The reasons for beginning to explore the connection between these social issues and disclosure recipients’ perspectives are outlined below.

Research on these three issues indicates that each can influence both victims’ and non-victims’ interpretations of sexual assault incidents. Therefore, conceptions about what constitutes “real rape,” miscommunication, and false allegations may together or separately guide disclosure recipients at three particular stages of the disclosure process: 1) as they attempt to understand a survivor’s experience; 2) as they make decisions about whether or not to offer the survivor support; and 3), as they determine what tangible responses and actions to offer in their support or non-support (which include a wide range of possible reactions and behaviors, from offering to accompany the survivor to medical treatment or to a police station, to spreading rumors or revictimizing the survivor; see, e.g., Ullman, 2010).

Consideration of these social issues is intended to illuminate why specific characteristics of disclosed sexual assault incidents can influence confidantes’ interpretations and subsequent advice giving decisions. Other than Amacker and Littleton’s (2013) study of how perceived

similarity to the victim can affect a confidantes' response to disclosure, no prior research has sought to uncover the mechanisms through which disclosure recipients choose to respond in a manner that survivors interpret as helpful or harmful. It is likely that sensitivity to these larger social issues is a driving force in how sexual assault disclosures are received and responded to by confidantes.

Conclusion

This conclusion will first summarize the main findings from the research reviewed above and address how these findings inform the present study. This will be followed by a discussion of how each of the proposed research questions addresses gaps in the current state of knowledge about sexual assault disclosure and extends prior research on this topic. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of how answering these research questions will contribute to building a grounded theory about the sexual assault disclosure process.

Summary of Findings

National-level and smaller-scale surveys reveal that women between the ages of 18-24 have the greatest risk for sexual assault victimization. Female undergraduates are in the age group of women with the highest rates of sexual assault, and can suffer unique mental and physical health consequences. Like women from other age groups, college-age women are unlikely to report sexual assault to formal sources, such as law enforcement, medical personnel, or mental health professionals. However, women enrolled in college are even less likely than unenrolled women to seek formal support. As such, this is an important population for sexual victimization research to target.

Across all age groups, the most likely sexual assaults to be reported to law enforcement or presented for medical care are those that resemble the stereotype of “real rape,” that is, those that include characteristics such as a stranger perpetrator, the use of a weapon, and/or result in visible injuries to the victim. Women whose experiences do not resemble “real rape” are less likely to seek formal support, despite data indicating that the characteristics of “real rape” are the least common among sexual assault incidents. Women describe various reasons for not seeking support from formal sources, the most common of which include not thinking the incident is serious enough, uncertainty about whether a crime occurred, concerns about not being taken seriously by law enforcement, and not wanting others to know about the incident. These findings suggest that women experience common facilitators and barriers to formal self-help seeking, which include incident characteristics and perceptions of others’ responses.

Although rates of reporting and other formal help-seeking behaviors are low, research shows that sexual assault survivors are extremely likely to confide their experiences to informal support sources. College females are most likely to disclose to their friends, followed by family members and intimate partners. As such, college students, both male and female, account for a large proportion of all disclosure recipients. College undergraduates are thus the most appropriate population for researching responses to sexual assault disclosure.

The reaction that a confidante gives to a disclosure can have an important effect on the victim in terms of whether or not they acknowledge their victimization, whether they experience additional psychological trauma, whether they engage in formal help-seeking behaviors, and whether they choose to disclose again in the future. The types of reactions given by confidantes are typically divided into positive and negative social reactions. Positive reactions include various forms of emotional support, tangible aid, and information support, and have been shown

to have either neutral or beneficial effects on survivors' recovery processes following disclosure. Negative reactions, conversely, are correlated with detrimental effects on survivor recovery, such as increased self-blame, greater uncertainty about how to label the event, silencing of future disclosures, and increased PTSD symptoms. These include victim blame, distraction, stigmatizing responses, egocentric responses, and controlling responses. Past research has provided consistent findings on the content of reactions to sexual assault disclosure, as well as how particular reactions can affect a survivor's recovery and decision making. However, no published study has examined disclosure recipients' reasons for reacting in one way or another.

Research examining disclosure from the perspectives of confidantes has shown that many believe they were helpful to survivors and were able to offer sufficient and effective support. However, many confidantes also express feelings of uncertainty as to what survivors needed or insecurity about how to best help the survivor. In addition, many confidantes report experiencing various distressing emotions, such as anger and disbelief, problems with the victim's reactions to the incident, and not wanting to know about the sexual assault incident. It is unclear, however, whether and to what extent confidantes' disclosure experiences affect the form or content of their reactions to survivors.

Some researchers have explored how potential confidantes would respond to specific hypothetical disclosure scenarios. These studies allow researchers to examine how variations in sexual assault scenarios correspond to variations in confidante reactions, specifically in terms of recommendations for reporting, beliefs about appropriate punishment, and attributions of blame to either the survivor or the perpetrator. Two consistent findings from these studies are that the degree of alcohol intoxication, on the parts of both victims and perpetrators, and the nature of the victim-offender relationship are important considerations in confidantes' responses to disclosure.

Although these characteristics have been shown important to potential disclosure recipients, prior research has not examined participants' perspectives as to why such factors can change attitudes or recommendations.

Research using hypothetical scenarios provides information on how confidantes *might* respond to a sexual assault disclosure. However, such research does not reveal whether these reactions actually occur. Two studies have examined actual reactions to sexual assault disclosure. These studies have the potential to triangulate the findings of hypothetical studies, but unfortunately have not been used in this manner. Instead, findings from action-based studies confirm the conclusions from research that examines the general proportion of negative versus positive social reactions. As such, it is unknown whether and how specific reactions may be related to specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed.

Several social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization were reviewed as possibly relevant to disclosure recipients' perspectives and as potentially extending the scope of understanding the disclosure process beyond research on rape myth acceptance. Research on the "real rape" stereotype may illuminate past findings that particular incident characteristics are important to sexual assault disclosure recipients. Adherence to the idea that "real rape" is the only valid form of sexual victimization may account for the negative and harmful social reactions described by some sexual assault survivors. The misconception that sexual assault is often a result of miscommunication could explain why disclosure recipients can have difficulty interpreting as sexual assault incidents resembling heteronormative sexual encounters and could be related to the type of advice offered in those situations. Finally, the cultural preoccupation with the possibility of false allegations of rape and sexual assault also may contribute to the differential responses confidantes provide survivors for disclosures of "real rape" versus "simple

rape.” Although prior research has situated these social issues within theoretical explanations about sexual assault more generally, disclosure recipients’ perspectives on how and why they draw on such issues have not been considered.

Addressing Gaps in the Current State of Knowledge

The research reviewed above demonstrates that the current body of knowledge related to the process by which college-age disclosure recipients interpret sexual assault disclosures and respond to sexual assault survivors leaves a number of questions unanswered. This subsection will 1) present each the present study’s proposed research questions; 2) explain how each research question aims to fill the gaps identified in the review of past research; and 3) discuss how answering the research question will contribute to the larger body of disclosure and sexual assault research. This chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of why grounded theory methodology is necessary to understanding the process of disclosure from the perspectives of disclosure recipients.

1: Do college-age disclosure recipients’ interpretations of sexual assault and subsequent responses to survivors change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident?

Past research suggests that the interpretations and the content of advice given by disclosure recipients can change according to variations in the content of sexual assault scenarios. However, the majority of data addressing this aspect of disclosure was collected through surveys. It is possible that participants were constrained in their choices of interpretations and advice, especially since it is unlikely that these surveys contained all possible options for responding to disclosure.

By answering the above research question, the present study aims to fill the gap in knowledge as to whether disclosure recipients change their interpretations of sexual assault incidents, as well as their responses to survivors, according to changing characteristics in sexual assault scenarios. It will also address the full range of interpretations and responses provided by participants, rather than requiring them to select from a predetermined list of options.

2. Which sexual assault characteristics are the most influential to college-age disclosure recipients when interpreting incidents of sexual assault and formulating responses to survivors?

Past research has uncovered that two sexual assault incident characteristics in particular, namely victim-offender relationships and victim/offender alcohol intoxication, can influence disclosure recipients interpretations and responses to survivors. However, it is possible that other incident characteristics may also be considered important by disclosure recipients. Furthermore, research in this area has not determined the precise relationship between these incident characteristics and the specific reactions given to survivors.

By answering this research question, the present study will uncover whether disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses are influenced by the two incident characteristics identified as important by prior research. It also will address whether participants take any additional characteristics into consideration, as well as identifying which ones. Additionally, it will specify which characteristics are associated with which types of interpretations and responses.

3. Why do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and responses to survivors change according to these influential sexual assault characteristics?

Past findings concerning reactions to sexual assault disclosure have been situated within a variety of established theoretical frameworks. However, such frameworks are not built on the experiences of research participants; rather, these theories are used as explanations for data that appears to fit into known frameworks. No published study to date has explored the perspectives of its participants as a means of generating a theoretical explanation of the disclosure process. As such, the current body of research cannot answer the question of why particular aspects of a sexual assault disclosure are influential to the interpretations and responses of disclosure recipients.

The present study will address this gap and will extend past research by using grounded theory methodology to address not only whether and which factors are influential to participants, but how considerations of these factors change their interpretations and responses, as well as why they do so. Doing so requires considering the specific social issues that participants draw upon when determining whether or not a disclosed incident ought to be interpreted as sexual assault and then formulating their subsequent responses to survivors. Although the issue of rape myth acceptance has been explored in relation to disclosure, it is likely that additional social issues considered in the larger body of sexual victimization research may better explicate the reasons that disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses can change according to different aspects of a sexual assault incident. The social issues considered in the present study are the stereotype of "real rape," miscommunication, and false allegations.

In conclusion, the aim of this study is to answer the above three research questions using qualitative data gathered from a sample of college undergraduates. Their perspectives will inform the generation of a grounded theory of the sexual assault disclosure process. The goal of this theory is to illustrate the interconnection between sexual assault incident characteristics,

social issues surrounding sexual victimization, and interpretations and responses to sexual assault disclosure. A better understanding of this process from the disclosure recipients' perspectives has the potential to provide insight into how disclosure recipients can be better supported by advocates, practitioners, and researchers, and thereby provide better support to sexual assault survivors.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative study of college students is intended to explore two phenomena. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how these are influenced by their perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. A grounded theory approach is used to examine the interpretations and responses of college students, and how these are shaped by, and contribute to the shaping of, the often negative social milieu faced by sexual assault survivors. To explore this issue, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and subsequent responses to survivors change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident?
2. Which sexual assault characteristics are the most influential to college-age disclosure recipients when interpreting incidents of sexual assault and formulating responses to survivors?
3. Why do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and responses to survivors change according to these influential sexual assault characteristics?

The above research questions aim to uncover two interconnected aspects of the disclosure process from confidantes' perspectives. The first two research questions are intended to explore how and why specific sexual assault characteristics influence the interpretations and responses of

disclosure recipients. The third research question aims to uncover information on the ways in which social issues related to sexual assault victimization affect disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses. Answering each research question separately, and then illustrating the relationship between these two areas of inquiry, will illuminate the process of sexual assault disclosure receipt, and will inform the content of this study's grounded theory.

This chapter will begin by explaining briefly the rationale for using a qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology. This will be followed by a broad discussion of grounded theory that will provide an overview of the method's purpose and function, as well as criteria for evaluation. Next will be a description of the study's data collection methods and research sample. Finally, the data analysis process will be described in depth; this will include an explanation of the different stages of the coding process and how this process leads to theory building.

One advantage of qualitative research is its flexibility. Qualitative researchers are able to develop and to expand their areas of inquiry throughout the research process, from the beginning stages of formulating a puzzle until the late stages of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Qualitative researchers seek to discover the meanings, interpretations, and perspectives of the study's participants (Woods, 1999). The flexibility inherent in qualitative methods permits the researcher to follow the leads that emerge from the data themselves. Rather than imposing a fixed theory on participants' views, qualitative flexibility can result in insights that may suggest a new theory, further develop an existing theory, or connect areas of thought that were previously considered disparate (Woods, 1999). A qualitative approach is well suited for researching phenomena about which not much is currently understood, such as the rationale for providing various responses to sexual assault disclosure.

Grounded theory methodology, in particular, is the most appropriate qualitative approach for research that seeks to uncover the process by which individuals construct meanings out of their intersubjective experiences, as well as for when a researcher is aware of an interesting phenomenon that lacks explanation (Suddaby, 2006). Used appropriately, grounded theory methods enhance the flexibility of qualitative research while offering greater focus on what is happening in the collected data (Charmaz, 2006). Acknowledging these strengths of grounded theory necessarily begs two questions: what is grounded theory methodology and how is it used appropriately? The following section aims to answer these questions.

Grounded Theory Methodology

This section will present an overview of the purpose and function of grounded theory methodology and is intended to familiarize readers with its basic principles, which can appear vague or unstructured at first glance. The following subsections will be covered: 1) defining grounded theory; 2) constant comparison; 3) theoretical sampling; 4) theoretical saturation; 5) objectivity and grounded theory; and, 6) criteria for evaluating grounded theory. This overview will establish that although grounded theory methodology is not a system of rigid rules, following its general guidelines can lead to research that is objective, valid, and reliable, as well as rich in description.

Defining Grounded Theory

Stated simply, grounded theory is a set of principles that guide the researcher to generate or to develop theory about poorly understood phenomena by using the data quelled from researching the same phenomena. As defined by Charmaz (2006:2),

[Grounded theory methods] consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves. The guidelines offer a set of general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules. Thus, data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct.

The general guidelines offered by grounded theory provide a rubric for researchers to gather and to analyze their data effectively, through methods such as constant comparison, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and several stages of data coding, all of which will be discussed over the course of this chapter.

The notion of flexibility is important for understanding why grounded theory is based on guidelines rather than on rules. The complexity of social phenomena necessitates flexibility in the steps taken to study such phenomena (Lee, 1998). For example, attempting to understand the process through which an organization adapts to changes in management is quite different than attempting to understand the process involved in decision making during a criminal event. As such, one standard set of rules will be insufficient to generate theory about dissimilar phenomena accurately; instead, a better method is to make use of guidelines that can be tailored to the complexity of the particular phenomenon of interest to the researcher.

Although the lack of set rules in grounded theory may make quantitative researchers question this methodology, it should be noted that its guidelines illustrate the primary advantage that grounded theory has over other types of qualitative methods (Charmaz, 2006). Other qualitative methods, such as ethnography, historical-comparative research, and social autopsy, lack such general principles that allow the researcher to establish rigor¹² and to move data beyond their descriptive capability. Grounded theory methodology not only enables the

¹² The term “rigor” in grounded theory research concerns the soundness of the study’s data collection and analysis processes. Unlike in other forms of qualitative research, rigor can be assessed in grounded theory studies through various forms of evaluation criteria. Evaluating rigor in grounded theory will be discussed later in the chapter under the subheading “Criteria for Evaluating Grounded Theory.”

researcher to describe the phenomenon of interest, but to analyze data in a manner that leads to expanding upon an existing theory or to generating an entirely new theory.

Constant Comparison

Perhaps the most fundamental principle of grounded theory, and one that well illustrates the necessity of flexibility over rigidity, is the technique of constant comparison, which is used throughout the entire research process. Put simply, constant comparison means that the researcher must engage in alternating sequences of data collection and data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Other research methods typically involve the researcher collecting data in the first stage of the research process and then analyzing the data in the second stage. Grounded theory, however, involves a constant interplay between these two stages. For example, after the initial interview, the grounded theorist will analyze the resultant data.¹³ This analysis will inform the next interview, which will then be analyzed and compared to the previous one, which will inform the following interview, and so on. This interplay may continue all the way through the final stages of analysis, since the researcher is encouraged to check his or her conclusions with informants from the target population, which may necessitate returning to the field to collect more data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Unsurprisingly, the principle of constant comparison often leads researchers to explore unforeseen dimensions of the phenomenon of interest. Not only are the guidelines of grounded theory flexible, but they compel the researcher to be flexible, as well. The technique of constant comparison will allow the researcher to become attuned quickly to the unexpected in his or her data, and also will permit him or her to explore these unforeseen leads in the subsequent data

¹³ A description of the analysis involved in this stage is provided later in the chapter under the subheading “Initial Coding.”

gathering events (Charmaz, 2006). It may turn out that these are the factors most important to the participants, and the researcher should be willing to adjust the study as needed. This makes sense because the point of this methodology is to understand a process from the participants' perspectives, rather than to confirm suspicions the researcher may have developed when determining his or her research problem or to test hypotheses from a predetermined theory.

Constant comparison is one of the main techniques by which a grounded theory study actually becomes “grounded” in the data; that is, representative of the lived experiences of the participants. By engaging with the data from the beginning stages of data gathering, the researcher is able to follow up on leads that otherwise may not have been evident until data collection was complete. In the latter case, the data gathering tools (such as an interview) would remain static throughout the process and the conclusions drawn would simply reflect the assumptions the researcher had when initially creating the tool. By engaging in constant comparison, however, the grounded theorist can allow his or her data gathering tools to evolve over the course of data collection; for example, interview protocols can be adjusted to include and to examine more deeply the topics and themes generated by the participants.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling is closely aligned with constant comparison and is another fundamental principle of grounded theory. This technique is informed by the leads generated through the constant comparison method and is a way for the researcher to determine what or whom to sample next in order to follow up on those leads. Additionally, this is another technique that is carried through the entire research process since it goes hand in hand with constant comparison.

Theoretical sampling can be defined as the means by which the researcher builds upon the discoveries generated so far by the data. It does not involve any specific procedure, but is instead a strategy that the researcher can use to explore the discoveries that result from initial data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Doing so will assist in maintaining the interplay between data collection and data analysis, as well as help to ensure that the eventual conclusions are actually “grounded” in the data.

The discussion thus far of theoretical sampling gives credence to the objection that grounded theory methods are vague. However, it is important to acknowledge that rigid rules cannot be developed for this technique because they must be tailored to the specific study. No one can know in advance what unexpected constructs might emerge from early data gathering (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, it is impossible to provide a rule such as “If you find X in your analysis, then interview Person Y.” The sampling strategy chosen by the researcher must be specific to the study and should be a logical next step according to the leads generated by the earlier analysis. Despite the inability to articulate specifically what a researcher does when he or she engages in theoretical sampling, it can be argued that theoretical sampling is generally accomplished in two ways: either through “actual” sampling or through “conceptual” sampling.¹⁴

“Actual” theoretical sampling involves the researcher literally choosing who or what to sample next based on the discoveries made through constant comparison. This is the strategy described by Strauss and Corbin (1998:206-211), who delineate three stages for accomplishing the technique. The first is “open sampling,” where the researcher recruits into her or her sample any person, place, or situation that provides the greatest opportunity for discovery. For example,

¹⁴ “Actual” and “conceptual” theoretical sampling are my own terms that I use to distinguish between the two general strategies expressed by researchers, but which they unanimously refer to as simply “theoretical sampling.”

a researcher who is interested in college students' decisions to report victimization to law enforcement might want to begin by interviewing a wide range of college students about various types of victimization and reporting decisions. This will allow the researcher to gain a sense of the types of crimes college students experience, which types are reported versus which types are not reported, and general patterns in reporting decisions.

The second stage of theoretical sampling is referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as "relational and variational sampling." In this stage, the researcher purposefully chooses sites or persons based on their potential for maximizing differences among emerging concepts. Continuing with the above example, the researcher might learn from students under the age of 21 that they are unlikely to report crimes that occurred while they were intoxicated because of fear of repercussions for underage drinking. In this case, the researcher may then want to sample students aged 21 or older to determine whether they, too, would be unlikely to report a crime while intoxicated and their reasoning behind either reporting or not reporting. Doing so will permit the researcher to begin examining variations and similarities in the larger sample and to establish the differential experiences involved in the phenomenon of interest.

The final stage of theoretical sampling is "discriminate sampling." Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe this as returning to old sites, documents, or persons, or finding new ones to gather the data necessary to saturate categories and complete a study. At this stage, the researcher is no longer interested in discovering new facets of the research puzzle, but instead in sampling to confirm conclusions developed during the previous stages of data gathering and analysis. The researcher may choose to re-interview one or more of the study's initial participants to get his or her perspectives on discoveries that occurred later in the research process. Otherwise, the researcher can interview new participants who share characteristics with

earlier participants and see whether the information gathered fits with their conclusions. Once no new discoveries are being gleaned from the data gathering stage, the study can be considered to have achieved “theoretical saturation” (Charmaz, 2006) and the researcher can discontinue data gathering and move on to more advanced stages of analysis. However, as explained previously, the researcher is not precluded from returning to the field to gather new data and is encouraged to do so if later stages of analysis suggest that this endeavor would be fruitful.

Theoretical sampling, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), illuminates how a researcher can target his or her data gathering to developments in the study by choosing specific types of individuals, sites, or documents to sample. Charmaz (2006) describes a slightly different technique of theoretical sampling, “conceptual” sampling, in which the researcher focuses more on adjusting the concepts being covered in data gathering rather than on adjusting the specific targets of the sampling. In this case, the researcher might make changes to the interview protocol, for example, to engage in more discussion related to a theme that has emerged from previous data, rather than change the type of individuals whom s/he is sampling. As explained by Charmaz (2006), this form of theoretical sampling involves following the conceptual leads that arise from the process of constant comparison, and is based on the ideas, gaps, ambiguities, and questions that develop through this process. Charmaz’s (2006) description is not completely at odds with that of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Although Strauss and Corbin provide a more concrete description of the activities involved in theoretical sampling, they make a point that theoretical sampling involves sampling “incidents, events, or happenings and not persons per se” (1998:203).

Overall, theoretical sampling is a technique that guides the researcher in the attempt to elaborate upon and to refine the inferences gathered through the process of constant comparison.

This may involve sampling specific individuals to explore variations or focusing more closely on an emergent concept within the preexisting sample. Whichever way the researcher chooses to engage in theoretical sampling, it should follow logically from the current study and from the conceptual problems with which the researcher is grappling. The ultimate aim of this technique, according to Charmaz (2006:106), is that it “encourage[s] you to raise your theory to a formal, more abstract level that cuts across different substantive areas.”

Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is the term used by grounded theorists to describe the point at which the data gathering and early analysis process can come to an end and the researcher can feel comfortable moving on to advanced analysis, theory generation, and the writing up of results. There must come a point when the activities of constant comparison and theoretical sampling are no longer generating new discoveries; otherwise, the process would continue forever. The concept of theoretical saturation provides a guideline for researchers to determine the point at which they have collected a sufficient amount of data to transition to the stages of advanced coding and theory building.

Theoretical saturation is a concept that is often misunderstood by researchers claiming to make use of grounded theory methods. As explained by Dey (1999), many researchers interpret the term to imply that their data sources have been systematically exhausted and that their analysis of these data is likewise exhaustive, rather than simply “good enough” to move on. However, Glaser and Strauss’ (1967:61) original definition is that “no additional data are being found.” That is, the capacity of the data to generate new ideas has been exhausted, not the likelihood of accumulating additional evidence to support those ideas (Dey, 1999).

The idea that other data sources can offer additional support for discoveries made during data collection and analysis suggests that the decision to cease gathering data is perhaps arbitrary. There is always the possibility of discovering the unexpected in the next interview, but the researcher is eventually required to make an educated guess as to when this possibility has become unlikely (Dey, 1999). Fortunately, the principles of constant comparison and theoretical sampling aid the researcher in determining when s/he has achieved theoretical saturation. They do so by tightening the focus of data analysis and by circumscribing the sampling procedure, until the main discoveries of the study are evident and offer the researcher a substantial, though focused and manageable, amount of data with which to build theory (Dey, 1999).

Objectivity and Grounded Theory

Perhaps the most common critique of grounded theory methodology is that its claim to extract theory from data, rather than to impose theory onto data, is logically impossible since genuine objectivity in research is unobtainable. Consider the following objection to grounded theory articulated by Scott and Garner (2013:96):

The researcher never goes into the field as a *tabula rasa*, recording everything indiscriminately... building grounded theory is a disingenuous depiction of the research process, because what we build is invariably the object for which we already have a blueprint in our minds very early in the research process. There is already a foundational theory 'at work' in producing the materials for the textual database, the choice of comparisons, and the open coding process.

According to this critique, grounded theorists claim that an advantage of their methodology is its objectivity, but no one can disengage from their prior knowledge and training during the research process. In fact, choosing a phenomenon to research would be impossible if one were truly operating as a blank slate. This argument is what Suddaby (2006:634) refers to as the "myth" of grounded theory; in truth, grounded theory methodology neither requires nor carries the

expectation that researchers can develop a research problem or enter the field without knowledge of prior research. How, then, do grounded theorists manage to build theory from the data rather than impose prior ideas onto their data?

As explained by Dey (1999), discovering theory from data primarily requires researchers to avoid preconceived ideas about the eventual content of the theory. This is possible when the researcher begins a project with a problem conceived of only in terms of a general disciplinary perspective. Once the researcher has identified a general topic and has selected the site or the population wherein this problem can be studied, s/he can then permit the accumulated data to direct the emerging theoretical agenda. Prior knowledge is useful for conceiving of a productive research problem, as well as for alerting the researcher to interesting conceptual puzzles during the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). However, the researcher must use his or her knowledge and experience as a “loose frame,” that is, as a departure point for developing ideas, rather than as the end point of the study (Charmaz, 2006).

To explain this in terms of the current study, prior knowledge of research on sexual assault victimization suggested the following: 1) compared to other age groups of sexual assault survivors, college-age females have the highest rate of sexual assault victimization; 2) college-age female sexual assault survivors rarely report their victimizations to law enforcement or seek medical or psychological assistance; and 3) they frequently tell their friends about their victimization experiences. This alone was sufficient to formulate a research problem exploring the connection between points two and three, while the first point indicated the population from which to sample participants. The interview protocol was initially designed to explore general aspects that could possibly shed light on this connection, as opposed to being designed to

investigate something more specific.¹⁵ By making use of constant comparison starting with the first interview, as well as “conceptual” theoretical sampling, the subsequent interviews were relevant to the research puzzle generated from knowledge of past research, while being objective in the sense that no specific hypotheses were formed or tested.

Accordingly, the criticism of grounded theory as a “disingenuous depiction of the research process” (Scott and Garner, 2013:96) is misinformed. Rather than requiring researchers to somehow dismiss their past experience and engage in research as a blank slate, grounded theory aids researchers in making use of their knowledge generally while avoiding preconceptions about their eventual findings. Although “genuine” objectivity is impossible with any research method, adhering to the principles of grounded theory methodology is likely to result in “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:1).

Criteria for Evaluating Grounded Theory

Another contentious aspect of grounded theory methods has to do with how methodological rigor is established. One limitation of grounded theory is that the process of verification described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is recursive: they simultaneously present discovery as a process that includes verification, and verification as a follow-up to discovery (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999). As such, establishing methodological rigor in grounded theory can be an ambiguous endeavor, especially in comparison to quantitative methods.

The concepts of validity and reliability are of great importance in establishing rigor in quantitative research methods but have been given much less attention in qualitative research. Some qualitative researchers argue that these concepts do not readily apply to their studies and

¹⁵ See the next section for a more detailed description of the development of the interview protocol.

are therefore inappropriate criteria (see Lee, 1998 for a review). As explained by Lee, the concepts of validity and reliability apply equally well to both forms of research: “Any study’s conceptualizations, measurement processes, and interpretations should be chosen carefully and systematically, and should be *representative* of the phenomena of interest” (1998:145-6). Grounded theorists thus should make use of the concepts of validity and reliability by adjusting them to be more applicable to the qualitative research design, as well as by being transparent about the procedures leading to one’s findings (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Grundetjern, 2015).

Several scholars have conceived of various ways to modify the concepts of validity and reliability to grounded theory studies (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Eisner, 1991; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lee, 1998; Morse, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Each of these modifications has particular strengths, but none is appropriate for the present study. Due to grounded theorists’ general rejection of the positivist tradition, no evaluation criteria to date include an explicit consideration of generalizability. According to Charmaz (2006:180), grounded theories typically do not aim for a general level that is abstracted from their empirical reality. In fact, she argues that this is one of the strengths of grounded theory methodology, since situating grounded theories within their particular contexts permits nuanced comparisons between studies, and thereby results in more abstract and, paradoxically, more general theories (Charmaz, 2006; see also Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

A counterargument to this position is that grounded theory is therefore so tightly data-driven and data-focused that it is rendered useless outside of the study from which it is generated. As discussed earlier, the overarching purpose of this methodology is to explain an unexplored phenomenon by uncovering the process by which individuals construct meanings out of their intersubjective experiences (Suddaby, 2006). Although the grounded theory generated by

a study is based on the experiences of that study's participants, it nonetheless should have the potential to be expanded into testable hypotheses for future research.

Furthermore, the criteria articulated by past grounded theorists may be useful rubrics for the researcher to evaluate his or her own study, but are too subjective to assist readers in evaluating the effectiveness of the presented grounded theory. For example, Charmaz (2006) suggests that one key criterion for evaluating grounded theory should be the concept of *resonance*. She explains that, to achieve resonance, the researcher must achieve the following three goals: 1) establish that his or her categories portray the fullness of the studied experience and that s/he has considered the variety of meanings discussed by participants, including those that are changing, taken for granted, or otherwise unstable; 2) explicitly connect the individual experiences considered in the study to the larger social collective; and, 3) offer the study's participants, or similar people, deeper insights into their lives and worlds. However, the reader only knows whether or not the researcher has fulfilled any one criterion based on the researcher stating s/he has done so. This creates a potential for fabrication that may undermine the reader's trust in the researcher's presentation and interpretation of findings and resultant grounded theory.

In light of the weaknesses of previous evaluation criteria, the present study will make use of an original guideline for evaluating grounded theory. The following criteria are intended to assist both researcher and reader in appraising the merits of theory-building research: clarity, transparency, plausibility, originality, and falsifiability. These five criteria aim to address the quality of the research process, how well findings are grounded in the collected data, and the potential for the grounded theory to be adapted into a generalizable theory. Each of the five concepts will be discussed briefly.

The first criterion is *clarity*. A grounded theory study should fulfill the promise of this methodology not only by proposing a theory, but by proposing one that is presented clearly and is easily grasped by readers. The researcher's analysis should offer interpretations and conclusions that readers can comprehend. Furthermore, the researcher should make evident how the study contributes to knowledge and how it can contribute to improving circumstances in the study's particular setting, as well as in the larger social context.

Second, a theory-building study should be evaluated on its *transparency*. The researcher must be transparent about each step of the data gathering and analysis processes, about how specific themes were discovered in the data, and about how greater abstraction of these themes resulted in the grounded theory. Another researcher, so inclined, should be able to follow these steps and replicate the study's methodology. Moreover, it should be evident to the reader how conclusions were reached based on the data and how the researcher arrived at the theory.

The third criterion is *plausibility*. Not only should the theory be clearly presented, but it should make sense to readers and should constitute a plausible interpretation of the data. The researcher must develop strong logical links between the data, the analysis, and the conclusions. Furthermore, s/he must show that sufficient data has been gathered to merit his or her claims by providing enough evidence for the reader to form an independent assessment and ultimately concur with the researcher's conclusions.

Fourth, a theory-building study should be evaluated on its *originality*. The themes developed by the researcher should be fresh and should offer new insights, and the analysis of these themes should provide a new conceptual rendering of the data. The study must have social and theoretical significance, which the researcher must make evident to the reader. Lastly, to

establish originality, the researcher also must give a clear explanation of how his or her grounded theory challenges, extends, or refines current ideas, concepts, and practices.

The fifth and last criterion is *falsifiability*. The aim of grounded theory methodology is to generate, rather than test, theory. However, the theory should have the potential to be adapted into testable, falsifiable hypotheses. The researcher should illustrate how the discovered theory can move beyond explaining the phenomenon according to the study's particular sample and can be modified so as to become generalizable.

The above outline of evaluation criteria will be employed in the upcoming two chapters, which present the findings and grounded theory. Additionally, the concluding chapter will revisit these criteria for evaluating grounded theory research and will outline specifically how each requirement was met in this dissertation. It is expected that readers will evaluate the merits of this study accordingly.

Summary

This section has provided a broad overview of the rationale and function of grounded theory methodology, with the aims of defining grounded theory and explaining how it can be done correctly. Grounded theory can be defined as a set of principles that permit a researcher to explore a poorly understood phenomenon and to generate a theory about that phenomenon. This objective is achieved through the techniques of constant comparison and theoretical sampling. Following these principles will eventually lead to theoretical saturation, at which point the researcher can progress to theory building. The grounded theorist is "objective" in the sense that prior knowledge is used to develop a research problem, but is not used to form conclusions about eventual findings. Rather, the researcher follows the leads that develop in data collection through

constant comparison and theoretical sampling, and these leads illuminate the theory that is “grounded” in participants’ lived experiences. The methodological rigor of a grounded theory study can be evaluated according to the criteria of clarity, transparency, plausibility, originality, and falsifiability, which aid the researcher in writing up results and the audience in appraising the study’s reliability.

Data Collection and Research Sample

This section will present a detailed description of the study’s data collection procedures and research sample. It will include the following topics: 1) rationale for interview data and interview protocol development; 2) recruitment and interviewing of research sample; and, 3) description of research sample. The first subsection will describe briefly why interviews were the preferred method of data gathering for this study, as well as illustrate how the interview protocol developed according to the principles of grounded theory described above. The second will explain how the research sample was recruited and how interviews progressed. The final subsection will provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of participants. The objectives of this section are to illustrate the composition of the sample, how data gathering occurred, and also the way in which the data gathering tool (i.e., the interview protocol) evolved according to the principles of grounded theory described above.

Rationale for Interview Data and Interview Protocol Development

In-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation are the two primary methods of gathering data in a grounded theory study. For the present study, only interviewing took place due to the impracticality of arranging to observe sexual assault disclosure among friends. Interviews are an excellent data collection tool because they combine flexibility and

control in a way that can increase the researcher's analytic incisiveness according to the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In grounded theory-based interviewing, the researcher makes use of constant comparison and theoretical sampling to narrow the range of interview topics so that specific data can be gathered to develop a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). This is different from other methods of interviewing because the grounded theorist is interested less in the participants' individual stories, but rather in eliciting information on the social phenomenon of interest (Suddaby, 2006).

The interview protocol is an important tool in the researcher's attempt to narrow the range of interview topics so as to generate a theoretical framework. The initial protocol typically includes a set of questions developed based on the researcher's early formulation of the problem and a range of topics that s/he believes are related to the problem. However, the protocol is not rigid; it instead functions mainly as a guide to assist the researcher in conversing with participants (Scott and Garner, 2013). It is important to point out that the initial protocol is usually prepared from the researcher's prior knowledge and experience; thus, once s/he begins to gather data and to engage in constant comparison, s/he should be focusing more closely on the concepts that emerge from the data. These concepts should then be incorporated into the interview protocol, while provisional topics that have not resulted in generating new insights should be discarded (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The initial interview protocol used in the current study can be found in Appendix A. It can be seen that this initial protocol included a general list of talking points related to several hypothetical sexual assault disclosure scenarios, as well as to experiences with actual sexual assault disclosure. Appendix B contains the final interview protocol, which includes several footnotes describing the changes made over the course of data collection and the rationales for

either adding or deleting specific concepts.¹⁶ Finally, Appendices C, D, and E include transcripts from an early interview, a mid-point interview, and a final interview, respectively. These transcripts should clarify how the interview protocol functions as a series of talking points, as well as how interviews can differ from one another largely based on pursuing the concepts that participants themselves bring up as important. The examples provided in Appendices A-E should give the reader a sense of how grounded theory-based interviewing moves from being somewhat unfocused to becoming much more selective as the study progresses (see, e.g., Dey, 1999).

One final point about the interview protocol is the use of hypothetical questions versus questions based on participants' lived experiences. The interview protocol for this study included both, although some participants did not have any experience with sexual assault disclosure. One possible critique of hypothetical questions is that responses will reflect the participants' knowledge of ideal responses rather than how s/he would actually respond.¹⁷ However, many qualitative scholars disagree with this critique and instead view the use of hypothetical questions as appropriate for researching certain types of phenomena. Hypothetical questions ask the participant to consider possibilities and scenarios that have not (yet) taken place. Participants' responses typically provide a detailed elaboration on their thought processes as they attempt to imagine themselves in such scenarios (Scott and Garner, 2013). Furthermore, some researchers claim that responses to hypothetical questions are most often descriptions of the participants' actual experiences (Merriam, 2014) and are a good way of asking about controversial issues (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Gray, 2015). For these reasons, it is argued that the use of hypothetical

¹⁶ Readers should note that sexual assault disclosure scenarios in this study only concern heterosexual encounters, female victims, and male perpetrators.

¹⁷ I have not found a written example of this critique anywhere in the literature on qualitative interviewing, but mention it because it was brought up by the instructor of an interviewing workshop I attended in the summer of 2014, and because I consider it a criticism worth contemplating.

questions, combined with questions based on experience whenever possible, was the most effective method for querying participants on the subject of this study.

Recruitment and Interviewing of Research Sample

Approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Cincinnati was received in July, 2013. Recruitment began at the start of the Fall 2013 semester using the university's Psychology Subject Pool. This is an online system that allows university researchers to post details of their study, eligibility requirements, and available meeting times (Appendix F). In turn, students who need research participation credit can view available studies and can volunteer for any study for which they are eligible and at a time that is convenient for them. The system automatically screens out ineligible participants. The researcher includes the available dates, times, and locations in the available study slots, but can also contact the volunteer through this system, if needed. In return for participating in the study, volunteers received four participation credits, which the Subject Pool system indicated was the standard amount of credits received for studies lasting one hour.

The following eligibility requirements were included: 1) participants had to be full-time undergraduates; 2) participants had to be between the ages of 18 to 24; and 3) participants had to be comfortable speaking English. A total of 38 participants were recruited for this study from August to October, 2013. Recruitment was discontinued when it appeared to the researcher that theoretical saturation had been reached. To ensure that the sample would be as representative as possible of the target population of college student sexual assault disclosure recipients, there were no eligibility criteria that participants had to be female or had to have previously received a sexual assault disclosure.

Research has shown that survivors disclose to both male and female friends and that survivors' decisions to disclose are not based on the confidante's prior experience with either sexual assault or disclosure. For example, Banyard and colleagues (2010) estimate that 1 in 3 female and 1 in 5 male undergraduates have received or will receive a sexual assault disclosure. Furthermore, other studies of college students have revealed the high prevalence rate of receiving disclosures among college students (see, e.g., Amacker and Littleton, 2013; Dunn et al., 1999; Paul et al., 2013). For these reasons, this study excluded neither males nor undergraduates who had never received a sexual assault disclosure.

Interviews took place in private meeting rooms reserved in the Tangeman University Center. Upon meeting, the participant read and signed the consent form (Appendix G) and was provided with a copy of that form to keep. The form included contact information for the researcher, the dissertation chair, and the Institutional Review Board, should any questions or concerns arise. The participants were assured of their confidentiality, agreed to be audio-recorded, and were told that they could terminate the interview at any time without it affecting their receiving credit for participation. All subjects chose to participate; none terminated the interview early. Interviews lasted thirty-five to sixty minutes, averaging forty-one minutes.¹⁸

The data gathering phase took place during the months of September and October, 2013. After one to three interviews, depending on timing of scheduled interviews, the researcher would transcribe the audio-recordings, write analytic memos¹⁹ on the interview experience and on what new insights had been gleaned, and conduct preliminary analyses that allowed the interview protocol to be adjusted based on themes that emerged during that round of interviews. This

¹⁸ Early interviews were typically longer than later interviews, corresponding with Dey's (1999:6) claim that, as a study proceeds, interviews "become highly selective and focused on particular topics (therefore much shorter) by its close."

¹⁹ The memoing process will be described in the later section on data analysis.

process of constant comparison and “conceptual” theoretical sampling continued over the course of the data collection stage.

Description of Research Sample

The majority of participants were 18 years old (47%, n=22); ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old. Most were white (81.6%, n=31), female (81.6%, n=31), and freshmen (76%, n=29). All participants were U.S. citizens, except for one male citizen of South Korea. Few female participants (13%, n=5) were involved in Greek life and no male participants were. The majority of participants (57.9%, n=22) attended Greek life parties on a regular or semi-regular basis and half (50%, n=19) were currently involved in a romantic relationship. See Table 1 for an overview of the sample’s demographic information.

The majority of participants (55.3%, n=21) had previously received a sexual assault disclosure at some point in their lifetime. Altogether, these participants accounted for 27 separate disclosure experiences. Fifteen participants had received one prior sexual assault disclosure and six had received two disclosures. While most of the participants (86%, n=18) who had received sexual assault disclosures were female, three male participants had previously been disclosed to. One male had been disclosed to on two separate occasions. This aspect of the sample composition aligns with prior findings that survivors disclose to both males and females (Banyard et al., 2010) and that many, if not most, undergraduates have received a sexual assault disclosure at some point in their lifetime (see, e.g., Paul et al., 2013). See Table 2 for an overview of the sample’s sexual assault disclosure experiences.

Summary

This section has described both the study's data collection procedures and research sample. It has covered the rationale behind using interview data, the formation and development of the interview protocol, and how interviews adapted to these adjustments. Additionally, this section has explained how the sample was recruited and how data were gathered, as well as the demographic makeup of the research sample.

Data Analysis Process

This section will provide an in-depth explanation of the data analysis process. It will cover the following subsections: 1) coding and memo writing; 2) initial coding and pattern coding; 3) identifying the core category and theoretical coding; and 4) theory building. The first subsection will describe briefly the software used in this study, explain the purpose and general content of memo writing, and finally provide a broad overview of the coding process and its purpose. The second subsection will discuss the initial coding process, including how categories were identified and the types of pattern coding used during this stage. The third subsection will go over the advanced analysis stage of determining the core category and engaging in theoretical coding. The final subsection will explain how the coding process results in theory building, which is the overarching goal of grounded theory methodology. It is intended for this section to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the grounded theory data analysis process used in this study, as well as how the findings and conclusions laid out in upcoming chapters were reached.

Coding and Memo Writing

Both coding and memo writing are facilitated through the use of qualitative software. The qualitative software NVIVO version 10 was used for this study. This software permits the researcher to code data from first-order codes all the way up through higher-level categories by coding data initially into “nodes” and then subsuming “nodes” into “parent nodes,”²⁰ with the option of easily making changes to these coding decisions as needed. Additionally, NVIVO 10 allows the researcher to maintain a coding dictionary by allowing him or her to define each code created and to keep these in an easily accessible file attached to the larger project. Finally, the software permits the researcher to write and to store memos that are time and date stamped and that correspond with the node to which it is pertinent.

Memo writing is advocated by perhaps all experts on qualitative research. It simply involves the researcher keeping informal notes about whatever is taking place during the coding process for the sake of clarifying and working through his or her perceptions of the data (Locke, 2002). As defined by Glaser (1978:83), a memo is “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding.” A memo does not have to be lengthy, but should be able to explain the researcher’s idea fully. Memos are useful references for keeping track of the coding process, how specific ideas are related to one another, and how they are part of a more general concept (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Coding, in qualitative data analysis, has been defined as “the actual process through which the data are organized into some theoretically meaningful structure” (Lee, 1998:47-8). The term “coding” in qualitative research is typically synonymous with what quantitative researchers

²⁰ Terminology related to “nodes” is specific to the NVIVO software and is equivalent to what qualitative researchers generally call “codes.”

refer to as “data analysis” (Dey, 1999). The process of coding involves defining and naming what is being seen in the data, as well as beginning to explicate the meaning of the data (Charmaz, 2006). This process involves several stages of defining, naming, and determining meaning; the ultimate aim is to generate a theory that not only originates in this process, but also describes the process and conceptually elevates it. Overall, data analysis in grounded theory research is a series of coding stages, ranging from simply naming and describing concepts to connecting concepts together, and finally to incorporating these concepts into an overarching framework that both explains and predicts the studied phenomenon.

This description of coding and its purpose may again bring up the objection that grounded theory research is vague and unstructured. As explained by Dey (1999:115), attempts to illustrate a systematic approach to coding in general are futile because the coding process is itself aconceptual. Charmaz (2006:46), however, offers some insight as to how and why this approach to data analysis differs from that of quantitative research:

The logic of grounded theory coding differs from quantitative logic that applies *preconceived* categories or codes to the data... we *create* our codes by defining what we see in the data. Codes emerge as you scrutinize your data and define meanings within them. Through this active coding, you interact with your data again and again and ask many different questions of them. As a result, coding may take you into unforeseen areas and new research questions.

Regardless of the difficulty inherent in providing a linear description of qualitative data analysis, the upcoming subsections are intended to illustrate to readers how the coding process progressed in this research study. It should be noted that this description does not constitute a manual for coding; the process of data analysis is necessarily study-specific. The general principles at work in this study’s process of coding are, however, aligned with grounded theory methodology.

*Initial Coding and Pattern Coding*²¹

The first stage of the coding process involves two interrelated steps: first, initial coding (naming and comparing data fragments), and, second, pattern coding (categorizing the named data fragments). This stage is an important starting point of data analysis because it offers a framework for beginning to delve into analysis and also indicates which concepts are worth pursuing in upcoming data gathering occasions. This is the stage of analysis that the researcher engages in when involved in constant comparison and theoretical sampling during data collection. Although each aspect of the first coding stage is presented separately, it should be noted that this is not a linear process. Instead, these coding methods are typically done in tandem with one another over the course of data collection and early analysis.

The first step of naming is quite simple, albeit time consuming. In this step, the researcher closely reads through the data word by word and line by line and names specific data fragments according to what s/he interprets as happening in those fragments (Locke, 2002). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the names (i.e., codes) applied to data fragments at this stage should fulfill three criteria: 1) they should be *valid*, meaning that they should accurately reflect what is being studied; 2) they should be *mutually exclusive*, meaning that they should be distinct and not overlapping; and, 3) they should be *exhaustive*, meaning that all relevant data should fit into one or another code. For example, some initial codes from the present study include “stranger perpetrator,” “psychological counseling,” and “disbelief.” This process basically entails breaking the data down into many discrete parts and necessarily results in a large amount of names, or codes.

²¹ “Initial coding” is Charmaz’s (2006) term; some grounded theorists use the phrase “open coding.” Charmaz’s term will be used here as it is considered preferable due to implying an initiating step in harmony with first stage coding procedures (Saldana, 2009:81). “Pattern coding” is generally equivalent to what Charmaz (2006) terms “focused coding” and other grounded theorists term “axial coding” (see, e.g., Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In the second step of this process, the researcher begins to put these parts back together through the process of comparison. Quite simply, the researcher compares the data fragments to one another and examines their similarities and differences. For example, initial codes related to the identity of the perpetrator were similar, while those concerning reasons for advising or not advising particular actions were different. After comparing the data fragments in this manner, the researcher can begin the third step, categorizing, which initiates the data reduction process. When categorizing the data, the researcher is grouping the many coded fragments into fewer conceptual categories.

Data reduction through categorization is sometimes referred to as “pattern coding” (see, e.g., Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). When engaged in pattern coding, the researcher examines the similarities and differences of the named data fragments, groups them together according to specific patterns, and then names those patterns according to the concept that they represent. When qualitative researchers discuss “conceptual categories,” they are referring to these named concepts that are comprised of named data fragments (see, e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2002). Decisions about how to group fragments together and how to determine which concepts they represent are not arbitrary; instead, there are several methods of pattern coding that the researcher can use to guide his or her decisions. In this study, the following methods of pattern coding were used: 1) values coding; 2) emotion coding; 3) process coding; and 4) structural coding (see Saldana, 2009 for a full review of pattern coding methods). Each method will be described below in terms of both the steps involved and the logic behind its use in this study.

In values coding, the researcher is categorizing coded data fragments according to participants’ values, attitudes, and/or beliefs, which represent their perspectives and worldviews

(Saldana, 2009). Any first-order codes that reflect specific attitudes, values, and beliefs should be grouped together under a corresponding conceptual category based on their collective meaning, interaction, and interplay (Saldana, 2009). For example, the codes “effect on reputation,” “extent of harm,” and “victim responsibility” reflect participants’ attitudes toward the victim’s role in the sexual assault; therefore, they were consolidated under the conceptual category “beliefs about victim responsibility.” Beyond data reduction, values coding leads to deeper analysis by prompting memos related to the social issues pertinent to participants. As explained by Saldana (2009:92):

Analysis and analytic memos generated from values coding might explore the origins of the participant’s value, attitude and belief systems derived from such individuals, institutions, and phenomena as parents, peers, school, religion, media, and age cohort, as well as the participant’s personal and unique experiences, development, and self-constructed identities from social interaction.

Values coding is a particular type of pattern coding that is best suited for research that seeks to examine cultural values, as well as the ways in which participants experience those cultural values and make behavioral choices in relation to them (Saldana, 2009).

The next method of pattern coding used in this study was emotion coding. In emotion coding, the researcher categorizes codes according to emotions either recalled or experienced by the participant, or that the researcher infers about the participant (Saldana, 2009). Any first-order codes that are named in relation to emotion are grouped together under a relevant conceptual category. For example, the codes “need for details,” “unconvinced of own ability to help,” and “victim blame” reflect participants’ emotions after receiving a sexual assault disclosure, and are combined into the conceptual category “unsupportive responses to disclosure.” In terms of memoing, the researcher should be reflecting on how these emotion codes offer insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions (Saldana, 2009). As explained by

Saldana (2009), this method of pattern coding is fruitful for research that seeks to illuminate participants' interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences and actions.

The third type of pattern coding used in this study was process coding. This analysis method involves the researcher categorizing codes related to the process of a phenomenon by using action verbs (gerunds) to name the conceptual category. One purpose of process coding is to capture the internal movements of participants as they endeavor to make sense of their circumstances and to react accordingly, as well as when they evaluate the consequences of their actions (Saldana, 2009). Participants' use of linguistic transitions (such as if, when, because, then, and so) can indicate to the researcher a process in action (Saldana, 2009). For example, the codes "extent of injuries," "victim coping," and "victim memory" relate to the process a participant describes when determining how they would advise a survivor, and can be grouped into the conceptual category of "factors considered when giving advice." Memo writing during process coding typically involves analyzing participants' explanations of process according to storyline conventions²² so as to capture the full experiential range of the process at hand, from its beginning to its conclusion (Saldana, 2009). Process coding is appropriate for research that seeks to understand the ongoing actions, interactions, and emotions that participants take in response to situations or to problems for the sake of reaching a goal or resolving a problem (Saldana, 2009).

The final method of pattern coding used in this study was structural coding. This method involves both labeling and indexing the data corpus according to the study's research questions (Saldana, 2009). Using each research question as a conceptual category, the researcher can group together relevant categories from the other stages of pattern coding to begin analyzing how the

²² Saldana (2009:98) provides an example of memoing using storyline conventions to illustrate process: "The first step, the turning point, the second step, the third step, subsequently, thus, and so on."

data specifically answers each question. For example, the pattern coded categories described above are related to this study's research questions, and were labeled as such (e.g., "Research Question 2"). Memos written during structural coding begin to explore the explicit connections between the data and the research questions, and can also lead to refining the content of the research questions. This was the final stage of pattern coding employed in this study prior to moving on to theoretical coding.

To summarize the first stage of coding, the researcher is involved in three major steps: naming the data, comparing the named data fragments, and identifying patterns that indicate conceptual categories. Initial coding involves breaking the data down into many discrete parts with valid, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive names, and then comparing and contrasting these data fragments. This is followed by engaging in data reduction through recombining the fractured data according to specific patterns. The entire process is facilitated by memo writing, which permits the researcher to engage in deeper analysis while maintaining a record of the reasoning behind coding decisions. In this study, naming and comparing was followed by the pattern coding methods of values coding, emotion coding, process coding, and structural coding.

Although each method of pattern coding was presented as a separate step, in reality the process is iterative. Put simply, the researcher can engage in several different coding techniques simultaneously, and decisions about one form of coding often influence decisions about another form. Additionally, unlike first-order codes, second-order codes (or conceptual categories) are not always mutually exclusive. Some codes can be categorized as pertaining to two or more categories; for example, a data fragment may reflect an emotion category but may be contextualized by a process category. The iterative nature of the coding process is facilitated by

the NVIVO software, which allows the researcher to attach as many categories as necessary to individual data fragments.

Identifying the Core Category and Theoretical Coding

After engaging in initial coding and pattern coding, data have been reduced and analyzed to the extent that the researcher can begin the process of identifying the core category and then engaging in theoretical coding.²³ This is the final stage of data analysis and it permits the researcher to move the data into a more theoretical direction that will culminate in a grounded theory (Locke, 2002; Saldana, 2009). The core category is essentially the main theme of the research summed up into a single name or label. As defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998:146), “In an exaggerated sense, [the core category] consists of all the products of the analysis condensed into a few words that seem to explain what ‘this research is all about.’” The researcher’s decision about what constitutes the core category is not arbitrary; instead, there are several guidelines that assist the researcher in discerning the central theme of the research.

Lee (1998:49) summarizes the six guidelines for identifying the core category, based on Strauss’ (1987) articulation: 1) the core category must be central, meaning that it should be conceptually related to as many other categories as possible; 2) the core category must explain a substantial amount of the data; 3) the connections between the core category and other categories should not be forced on the data; 4) the implications of the core category to a larger theory²⁴ should be evident; 5) the core category’s fit with the data should improve with subsequent waves

²³ The term “theoretical coding” is generally equivalent to what some qualitative researchers refer to as “selective coding” (see, e.g., Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

²⁴ By “a larger theory,” Lee means a new theory that is being built from the data and/or an established theory that the study seeks to refine. Generating and/or refining theory are both goals of grounded theory methodology.

of data collection; and, 6) the core category should maximize variance²⁵ and should fit with as many patterns found in the data as possible.

These are useful guidelines for determining whether the core category the researcher has identified is actually a condensed summary of what the research is all about; however, it is not yet clear as to how the researcher goes about identifying the core category. Strauss and Corbin (1998:150) offer a simple and efficient method, explaining that the researcher should write a brief and general memo that explains the data through a storyline. They should name this memo and then go back and rewrite it using the categories specified during pattern coding and build upon the links between these categories. The name given to the memo will be the name of the core category and the researcher should ensure that the core category meets the criteria articulated above by Lee (1998).

Although the above discussion should make clear that the decisions involved in choosing a core category are based on the researcher's previous data analysis, this does not mean that the process can necessarily be replicated exactly. The data analysis and the subsequent identification of the core category are dependent upon the individual researcher's interpretation of the data. As Strauss and Corbin (1998:146) explain, "Another researcher, coming from a different theoretical orientation and having another research question, might arrive at quite another interpretation." Nonetheless, it is imperative that the researcher explain his or her logic for deciding on a core category in such a manner that any reader would be able to follow this decision making and agree that the articulation of the core category constitutes a plausible explanation for what is happening in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

²⁵ By "variance," Lee means the range of data patterns identified in the earlier coding stages.

After identifying the core category, the researcher should elaborate on his or her storyline memo by engaging in theoretical coding. Theoretical coding is the final coding stage and it constitutes a further reduction of data by focusing on the categories generated through pattern coding and circumscribing them according to the core category. In this sophisticated stage of coding, the researcher begins to specify the possible relationships between categories and “moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction” (Charmaz, 2006:63), such that it results in a grounded theory.

During theoretical coding, the researcher specifies how each of the various categories generated in pattern coding relate to one another and to the core category. This process involves naming these relationships and writing analytic memos that clarify these connections. Through theoretical coding, the researcher forms a conceptual model that relates the core category to the subcategories and then integrates these into a theory grounded in the data.

This advanced stage of data analysis, namely, identifying the core category and theoretical coding, is essential because it leads directly into generating grounded theory, as well as providing the basis for the grounded theory’s explanatory power, completeness, and relevance (Hernandez, 2009). Without engaging in theoretical coding, the researcher’s previous coding would simply be comprised of themes found in the data, which would only serve to describe the study’s substance rather than to explain it (Hernandez, 2009). By explaining how and why the themes found through data analysis are connected, and by integrating these themes, the researcher is then able to begin articulating the study’s emergent, grounded theory.

Theory Building

The end result of the entire data analysis process is the generation of a grounded theory. A study's grounded theory emerges from its data, offers a sophisticated analysis of the connections between themes in the data, and also may build upon and elaborate existing theories. Although the specific content of this study's grounded theory will not be presented here, it is possible to give a brief explanation of how the researcher can move from data analysis to theory building. This is important because one critique of grounded theory, even among grounded theorists, is that *theory* in grounded theory has different meanings depending on the researcher, and some researchers claim to generate theory when, in actuality, they are simply presenting a description of their data (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999). Accordingly, Charmaz (2006:135) laments, "Theory generation continues to be the unfulfilled promise and potential of grounded theory."

To understand how a researcher generates theory in grounded theory, it is important first to examine what a grounded theory is and what it is not. As explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998:15), a grounded theory is "a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena." Essentially, a study's grounded theory should consist of several interrelated concepts that have emerged through data analysis, and the relationships between these concepts should be clear enough and abstract enough to indicate a specific framework through which the studied phenomenon can be understood and/or predicted. The major distinction between grounded theory and other methods of qualitative research is grounded theory's emphasis on using the data to generate new theory, rather than simply describing the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. As such, the theory generated through using grounded theory methodology

should comprise an abstract and explanatory framework, as opposed to a mere description of the participants' experiences and/or actions (Charmaz, 2006).

The notion of theory as a framework is significant because it indicates the importance of interpretation in the process of theory generation. As explained by Charmaz (2006), theorizing in grounded theory involves two primary points of view. The first is that of the study's participants, since the main goal of the study is to make sense of how and why they construct meanings and make behavioral decisions in specific situations. The second is that of the researcher, since his or her interpretation of participants' explanations strongly influences the work involved in theorizing, as well as the result.

In a grounded theory study, the researcher not only seeks to comprehend the perspectives of participants, but also to understand "how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships" (Charmaz, 2006:130). Accordingly, through grounded theory theorizing, the researcher endeavors to illuminate the differences and distinctions between individuals, as well how certain social forces maintain and perpetuate these differences and distinctions (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher's interpretation of these relationships is necessarily influenced by his or her existing understanding of social hierarchies. This acknowledgment may again elicit the criticism regarding objectivity in grounded theory discussed earlier. However, by making explicit the analysis and decision making involved in the research process, it is hoped that the audience can follow the researcher's logic and can agree that conclusions emerged from the data rather than being imposed on them.

Summary

This section has presented a detailed overview of the data analysis procedures used in the present study. First, initial coding took place during the data collection phase. These codes were combined into separate categories through pattern coding, which involved several different methods (values coding, emotion coding, process coding, and structural coding). The relationships between codes and categories were explored through writing analytic memos. Next, memo writing and category analysis facilitated the identification of the core category, while theoretical coding led to the generation of a grounded theory that both explains and predicts the phenomenon of interest. A visual representation of grounded theory methodology, specifically the process by which data collection and early analysis transition into advanced analysis and theory building, is provided in Figures 1 and 2.

Conclusion

As explained by Lee (1998:50): “Grounded theory is a long-term, labor-intensive, and time-consuming process.” Nonetheless, when done correctly, this methodology offers several advantages over other qualitative research methods. By following the fundamental principles of grounded theory, specifically constant comparison and theoretical sampling, a researcher is assisted in his or her attempt to generate theory about a poorly understood phenomenon. Moreover, the grounded theory data analysis process and the writing up of analytical memos enable the researcher to develop a sophisticated theory that not only describes his or her data but is predictive of future instances of the same phenomenon.²⁶

²⁶ Assessing a grounded theory’s predictive ability is only possible through a new qualitative study or through empirical hypothesis testing of the study’s grounded theory. Grounded theory studies are intended to generate new theory but cannot simultaneously test the theory’s predictive ability.

This study's grounded theory will be developed over the course of the following two chapters. Chapter Four will explore the connections between various categories and the core category, especially in terms of their connection to the research questions provided above. The full grounded theory of this study will be presented in Chapter Five. This setup will permit readers to follow the logic of the researcher's argument, especially since readers should now have a firm grasp of how categories were created after reading the present chapter. The evaluation criteria discussed above will be revisited in Chapter Six with the aim of assisting the reader in appraising the fit between the data and the resulting grounded theory.

CHAPTER 4:

FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study of college students is to build a grounded theory that addresses two phenomena. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how these are influenced by their perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. To explore these issues, this study asks the following research questions:

1. Do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and subsequent responses to survivors change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident?
2. Which sexual assault characteristics are the most influential to college-age disclosure recipients when interpreting incidents of sexual assault and formulating responses to survivors?
3. Why do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and responses to survivors change according to these influential sexual assault characteristics?

The above research questions aim to uncover two interconnected aspects of the disclosure process from confidantes' perspectives. The first two research questions are intended to explore whether specific sexual assault characteristics influence the interpretations and responses of disclosure recipients, and, if so, which characteristics are influential. The third research question

seeks information on the ways in which social issues related to sexual assault victimization affect disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses. This chapter presents the key findings addressing these research questions obtained from 38 in-depth interviews with college undergraduates conducted over the Fall semester of 2013 at the University of Cincinnati. It is organized according to the five victim-offender relationships discussed during the interviews: 1) acquaintance perpetrator; 2) casual date perpetrator; 3) boyfriend perpetrator; 4) mutual friend perpetrator; and, 5) stranger perpetrator. Each of these sexual assault scenarios concerns disclosure of heterosexual encounters, with female victims and male perpetrators. Findings are organized according to victim-offender relationships for the three reasons described below.

First, while the data reveal that victim-offender relationships are one of the most influential incident characteristics in participants' interpretations and responses, additional important characteristics also come to light through the analysis of victim-offender relationships. These include victim alcohol consumption, verbal and/or physical resistance, and victim presentation during disclosure, among others. The relative importance participants ascribed to these additional characteristics are closely connected to the nature of the victim-offender relationship under discussion. For example, victim alcohol consumption may be considered meaningful for disclosures of acquaintance-perpetrated sexual assault, but not for other disclosure scenarios. Furthermore, in response to the third research question, this organization allows for the emergence of the three social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization that appeared most important to participants when interpreting and responding to disclosure. These are the stereotype of "real rape," miscommunication as an explanation for sexual assault, and concerns with false allegations.

Second, this organization illustrates the extent to which interpretations and responses differ depending on participants' own degree of acquaintance with the perpetrator. The factors involved in determining whether or not a disclosed incident should be interpreted as sexual assault and the content of subsequent advice is strongly related to how well the participant is acquainted with the accused perpetrator. This appears to be taken into consideration by participants more often than their considerations of the victim's degree of acquaintance to the perpetrator. As such, organizing the findings according to increasing degrees of acquaintanceship between the participant and the perpetrator is sensible.

Third, while the first four sections below are organized according to increasing levels of acquaintanceship between the participant and the perpetrator, the analysis concludes with the stranger perpetrator scenario. Interpretations and responses to this scenario provide the clearest contrast to those given when the perpetrator is any non-stranger. Concluding with the stranger scenario highlights the various incident characteristics that are influential for other victim-offender relationships, as well as underscores the significance that the three social issues have for participants when interpreting and responding to disclosure.

Each section below (except for one, which will be noted) is organized into three subsections: 1) interpretations, meaning the factors involved in participants' decisions of whether or not to interpret a disclosed incident as sexual assault; 2) responses, meaning participants' explanations of how they would then respond to the victim after interpreting the disclosed incident; and, 3) a concluding section that summarizes the findings and discusses the relationship between participants' interpretations and responses for that particular victim-offender relationship. As explained in Chapter 1, interpretations and responses are treated as two separate, yet related, outcomes. However, both interpretations and responses indicate which specific

characteristics participants considered important in any given scenario, as well as how their specific considerations of these characteristics change depending on the scenario. See Table 3 for a list of the main interpretations, responses, and conclusions for each of the five scenarios.

The quotes presented throughout this and the following chapters are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive and are intended to capture the richness and complexity of the subject matter. The objectives in choosing exemplar quotations from the vast array of data are to document multiple participant perspectives and to illustrate the agreement among participants on certain points, as well as to highlight the points at which participants diverge. To keep this chapter at a manageable length, many times a particular perspective had to be summarized with one or a few quotes given to support a statement, rather than providing extensive supporting quotes (for more information on how and why representative quotes are chosen in qualitative research, see Copes, Tewksbury, and Sandberg, 2015). Furthermore, it should be noted that numeric counts are not provided for the findings discussed below; this was not possible considering the semi-structured nature of the interviews, as well as participants' tendencies to change their minds at later points during interviews.

Acquaintance Perpetrator

The results below are organized into three subsections: 1) participants' interpretations of a disclosure of sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance; 2) participants' explanations of how they would respond to the survivor after interpreting the incident; and, 3) concluding remarks that summarize participants' interpretations and responses for this scenario. During the interviews, participants were asked about various scenarios in which they could receive a sexual assault disclosure from a friend. In this instance, the perpetrator was described as the victim's

acquaintance; all other details were filled in by participants. For most, this scenario implied a sexual assault that occurred at a fraternity party, usually while the victim was drinking. The perpetrator was typically conceived of as an individual that the victim had just met at the party or else as someone she knew slightly from class. Thus, the majority of participants interpreted the term “acquaintance” to mean someone whom the victim knew peripherally, but with whom they themselves were not acquainted.

Interpretations

Participants described five main factors that they would consider when determining whether or not to interpret the disclosed incident as sexual assault. First, a number of participants explained their own interpretations of this scenario as a mutual effort between themselves and the survivor to understand and to define the incident.²⁷ These participants thus highlight the reciprocity involved in interpreting disclosure: the victim, perhaps uncomfortable with her own interpretation, is disclosing for the sake of seeking help to interpret the event; the confidante is fulfilling this function while also taking the victim’s understanding of the incident into consideration. Participants described several ways that they could assist victims in their interpretations. First, they could ask her how she feels about the acquaintance and whether she might be interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with him. As explained by Elise²⁸, “If she wasn't really sure, I'd talk to her about whether she wanted the guy to do what he did or if she wanted a relationship with the guy.” The second way of helping the victim interpret the incident is by assisting her to understand her own role in the sexual assault. This could be accomplished

²⁷ Although reaching a mutual understanding of the incident is perhaps the purpose of any disclosure, this was only acknowledged as such in this scenario. This is likely because acquaintance-perpetrated sexual assault was the first scenario considered by the vast majority of participants, so they may have been contemplating the purpose of disclosure at this early stage of the interview. Having established a sense of disclosure’s meaning, it may not have been necessary for participants to revisit the idea of mutuality for other scenarios.

²⁸ All names are pseudonyms; see Table 1 for demographic information on each individual participant.

by highlighting the victim's control over certain aspects, such as drinking or giving consent to have sexual contact. As Tiffany explained, "[I would tell her that] it's not out of her control. She had some control because she could have controlled how much she was drinking, and the guy who was taking advantage of her, maybe he was intoxicated, too. It's not like she was completely sober, so the guy was just trying to take advantage."²⁹ Similarly, Courtney detailed how she would explain to the victim her own role in an acquaintance sexual assault: "I mean, she was partially consenting to it, so it's not like she completely didn't know what she was doing, so she still knew what she was doing." By highlighting the victim's control over the situation, these participants assist the victim in interpreting the incident as her "being taken advantage of," which is distinguished from sexual assault, in which no consent is given for sexual contact.

A second factor that many participants identified as relevant when interpreting this scenario was their evaluation of the victim's relationship with the acquaintance. Mike explained, "If she knows the person, then I'd have to figure out what the history is with that person, because they could just have a bad history and then it's something that she might be making up or misinterpreting just to get back at that person for whatever reason, because some people do stuff like that." As Mike's statement illustrates, whether or not an incident is interpreted as sexual assault depends not only on the victim being acquainted with the perpetrator, but also on the degree and history of their acquaintanceship.

²⁹ Participants were encouraged to envision the details of these hypothetical scenarios on their own. When specific claims are made about alcohol intoxication or about consent, these were not imposed upon them; instead, these are details filled in by participants. They thus illustrate how the participant perceives such a scenario taking place. Furthermore, participants were permitted to define the term "sexual assault" themselves, resulting in much contemplation about what the term means. Most, if not all, participants ultimately equated the term with rape. As Tiffany explained, "That's what I think of when I think of sexual assault, that's the thought, rape. But, I mean, it could be something simple."

Third, several participants stated that their interpretations would depend on the victim's described level of verbal and/or physical resistance. Jessica stated, "If she said no, if she motioned to push him off, or said I don't want this to happen, or said stop and he didn't stop, yeah [that is sexual assault]." Likewise, Mary explained:

I think if you say no and your actions are like no, we're done, get away, you shove him off or you just kind of walk away or anything, I think that's a clear indication like no, if anything else happens, it's [sexual] assault... Yeah, if she gave like a serious no and was pushing him off and everything, then I think for sure you need to report it and that's [sexual] assault.

As these statements indicate, a number of participants evaluated a disclosure according to how "serious" the victim's resistance was. "Seriousness" of non-consent, according to these participants, is indicated by physical, as well as verbal, resistance strategies.

However, for a few participants, absence of verbal and/or physical resistance would not necessarily indicate consent. As explained by Mike,

The thing I've always been told is that, no matter what, even if it's obvious or not, you always need to ask. Ask like, 'Is what I'm doing okay with you?' If they say no, then don't do it. I guess I'd want to find out from her, did he ask you, did you tell him that it was okay, or did he just go ahead and do it without asking or getting your consent?

Mike and a few likeminded participants thus argued that consent is an active, ongoing process. Nonetheless, this opinion was not shared by the majority of the sample. For the most part, in a scenario in which a friend disclosed a sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance, most participants would inquire about the victim's verbal and/or physical resistance. As stated by Mike, "Whether or not [she] was allowing it is definitely a big factor for whether we want to get him in trouble or just let it go." The majority of these participants would be more inclined to interpret an incident as sexual assault if the victim claimed to have demonstrated some form of physical resistance.

Fourth, a number of participants stated that the victim's presentation during the disclosure would be the driving force for how they would interpret the incident. According to Abigail:

I think it just depends on if she was upset about it. If she felt like she didn't really care, or if it was like they were both drunk, then I feel like, I don't know, I would just have to see how she reacted, because, if she was just like, 'Whatever,' then I wouldn't be worried, but if she was really upset, I would try to get her help.

Likewise, Anne explained, "If it's somebody she knows and I can tell she's actually really upset about the situation and that something bad actually did happen, then I would still tell her go to the police, but also [I'd] try to figure out what is their relationship, because people can be good liars about that kind of stuff." According to these and similar participants, if the victim was exhibiting distress, then they would be likely to interpret the incident as a sexual assault, and to advise her to disclose formally. Jeffrey stated, "You have to pay attention to her body language and things like that to see if this is actually genuine, or if she's just trying to get someone in trouble." As his statement illustrates, lack of visible distress would lead disclosure recipients to question the victim's motives in disclosing the incident.

While the four factors detailed above (reciprocal interpretation, degree of acquaintance, verbal/physical resistance, and victim presentation) are described by participants as influencing their interpretations of this disclosure scenario, a fifth factor is also present in their narratives, although it is never directly addressed by participants as a tool employed in their interpretations. Participants consistently worked through their own interpretations by trying to make sense of how other parties would interpret the same scenario. This involved considering the viewpoints of other people, specifically those of the victim, peers, and law enforcement personnel, as well as the potentially detrimental effects that the reactions of others could have on the victim.

Entering the victim's point of view, participants articulated several concerns that she may have when disclosing to another individual, whether to a formal or informal support source. For instance, she may be worried about getting the acquaintance into trouble, about whether this was an isolated incident, and about whether he deserves any form of social or legal sanctions. Megan explained, "[She might] not want to get the guy in trouble because she kind of knew him, like it just happened one time, it wouldn't happen again." Likewise, Mike stated, "Maybe she doesn't want to get him in trouble, but really she didn't want it to happen, so she has to really think, 'Do I want to get this person in trouble for doing it or am I okay with it happening?'"

Relatedly, participants considered the possible repercussions that could occur against the victim as a result of "getting him into trouble." For example, the perpetrator or his friends could "come after her," as Megan articulated: "I think the reluctance could come from being afraid of the guy or his friends or something, that someone else could come after her." Similarly, Kelly explained, "She could be scared that the person could come after her." It is evident in participants' discussion of this and the following scenarios that the consequences of disclosure are typically divided into two outcomes: the victim can either get the perpetrator into trouble, or she can instead decide that she is "okay" with the incident. The first outcome is conceived of as leading to myriad harmful consequences for both the victim and the perpetrator, while the second is often considered the preferable outcome.

Several participants expressed concern about how formal reporting could affect the victim's reputation, especially if the accused convinced others that she was lying about the incident. Elise explained, "Everyone's gonna look at her like, 'Oh, my gosh, you're one of those people, you're a snitch,' and that kind of thing." Similarly, Kim stated, "He could just say that she was lying about it or something, so people would think that she wasn't trustworthy. Or he

could say that it was actually her fault, so people would think that maybe she was out of control with her actions.” Accordingly, participants were concerned with the ways in which other peers might interpret the incident, especially if the perpetrator’s version of events contradicted those of the victim. If such were to occur, it is assumed that the accused will be believed, and that the victim’s reputation among her peers will suffer as a consequence.

Connecting the victim’s point of view with the possible reactions of her peers, participants also expressed concern about the victim’s sense of shame that would come from disclosing the incident to others. As Leigh explained, “I think there’s shame attached with sexual assault. Even if it’s not the girl’s fault, there’s still, you don’t want to tell people about that... I think it’d mostly be just kind of being ashamed of it.” Leigh articulated well, albeit unintentionally, the reason for such shame: the clause “even if it’s not the girl’s fault” implies that the victim will likely be viewed by others as being at fault for the incident. Reinforcing the sense that others’ opinions might inflict a sense of shame, Megan described the embarrassment that the victim might feel: “I think she would be afraid of people finding out, like for herself, she would be embarrassed that happened, that she let that happen.” Megan’s statement that the victim could feel embarrassed about allowing the sexual assault to happen implies that she was in control of the event; as a result, it should not be interpreted as sexual assault. The disclosed incident is instead perceived as an example of the victim’s own misguided actions, since she is viewed as “letting it happen.”

In terms of considering the perspectives of law enforcement officials, a number of participants worried that the victim’s behavior prior to the incident, such as consuming alcohol or attending a party, would make law enforcement personnel unlikely to define the incident as sexual assault. Anne stated:

If she's drunk at a party and she's taken advantage of, and not really knowing what she's doing, I feel like the police in some situations don't take things like that seriously... In a situation where she was drunk at a party, the police can't really do too much about it, I feel like. I mean, she could complain, but there's not really proof that she was raped. Not everybody will take that seriously if she was [sexually] assaulted.

As Anne explained, the victim would be unlikely to be taken seriously by law enforcement officials if she were to "complain." Because she had been drinking, it is assumed that she would not have proof that a criminal incident had taken place. As a result, it is considered unlikely that the police would classify the incident as sexual assault and pursue any action against the perpetrator. Relatedly, some participants expressed concern about the potential consequences a report of sexual assault while intoxicated could have on the victim. As described by David,

Underage drinking could go on her record or something like that... If she's going for a high position in a job and they see that she was irresponsible at one point, and that irresponsibility ended up in a sexual [assault], it would be hard to trust her with something higher than just taking care of herself... She's given this liberty to drink and she kind of abused it.

David's statement reflects the position that reporting to law enforcement could have unexpected, drastic consequences for the victim. Law enforcement officials may view her behavior as irresponsible, and they may put this on her official record, which future employers would likely check when making hiring or promoting decisions.

Overall, participants made use of five main considerations when determining whether or not to interpret a disclosure of acquaintance sexual assault as sexual assault. These included: 1) the disclosure recipient and the victim working together to form a mutual interpretation of the incident; 2) the victim's relationship with the accused acquaintance; 3) the victim's described levels of verbal and/or physical resistance; 4) the victim's presentation during the disclosure; and, 5) considerations of how others would likely interpret the disclosure. It is not possible to rank each factor in terms of how strongly it might influence participants' final interpretations;

however, it is evident from their remarks that most participants would be unlikely to endorse interpreting this scenario as sexual assault unless the disclosure fulfilled certain self-perceived criteria.³⁰ These criteria include the victim's description of strong verbal and physical resistance, and the exhibiting of visible distress during the disclosure. The most common interpretation of this scenario was that it was an instance of the victim "being taken advantage of."

Responses

Participants' descriptions and considerations of the advice and recommendations that they would (or would not) offer to the survivor following her disclosure were directly related to whether or not they interpreted the disclosed incident as constituting sexual assault. As will become clear in the presentation of findings for additional victim-offender relationships, not only did participants' interpretations differ, but the content of their responses also varied greatly. Below, the main responses described by participants for an acquaintance perpetrator disclosure scenario are detailed and explained.

One of the most common responses participants gave to this disclosure scenario was deciding to confront the perpetrator.³¹ In terms of how this confrontation would occur, participants described two versions of events. First, one could trick him into telling the truth. As Lisa explained, "I would almost want to go talk to this acquaintance and see if, maybe, not say right away why I'm there, but [ask] if he knows about it [the sexual assault]." Second, one could take a more aggressive approach, as described by Philip: "I would ask him, 'What happened,

³⁰ The term "self-perceived criteria" is meant to underscore that these criteria were generated from participants themselves. They are likely based on individual participants' experiences, morals, values, and attitudes shaped outside of the context of this study.

³¹ Recall that participants were allowed to come up with their own scenarios and solutions. "Confrontation," as well as "Investigation," and "Mediation," both of which arise in later scenarios, are not options typically included on surveys. Nonetheless, they were frequently recommended by participants in this sample, who were not restricted to choosing from a predefined list of responses.

why'd you do it?' and all this different stuff. And then, probably, based on his answers, I don't know what I would do past that." Most participants did not have a clear understanding of the purpose of confronting the perpetrator, but nonetheless argued that doing so would be the best way to resolve the incident.

The reasoning participants delineated for preferring to confront the perpetrator in this scenario is that he may come to the realization that his actions were inappropriate, apologize to the victim, and promise never to act that way in the future. Lilly described what she would say to the victim when presenting confrontation as the best response to the incident:

If you could control everything about the situation, would you just want him to apologize? Would you just want him to say it would never happen again? Do you want a restraining order? What do you want? And then from there, I would suggest, you know, if you want it just to be on a personal level, for him to recognize that this was wrong, for him to show regret and say he's not gonna do it [again], then do you want me to go with you to his house or his apartment and we can talk about it?

Lilly's explanation of how she would present this resolution to the victim relates to participants' consistent sense, across non-stranger scenarios, that interpreting an incident as sexual assault will have one of two outcomes: either getting the perpetrator into trouble or deciding that everything is okay.

Some participants were cognizant of potential drawbacks to confronting the perpetrator. As Philip explained, "He would probably give me a story, like she was asking for it or she wanted it then, and then she regretted it afterwards." After working through the logistics of confronting the perpetrator, Philip and likeminded participants decided that doing so would not be the best course of action. In light of this realization, a number of participants described other options for the victim, such as reporting to law enforcement, seeking medical attention, and other forms of advice.

Reporting to law enforcement was often provided as a vague recommendation in this disclosure scenario. It was presented as a possible action that the victim could take, though usually with the caveat that reporting would be unlikely to result in anything substantial, such as an investigation or legal sanction. Robert stated, "I'd have her call the police, probably, and see what they could do to help. If that would do anything, I'm not sure." Likewise, Kim explained, "I would definitely tell her to report it. I don't know if that, like if she doesn't know who the guy is, I don't know what they can do about it, but I would definitely report that to somebody." Others explained that they would bring up reporting as a possibility, but would not strongly recommend it. Kelly stated, "I feel like I would leave it up to her and see what she wanted to do. I feel like I would suggest it and be like, 'Do you want to report him, do you want to do anything?' but I would leave it up to her."

Strong recommendations to report a sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance typically depended on three factors. First, if it was known or considered likely that the acquaintance would repeat this behavior (to either the same person or to another) or that he has done so in the past, participants would encourage reporting the incident. Elise explained, "If I've seen him at parties before and he's doing that to a bunch of girls and there have been reported incidences of that, I'd be like, alright, the cops. I would say go to the cops because of the reputation of the guy, because if that's something that's happened before, he needs to be reported." Some participants were thus swayed to recommend formal reporting due to the possibility that other reports have been filed in the past, or else that other women are likely to report him in the future, and thereby a case can be built against the perpetrator. Evidently, formal reporting appears fruitless if this was likely a one-time incident.

A second factor contributing to strong recommendations to report to law enforcement was if the incident was “obviously” sexual assault, meaning that both the victim and the confidante have interpreted it as such. According to Lisa, “If it was something that was obviously her being taken advantage of, then I would go to the police with her, just because things like that can't happen.” Likewise, Anne stated, “I mean, if it's something like she was hurt or you can tell there was a sexual assault, it was forced, then go to the police and try to seek actual help from the law.” Tiffany explained, “If she was completely like fighting it, then yeah, you need to get more higher authority in.” According to these participants, reporting would be strongly recommended if the victim had been injured and had evidence of physical resistance, since such factors lead to interpreting an incident as “obvious” sexual assault.

The third and final factor involved in strong recommendations to report to law enforcement was the victim not having consumed alcohol prior to the incident. As Lisa explained, “If there was nothing like [alcohol] involved and someone just took advantage of her, then that would definitely be something where we would probably want to [report]. If like, the guy knew what he was doing and my friend wasn't under the influence of anything and he took advantage of her, then that would probably have to go to the police right away because then he knew.” If the victim had been sober during the sexual assault, then she is considered not to have done anything to invite his behavior. Therefore, the incident should be reported because the acquaintance knew that his actions were wrong and understood that they were uninvited.

While a number of participants would advise, either ambivalently or strongly, the victim to report the incident to law enforcement, a few explained that they would actively advise against formal reporting. For some, this was because they did not consider the incident severe enough to warrant reporting since they did not think the victim was doing enough to resist the attacker.

Tiffany explained, “I don't think [an acquaintance sexual assault] would need to be taken to the police unless it was pretty severe... If he was just taking advantage of her and if she had a couple drinks and she didn't really do anything and if she was literally not trying to fight him off of her [it is not severe].” Similarly, Mike stated, “If she told him no, then still we'd want to report it, but if she kind of didn't stop him then maybe she shouldn't get him in trouble because she didn't let the person know that she didn't want to.” Others, such as Kim, expressed concern for how a police investigation could affect the victim's reputation: “I feel like people could find out about it because the cops would confront that guy and then he might spread things around about that girl that aren't necessarily true and then people would get misconceptions about her.” Finally, Courtney explained that she would not recommend reporting to law enforcement unless the victim had proof to corroborate her claims: “I mean, if you don't have proof, then I guess I couldn't really tell her to go to the police because they have no proof to do anything. So I would probably tell her not to go out anymore.”

As Courtney's above statement implied, many participants would offer the victim another form of advice other than reporting to law enforcement. Recommending that the victim seek medical attention, however, often appeared to be an afterthought for the relatively few participants who thought of it at all. Their recommending this course of action was typically vague and usually arose from direct prompting. Those who would recommend seeking medical attention were primarily concerned with the potential for pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. For example, Kelly stated, “If she felt that something bad had happened [then she should go to the doctor]. Not necessarily that she's in pain, but if she's like ‘I don't know this person, I don't know if they have anything,’ so I feel like we should go to the doctor.” Other participants who would advise seeking medical attention would recommend it as a means of

gathering evidence that could then be taken to the police. Anne explained, “I know that in some cases, if you do go to the doctor and you get an exam of some sort, they can kind of tell if it was a forced thing, so if it was something like that and you had some sort of evidence, then I would tell my friend to go to the police.”

Other types of advice that were sometimes mentioned by participants in response to receiving a disclosure of acquaintance-perpetrated sexual assault included recommending that the victim change her behavior (i.e., go out less, not attend parties, reduce alcohol intake, and be “smarter”), advising her to seek psychological counseling, and encouraging her to talk to someone else (i.e., parents, a sexual assault hotline). Overall, the main forms of advice that participants would give victims in response to this disclosure scenario were confronting the perpetrator, followed by reporting to law enforcement, though only if the incident could unequivocally be interpreted as a sexual assault.

Summary

Participants described five main factors that they would take into consideration when determining whether or not to interpret as sexual assault a disclosure involving an acquaintance. These were: 1) working with the victim to develop a mutual understanding of the incident; 2) evaluating the victim’s relationship with the acquaintance; 3) assessing the victim’s verbal and/or physical resistance; 4) gauging the victim’s presentation during the disclosure; and, 5) considering how others would interpret the disclosure. Overall, participants were unlikely to interpret this scenario as sexual assault unless the victim described strong levels of verbal and/or physical resistance and was visibly upset during the disclosure. Rather, participants often preferred to define such a disclosure as the victim “being taken advantage of,” which, in a sense,

negates responsibility for either party, since the victim can be considered too intoxicated to engage in effective resistance, while the perpetrator can be excused for not comprehending her lack of consent due to his own intoxication.

Participants' reluctance to interpret the disclosed incident as consistent with sexual assault corresponds with their hesitancy to recommend that the victim report the incident to law enforcement. Concerns about her lack of proof, her consumption of alcohol, and the potential consequences formal reporting could have for the perpetrator or for the victim's reputation were at the forefront of participants' minds when contemplating making this recommendation. As a result, participants were unlikely to advise the victim to seek formal support and instead often suggested that she should confront the perpetrator in the hopes of receiving an apology. Less common responses included recommendations that the victim seek medical attention, change her behavior, or seek help elsewhere.

Casual Date Perpetrator

The results below are organized into three subsections: 1) participants' interpretations of receiving a disclosure from a friend about being sexually assaulted while on a casual date; 2) participants' explanations of how they would then respond to the friend after interpreting the incident; and, 3) concluding remarks that summarize the interpretations and responses for this disclosure scenario. For most participants, this scenario would occur when the victim had been on a first date with a male that she knew from school and had subsequently invited him into her dorm room, or had accepted such an invitation from him. Additional details envisioned by participants will be described below.

Interpretations

When interpreting a disclosed incident of sexual assault perpetrated by a casual dating partner, many participants assessed the victim's behavior according to whether or not she followed what they considered two culturally normative dating rules. The first dating rule is to be upfront about how much sexual activity each party is willing to engage in prior to having any physical contact. Jessica explained, "I think they should make a clear definition at the beginning of the night or before things happen. This is as far as I want it to go and if it escalates you can say, no, I told you to stop. If they want it to go further, at that point, they can say, okay, yes, this is what I want." Some participants acknowledged that having a conversation about sexual activity would be uncomfortable at the initial stage of a dating relationship. However, reluctance to have an awkward conversation is also given as an indication that the two are not yet ready to engage in sexual activity. As Tiffany described,

They're not gonna be like, okay, so when we go back to my dorm room... No, that wouldn't be a normal conversation, so I think inviting somebody up to your dorm room is probably not a good idea... Just kiss him at the end of the night and go your separate ways or just hang out outside. If you're inviting somebody up to your dorm room, anything can happen.

If the couple were unwilling to have a conversation about physical intimacy, then it is argued that they should not be alone together at this stage of their relationship.

Not being alone together is the second, and more frequent, dating rule that participants drew upon when interpreting this disclosure scenario. It is expected that the female neither extend nor accept an invitation to be alone in a private location, such as a room or an apartment, in an early dating relationship, otherwise disclosure recipients are likely to view her as responsible for the incident. Tiffany explained, "Going up to the dorm room, never a good idea... In a guy's head, literally, all they're thinking about is just sex." Likewise, Breanne stated,

I don't think it's a good idea to invite somebody up to your apartment unless you plan on doing something. You know, as a woman, you don't want to put yourself in that one-on-one position in your own space, a private area... I mean, I think, by the time we're 16, we're all walking around knowing what [men] want. So, I think she put herself in that position in that case... [She is] kind of leading him on to think that he's gonna get it, you know. I think when you say yes to going to a man's room, you better know that you're ready to do it [have sex].

According to both of these participants, college-age women are expected to be aware that all men are actively seeking sex. By agreeing to be alone with her date, the victim put herself into a vulnerable position and should have anticipated the likely consequences. As a result, it is difficult for participants to interpret this scenario as consistent with sexual assault. Kirsten explained, "She agreed to some things but maybe not other things and if he pushed past the things that she didn't want to do, then maybe, I don't know, she should reconsider even doing anything with anybody because not a lot of people will follow the rules and I think they should, but I don't know [if that's sexual assault]."

Although several participants recognized what Breanne referred to as "a double standard that stinks" and Linda as "kind of a cliché," the majority nonetheless considered the victim responsible for the incident and as actively contributing to its occurrence by "leading him on." Since she chose not to follow normative dating rules, and since she is considered likely to have known what would happen as a result, many participants have difficulty endorsing this disclosure scenario as sexual assault. In fact, some participants, such as Tiffany, would express outright anger at the victim upon receiving this disclosure:

I think it's understandable what the guy did and I think the girl could have seen that coming in her head... If somebody were to say that to me, I'd probably condemn her and be like 'What were you thinking? Why would you [invite him inside]?' I would be angry with her. I would be like 'Were you that dumb?' That sounds mean, but 'Were you that dumb to invite him up to your room and be like not thinking something more severe than just making out on the bed could happen?' You know what I mean? I would probably get upset with her. I think

that girls should know, think in their head, but I think girls just don't think about those things before. They're in the moment so it's just like, oh, yeah, let's go up.

Tiffany's statement indicates that the victim shares some of the responsibility for the incident since she should have been able to foresee what would likely occur as a result of inviting her date into her dorm room. Her comment also implies that women, in general, do not think enough about the potentially harmful consequences of choosing to go against the standard rules of dating, and that sexual assault would be less likely to occur if women better followed these rules.

Some participants explained that the victim is not entirely at fault for being sexually assaulted when alone with a date. For example, Mike stated, "I feel like it's still a violation because she wanted to stop, but I still feel like she's put that guy in such a situation that a little bit of [responsibility] has to be on her because she's put him in such a hard situation for him to stop, but it's still, like she wanted it to stop and it didn't, I guess. It's still bad enough." However, others envisioned the victim as instigating the incident by being sexually aggressive toward her date. These participants described the victim as initiating a sexual encounter by kissing and teasing the male. Robert explained that he would view the victim as responsible "If she was being really flirty toward him or would be like kissing him all on the neck or obviously making out with him, or if she took him to her bed and pushed, or if she was the one taking off her clothes first and kind of leading him on." Similarly, Heather stated, "She's the one who invited him up in the first place and if they were kissing and stuff, she kind of was already letting him get closer and closer to her, so moving kind of quickly and everything, so it just makes her a little bit more responsible for what happened." As a result of her imagined sexual aggression, the victim is considered responsible for the incident, which therefore should not be interpreted as sexual assault.

Others, when interpreting this scenario, would want information about the extent to which the victim verbally expressed either consent or resistance to any sexual activity. Courtney explained,

[I would] probably just get the details of the whole situation. Whether she consented to making out or whether she consented to a little bit more or whether she consented to go almost all the way and then not. So, like, if she consented up to a point and then it went further than what her point was, then that would probably alter my [opinion], because she wanted to do something up to a point.

Prior consent to any sexual activity made it difficult for most participants to interpret this scenario as sexual assault. Similarly, whether or not the victim offered any form of verbal resistance was deemed important to a number of participants. A few expressed that verbal resistance is sufficient for an incident to cross the line into sexual assault, often repeating the familiar trope that “no means no.” As Lilly stated, “I can see how the guy would be confused, but the moment she says stop, I think that's where the confusion ends. If she said stop, I don't think she's leading him on.” Likewise, Samantha explained the following:

I think that in a way she kind of did lead him on, but just because she invites him up to her room, that doesn't have to mean that she wants to do whatever he did, and if she objected, no matter what, even if she invited him up to her room, even if there was previous like, yeah, I do want to do things with you, then even in the moment, if she says no, you're still supposed to stop. It's still called [sexual] assault.

However, some participants nonetheless considered verbal resistance alone to be likely misinterpreted by the male as playful or token. Robert claimed, “If he had a kind heart, he'd listen to her, but I think most guys would probably think of it as playful talk, or like, well, she led me on, so we're gonna do this anyway. She kind of brought it upon herself. There's types of men out there like that.”

Quite a few participants specified that they would also want to know whether and to what extent the victim offered physical resistance during the incident to support an interpretation of

sexual assault. Many participants explained that physical resistance is important for interpreting an incident as sexual assault, perhaps more important than verbal resistance. According to David, “If she verbally said [no], but she wasn't physically trying, it kind of seems like she was on the edge of wanting to, but not really wanting to. Or maybe she's not telling the whole truth. I think if she wasn't physically trying to stop, then I think miscommunication would definitely come into play.” David’s statement implies that verbal resistance alone could be misinterpreted by the male, while physical resistance would clearly indicate her non-consent. Additionally, although most participants agree that “no means no,” some are likely to infer, from her lack of reinforcing this message with physical resistance, that the victim may not be being truthful in her disclosure. David elaborated on this sentiment with the following, “Maybe she's not telling the whole truth because, injury-wise, you would suspect if someone got raped and they tried to resist physically, then they would have some kind of marking on them anyway. It wouldn't really seem abuse on the guy's part, I guess.”

Overall, participants took three main factors into consideration when determining whether or not to interpret as sexual assault a disclosed incident with a casual date perpetrator: 1) the fact that the victim declined to follow what are considered standard dating rules; 2) the victim’s described level of verbal resistance; and, 3) the victim’s described level of physical resistance. While many considered the victim responsible for the incident due to not following the dating rules, some would nonetheless interpret the incident as sexual assault if she could convince them that she had offered significant verbal and/or physical resistance. However, many participants assumed that since the victim chose not to follow the dating rules, she took the role as the sexual aggressor, and is therefore unlikely to be honest in her description of the incident. These participants are thus reluctant to interpret the incident as sexual assault.

Responses

Formal reporting to law enforcement was the form of advice that participants most often considered when contemplating receiving a disclosure of this scenario. However, despite frequent considerations given to formal reporting, very few participants ultimately decided that they would recommend the victim take this action. Participants offered a number of explanations for why they would be unlikely to recommend formal reporting in this scenario. For those who envisioned the victim as the sexual aggressor, they argued that because she initiated the incident, the police would not do anything in response to a report of sexual assault. As Robert explained, “There's not much you can really do against that, I don't think, because she started it, she initiated them getting into bed, them taking their clothes off. I'd still view it as [sexual assault], but there's not much you can do against it.” Although Robert claims that he would define the incident as sexual assault, he also argues that reporting to law enforcement would be unlikely to result in their taking action against the offender.

Others were concerned about how formal reporting would negatively affect the victim's reputation or her emotional state if the police did not take her report seriously. Megan stated, “I feel like the guy's definitely at fault. If she wants to risk her reputation, because I do think her reputation would be affected by that, then she should definitely go to the police because it's something that he did wrong, [but] I feel like the police wouldn't take it as serious since they don't have evidence.” Likewise, Susan remarked that she would be reluctant to recommend formal reporting “Just because I know that there's a lot of times where it kind of blows up in a victim's face where nothing really happens, or [the police] say ‘Oh, you invited him up to your dorm room, what did you expect was gonna happen?’, and it just kind of is victimizing all over again.”

Similar to the scenario of a disclosed acquaintance-perpetrated sexual assault, most participants negotiated their mixed feelings about formal reporting in the casual date scenario by deciding that, although they would not strongly recommend this course of action, they would support the victim's independent decision to report to law enforcement. They considered the victim justified in wanting the perpetrator to experience consequences, but expressed that she alone needs to decide whether formal reporting is warranted. According to Lilly, "I think when the day is done, if she wanted something to be done about that situation, like if he ended up traditionally raping her, like what you see on movies, she can do whatever she wants legally or socially to get some kind of retribution for that." Samantha expressed that she would advise the victim to wait and see how much the incident affected her before deciding to report:

It depends on how bad it affected her. If she thought that it was a big deal, then she should definitely go to the police, or if she felt that it was not okay. It depends on how bad it made her feel, how bad it's bothering her... I mean, if that's all she can think about and if she's really uncomfortable with what happened and it just nags at her, then she should definitely go report it. If she came to me and it happened last week, then obviously it's still bothering her, so I would tell her to go to the police. But if it was the following morning, I would just say wait a little bit. This is a complicated situation. I would just say to wait a little bit and if it still bothers her, then to go to the police.

Overall, although most participants contemplated recommending that the victim report to law enforcement, many were concerned with the potentially harmful outcome this decision could have on the victim. To negotiate this difficulty, participants often detailed certain caveats for recommending formal reporting, such as preferring that the victim make this decision of her own volition or that she wait to decide to report until she was certain that the incident caused her lasting physical or psychological harm.

This is not to imply that all participants would avoid actively recommending formal reporting. A small number claimed they would strongly advise this course of action and provided

various explanations as to why the difficulties expressed by other participants would not factor in to their own considerations for advising reporting. As Tiffany explained, even though she is not sure how police would handle such a report, she finds it unlikely that the victim would be dismissed or made to feel at fault:

I feel like the police would still be able to do something about it just because it is a sexual assault... I don't know how the police would deal with that, though. I don't know if they would be like 'Well, you never should have invited him up,' because I don't think that's gonna be the thought in their head. They're gonna be like, 'Who is this guy that sexually assaulted you?'

Others who would strongly recommend reporting focused on the seriousness of the incident and the need for the perpetrator to be punished. As Martin stated, "I'd be like, 'Did you say no?' And if she said 'Yeah,' [I'd] be like alright, well, 'Then you should go to the police because that's rape. He raped you.'"

Reporting to law enforcement was the most frequently considered recommendation for participants, although those who decided they would not recommend this action often described other types of advice they would offer a victim after disclosure. Very few participants would recommend that the victim talk to the perpetrator as a form of resolution in this scenario. For those few who brought up this possibility, it was unclear what purpose this would serve or how it would mitigate the harm experienced by the victim. David described what he would say to the victim following this disclosure scenario, stating: "Yeah, definitely try to talk it out with him. Because you guys just met and you guys were kind of, you guys were moving pretty fast, you know." Talking with the perpetrator was also described as a good solution if the victim did not feel especially harmed by the incident, as Mike explained: "If it's something that's just on her mind a little bit, but it's really not a big deal to her, but she just doesn't like that it happened, then maybe she needs to talk it out with that person." Additional recommendations offered by some

participants included talking to her parents, getting counseling, going to the campus women's center,³² reporting to campus authorities, or talking to someone else besides the confidante. No participant would recommend that the victim seek medical assistance in this scenario.

Summary

Participants detailed three main factors that they would take into consideration when determining whether or not to interpret as sexual assault a disclosure involving an acquaintance. These were: 1) evaluating how closely the victim adhered to normative dating rules; 2) assessing the victim's verbal resistance; and, 3) assessing the victim's physical resistance. Some participants insisted that as soon as the victim gave any indication of sexual refusal, the perpetrator committed sexual assault. Most, however, considered the victim responsible for the incident by reframing her as the sexual aggressor to support their interpretation of the scenario as not constituting sexual assault.

Despite the general tendency not to define this incident as sexual assault, the majority of participants considered whether or not they would respond to the victim by advising her to formally report to law enforcement. Nearly all of these participants decided that they would not recommend this course of action, for reasons ranging from concern about the effect formal reporting would have on the victim's reputation to the belief that the police would not take the incident seriously. Instead, most participants decided that, while they would not directly advise formal reporting, they would support the victim's independent decision to do so. Very few alternative recommendations were offered for this scenario. Some participants stated that they

³² It was unclear what purpose "going to the woman's center" would serve for victims. Likely, participants who made this recommendation were uncertain, as well. Unfortunately, participants who offered this response were not further probed about its meaning or intent. This is probably because the researcher, at the time, also had only a vague idea of what the campus women's center actually does for women.

would recommend confronting the perpetrator, and others explained that they would advise the victim to seek help from another support source.

Similar to the previous scenario of acquaintance-perpetrated sexual assault, the majority of participants were unlikely to define this incident as sexual assault. The responses participants described giving to a survivor after such a disclosure rarely included formal help-seeking, as with the previous scenario. This victim-offender relationship is distinguished from the previous one since most participants explained the incident with the acquaintance as related to alcohol consumption, but tended to envision the victim as the sexual aggressor in the scenario with the casual date. Reframing the victim's behavior so as to support this interpretation relates to participants' subsequent reluctance to respond in a helpful or supportive manner. This is underscored by the fact that some participants detailed the ways in which they would berate the victim in this hypothetical disclosure scenario.

Boyfriend Perpetrator

The results below are organized into three subsections: 1) participants' interpretations of receiving a disclosure from a friend about being sexually assaulted by a steady romantic partner; 2) participants' explanations of how they would then respond to the friend after interpreting the incident; and, 3) a conclusion that summarizes the interpretations and responses for this scenario. When trying to envision the circumstances in which such a scenario could occur, participants typically offered one of four explanations: 1) it could occur when the victim's boyfriend had been drinking alcohol; 2) it could occur during an argument between the couple; 3) sexual violence is to be expected in the context of a romantic relationship; or, 4) the incident is related to ongoing interpersonal violence in the relationship. Each of these four circumstances was

typically explained by participants as a miscommunication that could likely be resolved through talking.

Interpretations

For many participants, a disclosure of sexual assault perpetrated by a boyfriend would be the most difficult to interpret of any of the victim-offender scenarios. A number of participants focused on what was often described as the “ambiguity” of this scenario, explaining that such an incident was particularly hard to envision occurring. The most common reason for this was that it was difficult for participants to understand how, if the couple had previously engaged in consensual sexual activity, a later sexual encounter could be non-consensual. As Elise stated, “Especially if you've been sexually active, there's a very fine line to me [between] just what's normal and what's sexual assault.” Similarly, Lisa pondered, “If they've had sex before, maybe if he was like really forceful, then it was obviously different... [but] if they were already in a relationship, then consent is kind of assumed if you've already been like sexually active, you know what I mean?” Robert explained, “It'd be kind of hard to believe her, especially if they were sexually active.” Overall, participants tended to emphasize this sense of ambiguity when working through their decisions on how to define such a disclosed incident.

A number of participants highlighted the potentially ambiguous nature of this scenario by interpreting it as an instance of miscommunication, meaning that the victim was offering token resistance or else consented after initially resisting. According to Diane, “I mean, maybe it was miscommunication. There's so many different factors that could have played in. Like, maybe it was miscommunication, she was just messing around or something or joking with him, like oh no, I don't want to, and she caved or something like that, if that makes sense.” Similarly, Jessica

stated, “Maybe she didn't want it to happen, but afterwards she was glad it happened.” Those who interpreted the incident as miscommunication often followed up by explaining that the incident occurred because the victim was not sufficiently forceful about her non-consent, particularly through the use of physical resistance.

Due to the victim’s lack of forceful resistance, participants sometimes explained that her boyfriend likely did not understand that she was not consenting, and therefore did not sexually assault her. As Jessica stated, “Maybe the boyfriend wasn't necessarily clear on it and she might have said stop, but she didn't motion away or say no repeatedly. Maybe she just said it once and he was like ‘She's just afraid because it's her first time,’ or ‘She's just saying that, but really she doesn't mean it because it's a mental game or something.’ Maybe he didn't realize what he did was wrong.” Likewise, David explained, “If she said she was sexually abused by her boyfriend but they have a sexual history together, it kind of looks like a misunderstanding between them two that he thought that she was down to but then she wasn't. Kind of a misunderstanding between them.” Since the boyfriend did not understand the victim’s display of non-consent, he believed the interaction was consensual, and therefore he did not have the intention of sexually assaulting her. The tendency to assume that the boyfriend lacked malicious intentions contributes to participants’ difficulty interpreting this scenario as sexual assault. Instead, they often preferred to emphasize ambiguity by claiming it to be a miscommunication.

Some participants, even less inclined to interpret this incident as sexual assault, did not draw attention to the ambiguity of the scenario, but instead offered the alternative explanation that this was simply an instance of regretted sex on the part of the victim. This explanation highlights the potentially malicious intent of the victim, in contrast to the presumably innocent intentions of the boyfriend. For instance, David stated, “I mean, it's hard to say [whether or not

this is sexual assault] because she would probably regret it afterwards and she may regret it during, but... Kind of, but not really [sexual assault].” His interpretation implies that the victim’s regret, or non-consent, arose subsequent to her initial consent; otherwise the boyfriend would have been unlikely to engage in sexual activity.

The connection between regretted sex and the potential maliciousness of the victim is illustrated by Elise, who stated, “If she just regretted it after and she didn't say anything to him, then she can't do anything against that because it's not exactly his fault... Let's say they were fighting or something beforehand and it turns into that and it's like oh, hey, I regretted that because we're fighting right now.” As Elise explained, the victim may regret having consensual sex with her boyfriend because they had not been getting along at the time. Accordingly, the victim may be misinterpreting the incident as sexual assault, perhaps with vindictive motives. Brenda took this one step further to describe the reluctance a disclosure recipient would have to interpret this scenario as unequivocally sexual assault. She explained that it could mean falsely accusing the victim’s boyfriend: “You don't want to accuse someone who maybe she was just angry with him and she was just saying that this happened and it really didn't.”

Participants described two factors that would be required for them to endorse an unequivocal interpretation of sexual assault in this scenario. First, for a disclosed incident to no longer be viewed as “ambiguous” or as regretted sex, the victim would have to present some form of proof that corroborates her claim of sexual assault. Jessica explained, “If the [boyfriend] still pushes the issue and she still doesn't want it to happen, or if there were signs that the relationship was abusive, that would definitely help corroborate the victim's story.” According to this participant, if the boyfriend continued to ignore her non-consent, presumably meaning that he continued to sexually assault her, or if the victim had evidence of physical abuse, the

disclosed incident could be considered sexual assault. Similarly, Amanda stated, “Well, if you're afraid of your boyfriend hurting you, then I feel like there would have been something that happened previous to that. I think there would have to have been another instance of some sort of abuse before that... But, I guess in that case, I would consider it sexual assault if I had known about the previous altercation.” For both participants, a pattern of abuse in the relationship would indicate that an incident was not an ambiguous or regretted sexual encounter.

Second, the victim could demonstrate the non-ambiguity of the incident by providing the participant with details about her degree of verbal and/or physical resistance. Brenda explained that she would base her interpretation on “Just the severity of it, I guess, and make sure that it really did happen and what kind of happened... Yeah, if she was saying no or he tried to grab her or there was some type of altercation and he did it anyway even though she said no.” Lisa described the types of questions she would ask to determine the victim’s level of resistance: “Just to make sure she made it clear that she didn't want that to happen and did she go and get help right after it happened? Well, she could have been fearful to leave, I guess. But I would ask her questions like that, like what exactly was said and maybe if he was like really forceful.” The victim’s verbal or physical resistance is significant to participants since it makes interpretations such as miscommunication or regretted sex less likely. As stated by Amanda, “You have to follow through with it and try your hardest to avoid it if you really don't want it.”

For this scenario, in which the disclosed incident was perpetrated by the victim’s boyfriend, participants detailed five main factors that they would take into consideration when deciding whether or not the incident is consistent with sexual assault. These are: 1) whether the victim had engaged in consensual sexual intercourse previously with her boyfriend; 2) the likelihood that the incident was a miscommunication; 3) the possibility that the victim simply

regretted consensual sex with her boyfriend; 4) whether the victim had proof of the incident, specifically evidence of physical injuries; and, 5) the victim's level of verbal and/or physical resistance. Without evidence or the victim's description of clear efforts to resist, the majority of participants were disinclined to interpret the incident as sexual assault, and instead preferred to define it as an instance of miscommunication between the two parties.

Responses

Participants who interpreted the incident as sexual assault would be inclined to recommend that the victim report her boyfriend to law enforcement, although having corroborating evidence to present to police was particularly important to these participants. Robert explained, "I'd trust her and believe that it was sexual assault, but to do anything about it, you'd probably have to have proof, especially if they were sexually active. Proof that she didn't want it to happen." He followed up by describing the forms of proof that the victim could bring to the police:

If he's physically forceful to her and she never said yes, then definitely, she can go to the police about that... Her saying no or if there's bruises that he pushed her around or pushed her into bed or whatever, like physical, or like if she could record any kind of verbal, that would be enough to go off of... Definitely stay away from him and then she can file it with the police, sexual assault, she has the physical proof on her.

Likewise, Karen stated, "I would go to the police. If there were bruises and he did rape her." In a sense, injuries resulting from sexual assault are perceived by participants as positive because they support the victim's versions of events about a scenario that otherwise would be unlikely to be interpreted as sexual assault, both by participants themselves and by law enforcement officials. As Anne succinctly stated, "Physical injuries would help."

Although many participants contemplated the possibility of reporting to law enforcement, the majority nonetheless explained various reasons for not making this recommendation. First, as clear from the above quotations, reporting would not be strongly recommended unless the victim had some form of evidence that could back up her otherwise hard-to-believe accusation. Second, some participants took into consideration the effect that reporting to law enforcement would have on the victim's relationship with her boyfriend. As explained by Abigail, "If he thought it was a misunderstanding, like, "Oh, she likes it when guys are aggressive' ... If she still wants to be with him [and] she reports him for sexually assaulting her, that's pretty much ending it, because it's like, 'What you did was really wrong and you're kind of a criminal.'" Relatedly, some participants were concerned that making this recommendation could jeopardize their friendship with the victim, as Amanda described:

I think maybe in the end, she might end up resenting you if that ended up coming back to haunt her. If she went to the police and then he, the boyfriend, found out about it, well, obviously he would find out about it, but he was then able to come back and hurt her further, even just yell at her, she'd be like, 'Why did you make me go?'

Concerns about the consequences of reporting often made participants unlikely to recommend this course of action to victims of boyfriend-perpetrated sexual assault, even for those that interpreted the incident as sexual assault.

Third, several participants were worried about getting the victim's boyfriend into trouble through reporting, particularly if they were not convinced that this was an incident of sexual assault. Lilly explained:

You're just trying to fix it a little bit, just make it stop, but you accidentally get it on his record, he can't get a job, he gets charged as a sex offender, all this stuff where, I mean, you don't agree what he did was right and you want it to stop, but you don't think like his crime was egregious enough to... you want it to stop, but you don't want him to suffer intensely.

Concern with the perpetrator's record and the life-long consequences of reporting were at the forefront of many participants' minds. The potential consequences for the perpetrator often seemed to overwhelm those participants had for the victim.

Finally, and related to the third point, some participants considered formal reporting an overreaction to a misunderstanding between the couple. Anne expressed her concern about formal reporting being too drastic a measure with the following: "With the police, it does depend on whether she just woke up the next morning and regretted it, or if she was sexually assaulted... I would advise her against [reporting] it if it was just something she regretted, because that happens to people sometimes. They just regret something that happened." According to David, "I don't think going to the police would really help the situation... maybe going to the police would make the thing more complicated and that there could have been a simpler solution to it." David's statement illustrates the notion, also held by a number of other participants, that there is a "simpler solution" to responding to sexual assault in a relationship, especially considering the possibility that the victim may be misinterpreting what, at the time, was consensual.

In light of the infrequency of recommending reporting to law enforcement in this scenario, participants described several other forms of advice they would offer the victim following disclosure. The most common form of advice would be for the victim to talk about the incident with her boyfriend. This is considered an ideal solution since the victim is unlikely to have evidence to present to law enforcement officials and is also believed unlikely to want to break up with her boyfriend. As Diane explained, "Maybe not the police right away, but have her sit down and have a serious talk with him and just get the situation straight... Probably just talk to him because she doesn't really have a lot of proof that, not proof, but she doesn't have a lot of evidence that it was rape, I guess, if you just say no and don't really do anything else about it."

Participants who recommended talking with the boyfriend often explained that this would resolve the situation, so no further action would be needed unless he repeated his behavior.

Heather stated, “I think that's something that the two of them would have to work out between themselves... I think, in that situation, the best way would just be to try and talk it out between them first. Like, maybe if it happens again, then she should try to get the police involved, but before that, I think the first step would just be to try to talk it through.”

Talking about the incident was considered ideal not only because it would preclude police involvement and would keep the relationship intact, but also because it would give both the victim and her boyfriend an opportunity to understand each other's perspectives and thereby prevent future sexual misunderstandings. The boyfriend would be able to learn how to interpret non-consent signals in the future, as explained by Jessica: “[By her] going and talking to him, he would put it in perspective and be like, ‘Okay, well, the next time she says stop, or no, or pushes me off, I do need to stop because she didn't necessarily want that.’ Talking about it, I think, would help in that way. It wouldn't necessarily put the relationship in jeopardy.” Likewise, Diane stated the boyfriend could explain to the victim, “Oh I just thought you were joking, or I didn't even know that you were that serious about it.” This would help the victim understand that he did not have bad intentions and that the incident was not, in fact, sexual assault. Furthermore, she could learn that she needs to more clearly communicate her non-consent in the future.

Although talking with the boyfriend was the most frequent recommendation in this scenario, not all participants would advise doing so. A small number of participants who contemplated this advice recognized that it could have drawbacks. These included the sense that talking could be fruitless since the boyfriend is unlikely to change his violent tendencies, that he would not respect what the victim had to say, that the victim must have underlying psychological

issues if she continues to have feelings for him, and that this recommendation could potentially endanger the confidante. As to the last consideration, David explained:

Maybe he's gonna get a little irritated that she went and told me about it and that he may be mad at her for telling me and I would get myself into a situation that I really didn't want to be a part of. But, she came to me, and, being a trustful or truthful friend, you know, you want to help her, but you don't want to get in between her and the guy's relationship... You're trying to do the right thing but yet, maybe in the long run, something's gonna happen to you and you really don't want that, personally.

In light of the potential problems with talking and with reporting to law enforcement, a small number of participants would make alternative suggestions to the victim following this disclosure. These included talking to her own or to her boyfriend's parents, taking a brief relationship break and then "starting over," and "walking away" whenever the boyfriend initiated a sexual encounter. Seeking medical attention was only recommended as a means of gathering evidence to eventually bring to police, if the victim decided she wanted to formally report the incident.

Summary

Participants detailed five main factors that they would take into consideration when determining whether or not to interpret as sexual assault a disclosure involving a boyfriend. These were: 1) whether the victim had engaged in consensual sexual intercourse previously with her boyfriend; 2) the likelihood that the incident was a miscommunication; 3) the possibility that the victim simply regretted consensual sex with her boyfriend; 4) whether the victim had proof of the incident; and, 5) the victim's level of verbal and/or physical resistance. Overall, participants emphasized the ambiguity they perceived in this scenario and had difficulty understanding how sexual assault could occur in a relationship, particularly if the couple had previously engaged in consensual sexual activity. As a result, most participants preferred to

interpret this disclosure scenario as an instance of miscommunication rather than as sexual assault. This interpretation was supported by participants' claims that the victim must not have made her refusal clear enough and the resulting belief that the boyfriend did not have criminal intentions.

Since most participants interpreted this scenario as a miscommunication, they frequently recommended that the victim and her boyfriend should talk about the incident together as a form of resolution that would keep the relationship intact. Ideally, the victim could learn to better communicate her sexual desires, or lack thereof, while the boyfriend could understand that he should take seriously her indications of refusal. However, if the incident was "severe," meaning that the victim had visible injuries or a documented history of abuse, a number of participants explained that they would recommend formal reporting. Few other forms of advice were offered for this scenario.

Similar to the previous scenarios of sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance or a casual date, the majority of participants were unlikely to define this incident as sexual assault and the responses they described giving to a survivor after such a disclosure were unlikely to include formal help-seeking, such as reporting to law enforcement. The emphasis on ambiguity distinguishes this scenario from the previous ones. Although some participants contemplated the potential vindictiveness of the victim's intentions in disclosing, most were content to define the incident as miscommunication or as regretted consensual sex. The common recommendation to resolve the incident by talking with the boyfriend reflects the majority opinion that this scenario does not constitute sexual assault. As such, and as with the previous two scenarios, participants were reluctant to advise formal reporting, especially if the survivor lacked the proof considered necessary to convince law enforcement officials of the veracity of her story.

Mutual Friend Perpetrator

The results below are organized into four subsections, which will be described following a brief explanation. Unlike with the acquaintance perpetrator, who was envisioned by participants as someone they either had never met or else knew only peripherally, the mutual friend is someone with whom the participant is friends; typically, at least as close as he or she is with the victim. While participants described the boyfriend perpetrator scenario as being the most difficult to interpret because of its perceived ambiguity, this scenario presented its own peculiar difficulty for participants.

Because this scenario involved participants being close friends with both parties, the common assessment of this scenario was that it constituted a “he said, she said” situation. As such, participants consistently endeavored to refrain from interpreting the incident as either sexual assault or not sexual assault until they could find some evidence to support either interpretation. This scenario is thus unique to all other victim-offender relationships. In the other scenarios involving non-stranger perpetrators, participants would use cues from the disclosure to interpret the incident and then would attempt to offer some form of advice to the victim based on their interpretation. However, in the case of a mutual friend perpetrator, the majority of participants would attempt to refrain from forming an interpretation of the incident at the time of the disclosure. Instead, after construing the incident as “he said, she said,” most would conduct some form of informal investigation, followed by resuming the attempt to interpret the incident, ideally for the sake of offering a response to the victim. In light of this atypical order of events, this section is laid out differently than the previous ones, and is arranged into the following four subsections: 1) pre-interpretations; 2) investigation; 3) responses; and, 4) conclusion summarizing the findings for this scenario.

Pre-Interpretations

Underlying nearly all participants' initial reactions to this disclosure scenario is the sense that, as Megan phrased it, "It's her word against his." Likewise, Christina stated, "It's kind of like a 'he said, she said' thing. You really don't know what happened." Participants described several difficulties they would experience when first receiving such a disclosure, which would make them hesitate to interpret the incident at that time. First, several participants would take into consideration the closeness of their own relationship with the mutual friend. Some participants stated that a closer relationship with him would be helpful in terms of having a better sense of how he behaves, especially when drinking at parties, and therefore would make it easier to decide whom to believe. Lauren explained, "If I knew the person, I think it's easier to decide who's telling the truth once you're around people enough. Especially at parties, because people can change a lot at parties, the way they act and behave." However, others suggested that closeness with the perpetrator would make them more likely to disbelieve the victim and to make excuses for the perpetrator's behavior. According to Abigail, "Because you're friends with them, you could make up excuses like, 'Oh, she was drunk, or he was drunk and he didn't mean to.'"

Second, a number of participants explained that they would struggle with believing the victim in the first place. Many justified their default tendency to disbelieve the victim by envisioning the scenario as partying that got out of hand or as a figment of the victim's imagination. As Jessica explained, "If they were close friends and they were partying, maybe things just started happening, stuff built up to a point where they were like let's explore this option, and maybe she didn't want to admit that because of personal reasons or things between the two friends, and I think it might make it more difficult for me to believe that [a sexual assault occurred]." Similarly, Christina stated, "I wouldn't want my friend to get in a lot of trouble

because if he went here, he could possibly get kicked out, but it just would be so hard to pick who to believe, because girls a lot of times make up situations or say stuff that really didn't happen, just because in their mind it happened at the time.” Because many participants were unwilling, at least initially, to interpret the incident as sexual assault, they often expressed difficulty with giving the victim the advice or support that they would likely offer in other scenarios. As Mike stated, “If it's not a friend, it's a little easier to want to give her good advice if I do have to give advice... and if she doesn't have evidence to show, it's hard for me to give her advice and to maybe believe that it happened.”

Fourth, a unique difficulty for participants in this scenario is the sense that they are morally obligated to provide the same interpretations and responses that they would if the victim were disclosing sexual assault by a stranger perpetrator. Nonetheless, they struggle with whether or not they would be able to fulfill this obligation. Much of this struggle relates to the anticipation of negative consequences for the mutual friend, which can overwhelm their sense of moral obligation. Martin explained,

Morally, I would feel obligated to still say go to the cops. It doesn't change the offense that it's my friend, so I can't really say I'd give a different answer, but it'd definitely be a lot harder to say go to the police... It's just like, you don't want that person to get legally in trouble because that's one of your friends, despite how stupid of an action that might have been.

Similarly, Susan stated, “I wouldn't want to see someone I was friends with in jail, but I don't think that his actions were obviously good ones and I think he should learn, like, ‘Hey, we don't do this kind of stuff, that's not okay, we have to be punished for things like that.’” For some participants, the best reaction they could offer the victim upon disclosure would be to urge her to seek help from someone else, as Christina expressed: “I don't know what to do about that situation. I would say go to another person.”

Before moving on to explore what many participants would do to assist with their interpretations of this disclosure scenario, it is important to point out that a minority of participants claimed that they would not have any difficulty affirming the victim's version of events and advising her to seek formal support. These few participants explained that they would no longer be friends with a person accused of sexual assault, and therefore their mutual friendship would have no influence on their interpretations or responses. As Amanda stated, "That's pretty horrible, so I don't think that would sway anything... If it was a friend of mine and he pulled something like that, then I couldn't be friends with him anymore so it wouldn't really matter." Likewise, Linda explained, "I don't think my advice would change because if a friend did that to my friend, then obviously that friend is no longer my friend." Although this sentiment was relatively rare, it is worth acknowledging nonetheless.

Investigation

As detailed above, the majority of participants were conflicted about how to interpret this disclosure scenario, and reluctant to offer any definitive interpretation beyond claiming that it is a "he said, she said" situation. Nonetheless, most expressed an obligation to offer the victim some form of advice, although this was not considered possible until the participant had a firmer sense of which party to believe. As a result, prior to advising the victim, and in order to solidify a decision as to whether or not the incident constituted sexual assault, most participants would conduct their own investigation of the situation. Below, participants' explanations of the process, purpose, and likely result of investigating are outlined.

Many participants described investigation as the means by which they would negotiate between the need to discover whom to believe in this "he said, she said" scenario and the sense

that they are obligated to respond in some way to the victim following the disclosure.

Concerning the order of events for achieving these disparate goals, participants articulated two courses of action. First, some would make some form of recommendation to tide the victim over until their investigation was complete. For example, Robert explained that he would advise the victim to seek answers elsewhere, presumably beyond the perpetrator's actions. He stated that he would "Probably give her some advice first and then go and see what he has to say... Maybe she can find ways to help get over this emotional burden and make sure it doesn't happen again, or try to calm down and look for other answers. And then, yeah, I'd go talk to him."

Second, other participants explained that they would advise the victim to wait to do anything for the time being, until they could return with more practical advice. In the meantime, the disclosure recipient would be able to seek out the mutual friend to find out his version of events. For example, David, who initially stated that he would recommend reporting immediately upon receiving such a disclosure, later changed his mind and stated, "I remember saying that I would tell her [to go to] the police, but I guess before consulting them, I'd definitely consult him first."

In line with both forms of immediate recommendations to the survivor, many participants explained that it would be important to get the male's side of the story in this scenario to supplement the version described by the victim during her disclosure. As explained by Tiffany,

My friend, the girl, she could be completely lying, and there's two sides to every story. She could be saying, 'I resisted it and I tried to get him off me and he wouldn't. I was fighting him and he was still forcing me.' So, I would want to get his story. Maybe he was saying, 'She was perfectly just letting me. She was going along with it, too. She wasn't trying to push me off.' He could even be like, 'Yeah, she said no at first, but then once things got started, she kind of just wasn't trying to force anything off me.' I think it'd be good to have two sides.

Since this scenario is interpreted as “he said, she said,” participants go to great lengths to determine which version is the truthful one.

A number of participants explained that getting both versions would allow them to compare the two and to discover the truth of what occurred, as Christina described: “I think I would listen to one side of the story, then listen to the other side of the story, and kind of just pick out the similarities and figure out what actually happened.” Likewise, Andrea stated, “I probably would ask them [both] what happened, mainly because if I’m both of their friends then I wouldn’t want to be like, ‘Oh, I’m taking her side immediately.’ I feel like I would ask him, ‘What happened, from your eyes what happened?’ And then see the similarities, see the differences.” By piecing together the similarities and differences in the victim’s and perpetrator’s versions of events, participants assumed that the resulting overlap would reveal whether or not a sexual assault had occurred. They could then proceed by offering more concrete advice to the victim, or else by disregarding her disclosure altogether.

However, “consulting” the perpetrator (to use David’s term) typically meant finding out the truth about what happened by learning his interpretation of the incident. Most participants appeared to believe that, due to their friendship, the accused perpetrator would tell the truth about whether or not he had sexually assaulted the victim. This is curious, considering participants’ frequent tendency to disbelieve their other friend, the victim. Lauren described how she envisioned her conversation with the male friend would go:

I would probably just act like it wasn’t [sexual] assault or anything. I’d be like, ‘Oh, I heard you were with her last night. What happened?’ And make it, try to come off more like curious and maybe excited, that way he thinks ‘Oh, it’s okay, she doesn’t know what really happened.’ If he told me anything similar to what she told me, then I would know it [sexual assault] actually happened.

Lauren would interpret the incident as sexual assault only if the perpetrator described sexually assaulting the victim. Similarly, other participants also explained that they would align with his interpretation, even if it contradicted that of the victim. As Robert described, “He might have proof that he was somewhere else and she just didn't know who it was. Especially if she was intoxicated... It's not like she can just blame him if he did have proof that she gave consent or she wanted to do that.” Proof, in relation to the accused perpetrator, does not relate to any form of evidence other than his stating that consent had been given. This is in clear contrast to the evidentiary demands participants typically placed on the victim, particularly in the previous scenarios, which include visible injuries and other forms of forensic evidence, audio recording of the incident, and overt displays of grief during the disclosure, among others.

For those participants who assumed that the mutual friend would admit to sexually assaulting the victim, they explained that their next and likely final step would be to explain to him the potentially negative consequence of his actions. In David's words, this would involve “telling him what kind of trouble he could get in.” Similarly, Robert stated, “I'd make sure he knows what he did was wrong.” Nonetheless, some participants acknowledged that the perpetrator may lie about his actions, such as Megan, who stated, “Unless they were crazy or something, I don't think anyone would admit they raped someone.” Likewise, Lauren explained, “Obviously if it was true, the guy wouldn't admit to doing it because that would not make sense.” However, most participants described the mutual friend as giving a convincing explanation about the incident somehow being a misunderstanding, in which case, the next logical course of action for quite a few participants would be to return to the victim and check the consistency of her story.

For these participants, checking back with the victim is the necessary next step in determining whose version of events should be believed. Robert described in detail how he would do this and what purpose it would serve:

I'd ask her to go through it. It would probably be traumatizing to her, but I'd ask her to go through it probably, like tell it, and then a couple hours, eight or ten hours later, tell it to me again to make sure everything's the same and she didn't change her story around. If she started changing her story up, then she probably didn't have a good memory of who it was, so then I'd probably lean more towards [believing] him. But if she can keep the facts straight and it all makes sense, it's not like any crazy ideas, then, [I'd believe her].

It's unclear what a consistent story would signal to Robert or what he would do as a result.

Lauren perhaps provides an answer to this question with the following:

It's sometimes obvious. If you question someone several times about it, it's more obvious if they're lying than if you ask once, because normally they change their story, so I guess I'd probably ask her a few more times, at different times, maybe different days, and see if they were the same. Because I know, normally, if you ask someone a story over and over, they start to get mad and they'll just say something, whether it's true or not, and then, obviously, that would be a lie if it didn't match the first story they told you.

Although participants would go through this process of comparing stories to find out whose version to believe, and would return to the victim, likely multiple times, to verify the consistency of her version if the perpetrator were to provide another explanation, doing so nonetheless can serve to confirm the accused's version of events. Lauren's and Robert's descriptions of this process indicate that the victim would likely deviate in some way due to their repeated questioning, thereby confirming their initial suspicions that she was lying about the incident.

Overall, despite the described necessity of further investigation, and despite the time-consuming effort involved in conducting one, participants tended to conclude that they were unlikely to form an interpretation of the incident based on this endeavor. The majority of participants who claimed that they would conduct an investigation concluded that their efforts

would simply result in maintaining the scenario's status as a "he said, she said" situation. The persistence of this interpretation is reflected in the typical responses they described giving in this disclosure scenario.

Responses

While the majority of participants detailed a process of investigating this incident by attempting to clarify both party's versions of events, the end result described typically was not the formulation of a resolute interpretation benefitting either party. These participants continued to consider this a "he said, she said" scenario, following their hypothetical investigations. Subsequently, most participants explained that their next step would be to initiate peer mediation between the victim and offender, with the assumption that this course of action would allow both parties to reach a mutual understanding of the incident and to determine together how it ought to be resolved.

Participants described the process of peer mediation as bringing the victim and offender together and encouraging them to explain to one another their thoughts about the incident. As David stated, "I think bringing them two together with you being there and talking it through with them may be the primary solution." Although some participants recognized that mediation could be uncomfortable for the victim, it was considered a necessary and likely mutually beneficial, endeavor. As Robert explained:

I'm sure the woman definitely wouldn't be comfortable. The man probably wants to get down to the bottom of this before he gets turned in. I don't want her to feel threatened or, I don't know, berated, but it's something that needs to happen, I feel like... But I mean, I'd tell her, he needs to know your side of the story before you go and do anything against him and even though it's really difficult, this needs to happen in order to grow through the situation and to help get through it.

Participants described three specific benefits that could come from mediation, through which both parties could “grow through the situation” and which would result in further action being unnecessary.

First, the victim and offender could begin to understand one another’s perspectives. As Robert stated, “I’d probably have them in the same room and then sit across from each other. I’d definitely be there and then I’d make sure that she knows what he had to say and how he didn’t think it was rape and then make sure he knows what she has to say.” Second, and relatedly, this could result in the victim realizing that the incident was not in fact sexual assault, but rather a misunderstanding. As Elise explained, it may actually be the case that the perpetrator has a crush on the victim and he could not find a way to communicate this with her. Through mediation, he could explain to her that “He sees it as something else. He sees it as, ‘Oh my gosh, I really like her and I’ve liked her for a long time, and she didn’t realize that,’ so at least have them try to communicate.” Robert described the ideal outcome of mediation: “Well, the ideal outcome, I think would be if she could remember or if he had proof that she gave consent, because then it was for enjoyment and pleasure, not him taking advantage of her. I think that would be the ideal, if there was proof she gave consent to him.” Third, the perpetrator could apologize to the victim during the mediation, and this would preclude the need for police involvement. As Christina stated, this would involve the perpetrator saying something along the lines of “I’m really, really sorry, this is never gonna happen again.”

Altogether, most participants who would recommend mediation were convinced that it would resolve the situation through one of those three ways. However, some explained that formal reporting would be warranted if the victim reached this decision after mediation. According to Robert, “If she still wants to file a report, I actually wouldn’t have a problem with

it... If they still can't come to an agreement, then, I mean, ultimately, it's up to the woman, so I'd let her do what she needs to do to handle the situation.” Christina explained that she would advise formal reporting if the perpetrator refused to apologize to the victim: “If the guy's like whatever, I didn't do that, then it's obvious he did it... If the guy is being rude about it and doesn't want to [apologize], then I would be like report it, I don't care.”

After investigating and assisting with mediation, most participants would consider the issue resolved and would not make any additional recommendations to the victim. However, it should be recalled that some would not take these steps and would instead urge the victim to report to law enforcement immediately following disclosure, as discussed earlier in this section. Very few alternative recommendations were offered by participants for this disclosure scenario. A small minority explained that they would suggest she seek medical attention, either to gather evidence through a rape kit or to be tested for STDs. One participant stated that she would suggest counseling. No other recommendations were considered in this scenario.

Summary

Participants described three main factors that they would take into consideration when determining whether or not to interpret as sexual assault a disclosure involving a mutual friend. These were: 1) their own relationship with the perpetrator; 2) disbelief of the victim's version of events; and, 3) a sense of a moral obligation to provide consistent recommendations across victim-offender relationships. Once again, participants were unlikely to define this incident as sexual assault, and described going to great lengths to confirm the initial interpretation of it as a “he said, she said” situation. By refusing to take a side in this scenario, and by gathering evidence to support the decision not to choose sides, participants were able to refrain from the

obligations associated with the role of confidante while maintaining the appearance of support for both parties.

Bringing the two friends together and leading them through peer mediation was frequently described as the best solution to this scenario. Ideally, peer mediation would result in the victim being persuaded that she had actually consented or had otherwise misinterpreted the incident, along with an apology from the perpetrator. If this is not possible, however, participants recommending this course of action would be supportive of the victim's independent decision to seek formal support. Participants would be likely to support the victim's version of events only if the perpetrator appeared unapologetic or if he admitted to sexually assaulting her. In either of these instances, a strong recommendation to report to law enforcement, or to gather the necessary medical evidence, would be offered to the victim.

As explained earlier, this scenario is unique among the victim-offender relationships discussed during the interviews. It involved the closest degree of acquaintanceship between the participants and the hypothetical perpetrator. As such, it also involved the greatest degree of reluctance to accept the victim's version of events given during the disclosure and to interpret this as an unequivocal incident of sexual assault. Rather than providing a straightforward connection between interpretations and responses, participants instead offered a meandering route to discovering "the truth," although the end result was not likely to generate firm conclusions. Nonetheless, this scenario is similar to the previous ones in that participants adhered to their reluctance to interpret the incident as sexual assault, as well as their reluctance to advise formal help-seeking.

Stranger Perpetrator

The results below are organized into three subsections: 1) participants' interpretations of receiving a disclosure from a friend about being sexually assaulted by a stranger; 2) participants' explanations of how they would then respond to the friend after interpreting the incident; and, 3) a conclusion summarizing interpretations and responses for this scenario. The majority of participants envisioned this scenario as occurring when the victim was walking alone near campus at night. Despite her utmost resistance, she was brutally attacked by a stranger and left with severe injuries.

Interpretations

There was not a single instance in which a participant would interpret this disclosed incident as anything other than sexual assault. Disclosure of stranger sexual assault is unanimously deemed the most serious by participants. This scenario is considered unambiguous, the victim is considered innocent, and the offender's criminal motivations are considered obvious. As a result, no participant questioned the victim's version of events or entertained the possibility that the incident was the result of a miscommunication, regretted consensual sex, or victim sexual aggression. Other factors deemed significant in previous victim-offender scenarios, such as alcohol consumption, verbal and/or physical resistance, or following social norms,³³ did not factor in to participants' interpretations when the perpetrator was a stranger.

³³ It should be noted that many participants explained that the victim should not have been walking alone at night. However, unlike in the casual date perpetrator scenario, where social norms were employed to assist in the determination of responsibility, no participant drew on this consideration when formulating an interpretation of stranger-perpetrated sexual assault disclosure.

None of the participants expressed the same sense of ambiguity about stranger-perpetrated sexual assault that they did with other victim-offender relationships. Martin struggled to explain the difference in his contrast of stranger and non-stranger-perpetrated sexual assault:

Because I guess that a random rape, there's like a random rape where like a dude runs up or whatever, and then she kind of knows this guy, so there's a bigger chance in this situation, where she knows this guy, that she didn't get raped, she's kind of saying she got raped, but, like, I don't know, there's no chance of that in a random rape, that it wasn't actually a rape. You know?

While a disclosure recipient may be likely to doubt the victim's account of being sexually assaulted by a non-stranger, her fabricating the incident appears inconceivable if the offender were a stranger. Catherine expanded on the distinction between stranger and non-stranger perpetrators with the following:

In a situation where she was attacked on campus or something that wasn't alcohol or anything involved, I feel like people would have maybe a little bit more sympathy because she was just completely attacked for no reason. There was nothing she could have done or anything to prevent it, and in the party situation, alcohol would be involved, probably, most likely, so I feel like people may be a little bit more not as sympathetic. I don't know. They would have sympathy, but maybe people would make alcohol an excuse for what had happened... And a [stranger] who assaulted her, he just did it. There is no excuse for what he's doing, but people might excuse the person at a party with like, 'Oh, he was drinking, he didn't know what he was doing, he would never do that sober.'

As Catherine explained, since there is "no reason" for being sexually assaulted by a stranger, such as drinking alcohol, there would be greater sympathy for the victim. Furthermore, there is no justification that a third party could employ to downplay the offender's criminal motivations, which removes the sense of ambiguity present in scenarios with non-stranger perpetrators. Additionally, as Abigail stated, "I think that's what people think of when they think of rape, someone just attacking someone." If a disclosed incident corresponds with the standard definition of rape, then participants will interpret it as such without question.

Not only are the criminal motivations of stranger perpetrators considered evident in this scenario, but the victim's innocence is also highlighted by participants to demonstrate that such an incident would unequivocally be interpreted as sexual assault. Rachel stated, "I think she'd be seen as more of a victim than if she knew [the perpetrator]... Like, if it was a stranger, then I don't think anyone would see it as her fault at all, if she was attacked and everything." Moreover, in this scenario, the victim's level of resistance is not considered relevant to participants' interpretations. Rather, her inability to resist is emphasized as evidence of her innocence, as Jessica explained: "She was walking by herself, she couldn't defend herself, he was bigger than her." Likewise, according to Elise, "I mean, there's nothing she could have done in that situation to stop it. She probably did what she could... so she was actually a victim in this and that kind of thing, whereas with the party situation, it's, well, you were there to do that. What did you expect? You were at a frat party." Additionally, as Elise's statement conveys, a victim of a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault is not considered to have control over the situation. Amanda expanded on this sentiment with the following: "Because when someone would just take you on the street and rape you, they are just completely taking away your control of the situation and your control of yourself."

Altogether, participants would consistently interpret this disclosure scenario as sexual assault. They highlighted the stranger perpetrator's undeniably criminal intentions by contrasting this scenario with that of a non-stranger perpetrator, which could instead be viewed as ambiguous. Moreover, they drew attention to the victim's lack of control and her inability to defend herself against a stranger. Participants explained that no one would doubt the victim's story, nor would anyone feel anything but sympathy toward her. The ability to unequivocally

interpret this scenario as an incident of sexual assault leads to equally unequivocal responses given to the victim upon disclosure, as illustrated below.

Responses

Recommending the victim seek assistance from law enforcement was the immediate response of all but one participant.³⁴ The overwhelming tendency to recommend formal reporting in this scenario is in striking contrast to the general reluctance to advise this for other victim-offender relationships. Megan detailed her thought process in recommending formal reporting for this scenario, but not for another: “Okay, before, when I said don't go to the police because she was at a party and stuff, I feel like in that situation, it's more like her choice to be there. But when it's some random person on the street, then that wasn't her choice at all, in any aspect.” Participants detailed five different benefits related to the formal reporting of a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault, none of which were considered important when contemplating this recommendation for other scenarios.

First, a number of participants argued that reporting the incident to law enforcement could increase deterrence by showing others who are inclined to sexually offend that they could receive legal sanctions. Elise explained, “That person, and also if other, I don't want to say rapists, but you know what I mean, if other people see that [they think], ‘Oh, if I do that, I'm

³⁴ The one outlier was a survivor of sexual assault who had firsthand experience of the criminal justice system's response to victims. She explained that she would not recommend reporting unless the victim had evidence from either a witness or a surveillance camera. She stated the following:

It's hard in a court setting because the lawyers and everybody who's going against you to protect that guy is practically making out that you're a bad person... That's personally how I feel. If you go to a court setting, they make you feel bad. They say oh, you were asking for it because you are a girl. It's just wrong. I mean, getting over being a victim of sexual assault is really hard but having to go to someone and try to convince them and then they just laugh in your face and call you practically trash is worse.

gonna get caught and get thrown in jail.' That's a huge deterrent." Likewise, Abigail described how she would encourage the victim to report following the disclosure:

I feel like if something was violent, she would be really traumatized and she would just want to hide and be like this never happened, but, as a friend, I would want to encourage her, you need to turn it in. In the end, I think it would protect other people, because, hopefully, [the police] could catch him and get him in trouble to overall discourage [others] from doing things like that.

Although it is acknowledged that the victim may be reluctant to report to law enforcement, many participants described ways that they would convince her to do so. This is also in contrast to other scenarios, in which strong recommendations to report occurred infrequently, if at all.

Abigail's statement also illustrates the second benefit of formal reporting, namely protecting other women from sexual predators. Many participants spoke about how, as long as a stranger perpetrator remains on the street, women, at large, are in danger. Additionally, participants states that even if the victim's report does not immediately lead to the perpetrator's apprehension and arrest, it will likely contribute to the progression of past or future cases. Some participants, such as Tiffany, expressed concern that the perpetrator would attack the same victim again if their paths crossed in the future, since he knows that she is an easy target. She explained the following:

If he did it once, if he enjoyed it, why wouldn't he continue to go out and do this? I don't obviously know what a rapist's mind is like, but if you're gonna do it to one person, you obviously have the intentions to do it more than once, unless you hated it and whatnot, but I feel like most would continue to or maybe he might have a past and they've not caught him or maybe he has a record. Who knows? ...He could come back after her. He could see her and try again because he knows he got away with it. Yeah, I'd have to try and persuade her. I'd use that argument that he's doing this to other people, he needs to be caught and be put somewhere.

Similarly, Megan stated that she would recommend formal reporting "just so it's documented publicly, and maybe if they had more rapes in the same area, it could all help to finding the

actual person, and if they find some DNA on her and they don't know who it is, they could save it, it could be a record, so it could be [used in] the future, helping to catch the person.”

A third benefit of formal reporting is that law enforcement could begin an investigation to track down the perpetrator. Since this scenario involves a stranger, participants often explained that they do not have the means to conduct their own investigations, to confront the perpetrator, or to otherwise resolve the situation. As Jeffrey explained, “We can legitimately find out what happened if we already know the person. We know a little bit about them, we know who they are, essentially. If it's some random stranger that just came up and did this, then we know nothing. We don't know where he is, we don't know who he is, so we might want to leave that to the police.” Similarly, Philip stated, “I would tell her to go right to the police. Since I don't know the person and I don't want to go track him down myself, I would say definitely go to the police... I think they'd probably have a better chance of finding him than me.”

Fourth, and related to the third benefit, a number of participants emphasized that formal reporting was the only way for the victim to achieve justice when sexually assaulted by a stranger. Tiffany explained, “I wouldn't want her to keep it confidential to just herself. If it was to that extent where she was raped and there's a rapist out there, he needs to be caught and you can't just let him continue doing the same things.” Susan echoed this sentiment, stating “I know that it's not an easy decision to make but I think that punishment should happen.” Likewise, according to Catherine, “I think that if she was sexually assaulted, the person who attacked her or sexually assaulted her deserves to be brought to justice, I guess.” Since law enforcement officers have the best chances of finding the perpetrator, formal reporting presents the only opportunity to achieve justice in a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault.

The fifth and final benefit of formally reporting a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault is that doing so would not have any adverse effect on the victim's reputation. As Breanne explained, "There's not as much repercussion for her to have him caught... I don't even know that her peers would even know about it as much, except for the close people that she told." Again, this is in contrast to previous non-stranger perpetrator scenarios, in which many participants contemplated recommending formal reporting, but expressed concern about the potentially negative consequences it could have for the victim. Martin discussed the difference between this scenario and others: "If the person that committed the rape had mutual friends with her, I think rumors would pop up, like no, she didn't get raped, she's a slut or whatever, and so I guess she'd get more of a negative response by going to the cops than if she went to the cops and it was a completely random person on the street, just because of how people talk."

Not only is the disclosure scenario of a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault unique because of the consistency with which participants would encourage formal reporting, but also because half of all participants stated that they would also recommend that the victim seek medical attention. Recall that in previous scenarios, if this form of advice were mentioned at all, it was typically offered without explanation or with a vague explanation, and often arose from direct prompting. Nonetheless, similar to other victim-offender relationships, participants who recommended medical attention for this scenario often were more concerned with the gathering of evidence than with the victim's self-care. Jessica explained that she would tell the victim, "Go to the hospital first so they can do a rape test and then file charges." Likewise, Andrea stated that she would "Tell her to go to the hospital and get the rape kit and talk to the doctors there." Linda emphasized the importance of gathering such evidence, though she was uncertain as to its outcome would be: "I would definitely tell her to go get a rape kit. Well, actually, if a rape kit

tells you, does it tell you who the person is? I don't know.” Additionally, a number of participants expressed concern over the possibility of STDs or pregnancy, and would recommend seeking medical attention for those reasons.

A few participants expressed that they would offer the victim additional forms of advice that she could pursue either in combination with formal reporting or until she felt comfortable with reporting. A small number would recommend speaking with another person, such as a counselor, parents, a resident advisor, or other friends. The reasoning here typically was that these individuals would assist encouraging the victim to formally report. As Lauren explained, “If she wasn't comfortable [reporting], I would just maybe suggest why don't we talk to [our resident advisor] and see what she thinks, and then, hopefully, coming from someone of sort of an authority to us, but who is also similar in our age and everything, could calm her down enough to convince her, if I couldn't do it.” The only other alternative form of advice mentioned, albeit by very few participants, was telling the victim to watch what she is doing and always be in the company of others, especially if out walking. For example, David suggested that he would “Tell her she needs to watch what she’s doing or always have someone around her, even if it's at a party, have a buddy or a couple buddies around her.”

Summary

The scenario in which a stranger-perpetrated sexual assault is disclosed is unique among all other disclosure scenarios considered during this study. It contrasts with previous scenarios because it is the only one in which all participants would interpret the incident as unequivocally sexual assault, as well as because it is the only one in which participants consistently would advise formal reporting to law enforcement and seeking medical attention. It is evident that this

scenario conforms to the stereotype of “real rape,” and that participants consider incidents conforming to this stereotype to be of utmost seriousness and deserving of formal sanctions.

When discussing their interpretations of this disclosure scenario, participants drew upon three factors to support the victim’s claim that she was sexually assaulted. First, they highlighted the stranger perpetrator’s undeniably criminal intentions by contrasting this scenario with that of a non-stranger perpetrator, which could instead be viewed as ambiguous or as miscommunication. Second, they drew attention to the victim’s lack of control and her inability to defend herself against a stranger. Third, participants explained that no one would doubt the victim’s story, nor would anyone feel anything but sympathy toward her. Factors that were brought up in other scenarios to raise doubt about the victim’s claim, such as her drinking alcohol, not sufficiently resisting, or consenting to other sexual activity, did not contribute to shaping participants’ interpretations of this incident.

Because this stereotypical scenario was unanimously interpreted as sexual assault, participants explained that they would overwhelmingly respond to the victim’s disclosure with strong recommendations to report to law enforcement, often in combination with seeking medical attention or other forms of advice. Rather than contemplating the drawbacks to formal reporting that were considered significant in other scenarios, such as lack of evidence or the effects it could have on the victim or the perpetrator, participants focused on the various benefits that would come from reporting. Not only could formal reporting bring the perpetrator to justice and deter other predators, thereby assisting in keeping all women safe, but doing so would have no negative impact on the victim were others to learn about the incident.

Conclusion

It is evident that certain patterns emerge as important to participants within and across each type of victim-offender relationship. Consideration of these patterns provides answers to each of the three research questions articulated above. The answer to research question one is rather straightforward: yes, college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident. The specific characteristics that are influential to interpretations and responses, as addressed by research question two, consist of the following. In addition to the nature of the victim-offender relationship under discussion, additional influential characteristics included the victim's alcohol intake, her degrees of verbal and/or physical resistance, her presentation during disclosure, others' likely interpretations, as well as the consequences the victim or the perpetrator could experience as a result of future formal or informal disclosure. While some of these characteristics were only considered relevant for particular victim-offender relationships, all are related to the interpretations participants would form about a disclosed incident, as well as to the responses they would subsequently offer the survivor.

The answer to research question three becomes evident when considering the patterns underlying interpretations and responses to the various scenarios discussed during interviews. These will be summarized below, but, again, see Table 3 in the Appendix for a summary of the interpretations and responses for each victim-offender relationship under discussion. Overall, the stranger perpetrator scenario stands in strong contrast to the previous victim-offender relationships considered in this chapter, thereby highlighting the great lengths that participants went to in their attempts to interpret other disclosed incidents as not constituting sexual assault.

For the acquaintance perpetrator, participants tended to interpret the incident as the victim “being taken advantage of,” and as something that she could have avoided by not drinking alcohol and by physically resisting his advances. Moreover, participants explained that they would be reluctant to believe her story for two main reasons. First, she may be trying to get the acquaintance into trouble. Second, she did not present an adequate display of grief during the disclosure.

For the casual date perpetrator, most participants chose to view this scenario as the victim “leading him on,” rather than as sexual assault. To support this interpretation, participants focused on the victim’s disregard of standard dating rules and reimagined her as the sexual aggressor in the situation. Most participants would be unlikely to believe the victim’s version of events without the victim presenting either physical evidence or a convincing description of verbal resistance.

For the boyfriend perpetrator, participants typically highlighted the ambiguity of this disclosure. The majority preferred to interpret the disclosed incident as miscommunication, rather than as sexual assault, particularly if the victim did not have evidence to corroborate her claims. Participants found this scenario particularly difficult to envision, and therefore difficult to interpret as sexual assault.

Finally, the mutual friend perpetrator was typically interpreted as a “he said, she said” situation. Despite the lengths to which participants would go to reach the “truth” of what happened, most would not interpret the scenario as consistent with sexual assault. The responses given by participants after formulating their interpretations for this non-stranger scenario typically reflected their reluctance to unequivocally define the disclosed incident as sexual

assault, hence their unlikelihood of strongly advising formal help seeking and instead urging the victim to understand the accused perpetrator's perspective.

Altogether, the findings presented in this chapter point to three main social issues that participants took into consideration when determining their interpretations and responses across the five victim-offender scenarios. These three social issues are the stereotype of "real rape," the idea of miscommunication, and the concern with false allegations. These three issues offer a partial answer to the third research question as to *why* disclosure recipients are influenced by certain characteristics of the disclosed sexual assault incident. Yet, the answer is incomplete; although qualitative data analysis has led to the identification of these three issues as significant in participants' formulations of interpretations and responses, simply identifying these issues does not constitute a complete answer to this question, nor does doing so contribute to the aim of theory building.³⁵ Understanding *why* these issues are significant for disclosure recipients requires understanding how they are interconnected and why individuals are compelled to draw upon these issues when confronted with sexual assault disclosure. Providing a complete answer to research question three is the purpose of this study's grounded theory, to be presented in the upcoming chapter.

³⁵ Recall Charmaz's lament discussed in Chapter Three: "Theory generation continues to be the unfulfilled promise and potential of grounded theory" (2006:135). In agreement with Charmaz, this dissertation aims not only to describe findings and themes, but actually to theorize about them.

CHAPTER 5: GROUNDED THEORY

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study of college students is to build a grounded theory that addresses two phenomena. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how their interpretations and responses are influenced by perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. To explore these issues, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and subsequent responses to survivors change according to specific characteristics of the disclosed incident?
2. Which sexual assault characteristics are the most influential to college-age disclosure recipients when interpreting incidents of sexual assault and formulating responses to survivors?
3. Why do college-age disclosure recipients' interpretations of sexual assault and responses to survivors change according to these influential sexual assault characteristics?

The previous chapter addressed these three research questions in relation to this study's findings. Concerning the first two research questions, the findings indicated that specific sexual assault characteristics indeed influenced the interpretations and responses of disclosure recipients. The most influential characteristic was the victim-offender relationship; secondary

characteristics included victim presentation during disclosure, victim alcohol consumption, and the victim's degrees of verbal and/or physical resistance. For research question three, specific themes emerged as driving participants' considerations of these characteristics, which point to three main social issues related to sexual assault victimization that appear to affect disclosure recipients' interpretations and responses. These three social issues are the stereotype of "real rape," miscommunication as an explanation for sexual assault, and concerns with the possibility of false allegations of sexual assault. The identification of these three issues constitutes a partial answer to research question three. The full answer to this research question, namely, illuminating the interconnection between these three issues and their larger social significance, will be provided through this study's grounded theory. The purpose of the present chapter is to detail this grounded theory.

Since presenting a theory is quite different from the tasks allocated to each of the previous chapters, the layout of this chapter also will be different, as will be some wording choices.³⁶ The theory itself consists of several interconnected parts; as a result, it will take some time to get to the point at which the grounded theory can be summarized in brief.³⁷ To facilitate reading and to make the reasoning as linear as possible, the theory will be presented in six cumulative propositions. Each of these will be elaborated upon as much as is considered necessary for the reader to follow the logic that led to that proposition, and to reach, it is hoped, a tentative agreement with each. Following the six propositions, the theory will be summarized as neatly as possible, and connected back to the third research question, specifically, as well as to the overall purpose of grounded theory methodology. One final remark before forging ahead

³⁶ Such as the use of the royal "we" to facilitate ease of communication and readability.

³⁷ This is particularly the case with the first proposition. The reader is encouraged to keep in mind that all theories must have a foundational premise upon which to build.

with presenting and discussing the study's grounded theory: the reader is encouraged to return to Chapter Four and to skim through the findings while reading the theory (particularly from the second proposition onwards) or after having read all six propositions. Doing so will assist the reader in determining whether the grounded theory represents an accurate, or at least "good enough," interpretation of the data as a whole.

Grounded Theory

***Proposition One:** In many realms of life, we respond to transgressions against norms, including criminal transgressions, by giving the offending party the benefit of the doubt.*

It can be accepted as fact that in nearly all realms of life, we have a natural inclination to give others the benefit of the doubt when faced with their transgressions against norms. We generally want to believe the best about others, and, when others fall short of our expectations, we also want to believe that they can learn to improve upon their future decisions and behaviors. Additionally, we hope that others will likewise give us the benefit of the doubt under similar circumstances. Before offering a brief catalogue of evidence for this proposition, it will be helpful to define what is meant by "giving the benefit of the doubt," since this phrase essentially provides the foundation for the following propositions.

The standard definition for this idiom is "To give a verdict of Not Guilty where the evidence is conflicting; to assume his innocence rather than guilt; hence, in wider use, to incline to the more favourable or kindly decision, estimate, or the like" (Oxford English Dictionary). While this is an accurate definition, for the present purposes, the following elaboration will be adopted, which consists of three important components:

1. We want to believe that others do not have malicious intentions when they transgress norms.

2. We want to believe that, given the proper tools, training, education, etc., others would choose to make better decisions that would not result in the transgression of norms.

3. We *want to believe* the above, as opposed to *believe*.³⁸

The idiom “giving the benefit of the doubt” is a simplistic term that stands for a much more elaborate concept. In sum, it means that when a person transgresses from the norm, we typically do not attribute this transgression to an inherent and unchangeable deficiency in that individual, but rather to a set of changeable circumstances that, for one reason or another, compel poor decision making. Ideally, a less colloquial term could be used in place of “giving the benefit of the doubt,” but this will have to do until such a term is found.

It should be fairly straightforward for the reader to conceive of anecdotal examples of giving the benefit of the doubt based on prior experiences with, for instance, students, children, coworkers, spouses, and others. Beyond such one-on-one instances, the upcoming examples are meant to illustrate how this tendency is built into our larger social fabric, and how it is connected to the various ways that we theorize about the world and then practically apply those theoretical insights. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive (either in detail or in terms of the range of possibilities), but they nevertheless begin to demonstrate the pervasiveness of giving the benefit of the doubt, and how this tendency can be connected specifically to our responses to criminal behavior.

Consider, as an initial example, the field of theology. It could be argued that the field is basically premised on the notion that some individuals behave poorly (i.e., sin or transgress from

³⁸ This distinction is important because it relates to our tendency to construct ways to support the upholding of components one and two. If these were actual beliefs, they would simply be held, and supports would not be needed. This component will be elaborated upon in upcoming propositions.

the good), while others behave well (i.e., align with the good). Major questions in this field therefore include: How can we explain this discrepancy among individuals? And, more importantly, how can we use this understanding to assist those who behave poorly to behave well instead? The major theme connecting these two questions is the rejection of the idea that transgressions from the good are the result of inherent evil. While certain actions can be described as evil, care is taken not to ascribe evil to the individual. Instead, the world at large has a tendency toward sinfulness, and some individuals have greater difficulty working against this tendency. Moreover, at even the most basic level, the purpose of religion can be argued to be providing useful guidelines and knowledge to assist those who would otherwise transgress from the good (while includes all of humankind) to make decisions that instead align with the good (see, for example, Anselm of Canterbury, 10th C. CE/1998; St. Athanasius, 4th C. CE/2003; Bernard of Clairvaux, 12th C. CE/1995; Kant, 1934/1960; Matt (*Zohar*), 13th C. CE/1983; Maimonides, 12th C. CE/1963).

While the example of theology illustrates the extent to which the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt is widespread and deep-rooted in our society, as well as the importance of each of the three components in the above definition, even better examples can be found in the social sciences. For example, a large body of sociological research is devoted to explaining the norms from which people transgress, how order is restored through cooperation between the transgressor and the transgressed, and why such cooperation is so important to maintaining our social structure (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967; Lyman and Scott, 1970). In terms of cooperation, apologies, for example, work because of the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt (Lyman and Scott, 1970). Likewise, neutralizations can be successful, even when they are not necessarily believed, because they appeal to this tendency (Fritzsche, 2002; Orbuch, 1997; Scott and Lyman;

1968). Apologies and neutralizations, therefore, are examples of the support described in the third component of the definition, namely, the *want to believe*. Sociological inquiries related to such topics indicate that individuals know how to correct their mistakes and that they work together to ensure that such mistakes are corrected (see, e.g., Bell, 1997; Goffman, 1971/2010). The underlying premise of such inquiries is that others generally do not possess inherent defects that prevent them from learning how to make better decisions.

The fields of criminology and criminal justice offer perhaps the best examples for illustrating our tendency to give the benefit of the doubt and how this tendency is enmeshed in our social fabric. Criminological theories are developed not only to explain criminal events, but also to explain criminal motivations. The premise here, again, is that individuals, even criminals, are not inherently defective, but that their poor decision making results from forces outside of the individual's control that act upon the individual and thereby increase the likelihood of making poor decisions. The vast array of criminological theories illustrates the various ways in which such outside forces have been explained, such as strain related to pursuing the American dream (Agnew, 1992), gene x environment interactions (see, e.g., Fishbein, 1990, 2001), and the influence of subculture (Anderson, 1999), to name just a few. Likewise, and related to the second component of the above definition, a vast array of interventions and programs have been implemented to assist in alleviating those outside forces and to help criminally-inclined individuals make better decisions in the future (see, for example, Chicago Area Project, 2016; Farrington and Welsch, 2007; Spiegler and Guevremont, 1998).

In terms of the criminal justice system, it is likely evident to the reader how its design is also premised on the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt. This extends from law enforcement practices (e.g., investigation of criminal complaints rather than taking accusations at

face value), to the trial phase (e.g., proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt), to correctional rehabilitation programs (participation in which can influence the outcomes of parole hearings), as well as to additional aspects. What would be the point of a criminal justice system such as ours, if, in fact, we believed that criminal transgressions were the result of inherent defectiveness and that individuals could not be compelled to make better decisions?

The above examples hopefully have validated the initial point made concerning the first proposition (“It can be accepted as fact that in nearly all realms of life, we have a natural inclination to give others the benefit of the doubt when faced with their transgressions of the norm.”). At this point, the reader is likely wondering where this discussion is heading, and how it will connect back to the overarching purpose of this study’s grounded theory. This discussion has meant to establish the foundational premise upon which the upcoming propositions are built. Accepting this foundational premise, particularly its relation to criminal transgressions, should assist the reader in making sense of the remaining propositions. Hopefully, however, the reader has begun questioning the present proposition by coming up with potentially falsifying counter-examples. Such engagement leads directly to the second proposition.

Proposition Two: *Certain crimes, however, are so heinous that they allow us to disengage from the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt.*

Accepting that we generally have this tendency to give the benefit of the doubt, and accepting that we do so for minor to major transgressions, necessarily leads to questioning whether this is always the case. Put simply, do we give the benefit of the doubt to all transgressions, all the time? No, we do not. Returning, briefly, to the above examples, theologians must account for the construct “Hell,” sociologists must acknowledge practices such

as shunning and banishment, and criminologists must concede that some people receive sentences such as “life without the possibility of parole” or the death penalty. Despite our general tendency to give others the benefit of the doubt, some individuals are nonetheless assessed as having malicious intentions that cannot be improved upon through any known form of education or training. As a result, when faced with such individuals, we no longer maintain the third component of the definition, namely, the *want to believe*, which allows us to disengage altogether from the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt.

Leaving aside the more mundane and common social transgressions, and focusing only on those that are criminal, we can acknowledge that there is a general distinction between that which is deemed “crime” and that which is deemed “heinous crime.” The question then becomes: What distinguishes crime from heinous crime? The answer, it seems, again relates back to the definition provided for our foundational idiom, particularly the first component. Recall that the first component of the definition is “We want to believe that others do not have malicious intentions.” A *heinous crime* offers *clear evidence* of malicious intentions. The concept of clear evidence is especially important in terms of the third component of the definition, *wanting to believe*. Again, recall that wanting to believe relates to our tendency to create supports, meaning to build up evidence in support of this desire. The ability to garner support for a tenuous belief depends on not being confronted with the belief’s tenuousness. *Clear evidence* of malicious intentions clearly presents such a confrontation. The acceptance of this proposition logically leads to the next question: What constitutes *clear evidence* of malicious intentions?

Proposition Three: *Heinous crimes have certain qualities in common. The first primary quality is that the perpetrator is a stranger. The second primary quality is that the victim sustains injuries.*

In answering the question of what constitutes *clear evidence* of malicious intentions, we must take into account the full spectrum of criminal behavior and identify as many examples of such behavior as possible. Doing so will highlight the distinction between crimes and heinous crimes, and hopefully enable the discernment of the qualities that all forms of heinous crime hold in common. For the sake of brevity, the reader is encouraged to come up with such examples and possible counterexamples on his or her own, particularly by delineating the characteristics of so-called normal crimes from those that deviate from the norm.

Having attempted to discern the common qualities among a range of examples, it should be evident that there are at least two primary qualities that provide clear evidence of malicious intentions. The first is a stranger perpetrator and the second is victim injuries. After much consideration, it appears that there are additional characteristics that can offer evidence of malicious intentions. However, these seem to be secondary, rather than primary, qualities. Secondary qualities catalogued so far by the researcher include child victims (of most, if not all, crimes; but particularly those perpetrated by an adult), male victims of sexual assault, victims who are not intoxicated by drugs and/or alcohol, victims who demonstrate clear displays of grief, and multiple victims of the same type of crime by the same perpetrator.³⁹ It is likely that a combination of secondary qualities may constitute clear evidence with the same force as either

³⁹ Many of these secondary qualities are representative of the actual disclosure experiences perpetrated by non-strangers described by participants in the present study, in which the incident was interpreted as sexual assault and the participant responded to the victim in a helpful or otherwise supportive manner. Table 2 presents an overview of these disclosures and participants' responses.

one of the primary qualities. However, for the present purposes only the two primary qualities will be discussed in greater depth.

The first, and perhaps more important, primary quality constituting clear evidence of malicious intentions is that the offender was a stranger to the victim. This is quite interesting since, even among those of us familiar with overall crime rates and trends (who therefore understand that most personal crimes are committed by known individuals), there persists a natural assumption that strangers are the most likely to cause harm. Doubtless, there are numerous scientific and social scientific explanations for the in-born distrust of strangers, but for the sake of the current study, it will be useful to explain the reason that stranger perpetrators provide *clear evidence* of malicious intentions in relation to the construct of giving the benefit of the doubt.

A relatively simple explanation may be that when two individuals become acquainted with one another, even to a minimal degree, they enter into what is essentially a social contract, consisting of an unspoken agreement that neither party will harm the other, to the benefit of both parties (see, e.g., Rousseau, 1762/2015). The strength of this social contract increases relative to increasing closeness between the two parties. Lyman and Scott (1989:66) provide a brief description of this social contract that helps us to understand the notion of mutuality briefly mentioned earlier concerning giving the benefit of the doubt⁴⁰:

The social contract – society itself – rests ultimately on the tacit agreement of individuals to suspend disbelief in the inauthenticity of one another’s basic characterizations. The acceptance of normal appearances as representative of what they express is the necessary condition of routine audience participation. And a routinized audience reaction keeps the play from falling apart or being withdrawn altogether.

⁴⁰ See above: “Additionally, we hope that others will likewise give us the benefit of the doubt under similar circumstances.”

Not only does the social contract involve a tacit promise not to harm one another physically or otherwise, but also to enter into a mutual giving of the benefit of the doubt by tacitly agreeing to uphold the belief in one another's lack of intentional maliciousness if some form of harm were to occur.

Strangers, therefore, provoke fear because this social contract is lacking. Strangers cannot be assumed to have entered into a social contract because there has not been any prior interaction upon which social contracts are based. As a result, we can easily view any criminal behavior on the part of a stranger as the result of genuine maliciousness. Opposing this with a non-stranger, we want to believe that, just as I would not intentionally harm you, you would not intentionally harm me; therefore, any harm you cause me (or vice versa) was not done *for the sake of* intentionally causing me harm, and you would have behaved differently if you had known in advance that your actions would cause me harm. The employment of various neutralizations and the offering of apologies help to support this desire to believe in the non-maliciousness of those with whom we have entered into the social contract. Essentially, all such assumptions are removed in the case of a stranger. There is no unspoken agreement between two unacquainted individuals that neither would intentionally harm the other, nor is there the unspoken agreement that both parties will work to maintain this belief when faced with conflicting evidence.

The second most important primary quality providing *clear evidence* of malicious intentions on the part of the perpetrator is victim injury. This quality has been deemed second in importance to the stranger perpetrator because its significance, while greater than the so-called secondary qualities, is closely connected to the perpetrator's identity. Although it seems that the perpetrator's identity as a stranger is considered sufficient regardless of whether or not the victim

sustained injuries during the criminal event, the sustaining of injuries can either serve to reinforce the heinousness of the crime if the perpetrator were a stranger, or else to establish heinousness if the perpetrator were a non-stranger.

Proposition Four: The “real rape” stereotype exemplifies a heinous crime.

The significance of the “real rape” stereotype in larger society’s perceptions of sexual assault and of sexual assault survivors has already been well established (see e.g., Estrich, 1987; Sabina and Ho, 2014; Williams, 1984). The purpose of this grounded theory is not to provide further evidence for the significance of this stereotype, but rather to help make sense of why it is continually drawn upon, specifically by individuals to whom incidents of sexual assault are disclosed. While the significance of a stranger perpetrator is not exclusive to sexual assault by any means, understanding this possible explanation for its significance in relation to our tendency to give others the benefit of the doubt helps to clarify why this incident characteristic, in particular, is such an important component of the “real rape” stereotype. Referring back to the relevant subsection of Chapter Two, several studies have established that the stranger identity of the perpetrator is the most salient aspect of this stereotype for individuals learning about a real or a hypothetical sexual assault (see, e.g., Ben-David and Schneider, 2005; Deming et al., 2013; McMillan and White, 2015; see also Angelone, Mitchell, and Grossi, 2015; Venema, 2016). The consistency of this finding bolsters the current proposition’s claim that a stranger perpetrator is one of the primary qualities comprising clear evidence of an offender’s malicious intentions.

Furthermore, this explanation helps to clarify a curious aspect in the findings of the present study; namely, that participants exhibited a noticeable discrepancy between consciously rejecting the “real rape” stereotype, and, at the same time, employing elements of it when

making sense of the different disclosure scenarios. Referring back to Table 3, participants only interpreted disclosed incidents perpetrated by a stranger as unquestionably constituting sexual assault. At the same time, however, many participants acknowledged that “real rape,” especially in terms of a stranger perpetrator, is an unlikely event.

Acknowledgement of the unlikelihood of stranger-perpetrated sexual assault was particularly evident at the beginning of each interview, whereupon participants were asked to envision and to describe in detail a scenario about which they could imagine a friend coming to them afterwards to disclose being sexually assaulted (see Final Interview Protocol in Appendix B). In terms of the victim-offender relationships described by participants in their first scenario, as Table 4 illustrates, 76.3% (n=29) described an acquaintance, 10.5% (n=4) described a stranger, 7.9% (n=3) described a casual date, and 5.3% (n=2) described a boyfriend. The fact that 34 of 38 participants described a known perpetrator when envisioning the victim-offender relationship on their own is evidence that the majority were aware that sexual assault is more likely to be perpetrated by someone known to the victim than by a stranger.

Further support for this discrepancy comes from direct quotes from participants concerning the perpetrator’s identity in the first scenario. Susan explained that she would first think of “Something casual, not stereotypical. I don’t want to say stereotypical, but someone attacking them from the bushes.” Likewise, Linda stated, “I wouldn’t ever suspect it to be a random person, like on the street. I would never think that a homeless man would try to do that. I see it more as a really close friend.” Some participants explained that their first instinct would be to envision a stranger perpetrator, but then decided that this would be unlikely. As David stated, “That’s [stranger perpetrator] what I would think first, but it probably wouldn’t happen.” Similarly, Lilly, taking her own past experiences with sexual assault disclosure into

consideration, explained, “I would expect it to be with a stranger, but, in my own experience, it’s been more not with strangers, when friends have come to me.”

That the majority of participants described the perpetrator as a non-stranger indicates recognition that this aspect of the “real rape” stereotype is unlikely. Yet, despite this recognition, participants frequently made use of the stereotype to navigate their interpretations and responses to the varying victim-offender scenarios, as clearly evidenced in the previous chapter. It is apparent that the quality of being a stranger provides *clear evidence* of the perpetrator’s malicious intentions and is the most important primary quality with which a crime can be deemed “heinous.” However, as discussed above, this is not the only primary quality.

As with the stranger perpetrator, the connection between victim injuries and the heinousness of a crime is not exclusive to sexual assault. However, the relationship between these two primary qualities of *clear evidence* aids us in making sense of when and why the characteristic of victim injuries is influential in interpretations and responses to sexual assault disclosure. In the present study, as well as in prior literature examining the “real rape” stereotype (see, e.g., Deming et al., 2013; McMillan and White, 2015), participants tend to draw on this element of the stereotype when the perpetrator is described as any non-stranger. This explains why physical resistance, in particular, holds significance for participants’ interpretations of non-stranger scenarios. Physical resistance is assumed to inevitably result in injuries, and thereby provide evidence of the non-stranger perpetrator’s maliciousness. Understanding this tendency as it relates to giving the benefit of the doubt, victim injuries present *clear evidence* of malicious intentions and the violation of the social contract. As such, they indicate that the benefit of the doubt no longer ought to be given to the perpetrator.

Reviewing the findings presented in the previous chapter, it should be evident that there are multiple examples of participants making the claim about either a stranger perpetrator or about victim injuries that, in such instances, the perpetrator *knew* that his actions were wrong. To use just one example, Catherine, when explaining her interpretation of the stranger scenario as unequivocally sexual assault, stated, “There is no excuse for what he’s doing.” Such statements imply that the successful neutralization of another’s behavior depends upon the possibility of the offending party’s ignorance that his actions were unwanted or would cause harm. Ignorance thus provides additional support related to the third component of the idiom’s definition, namely, the *want to believe*. Without the possibility of ignorance, it can instead be assumed that the perpetrator’s actions were the result of malicious intentions. These two primary qualities, namely, a stranger perpetrator and victim injuries, thus constitute clear evidence of malicious intentions, and thereby remove the possibility of the perpetrator’s ignorance. As a result, participants interpreted such incidents as sexual assault.

Overall, sexual assaults that contain these two primary qualities, and which thereby correspond to the “real rape” stereotype, effectively halt the tendency to neutralize the perpetrator’s behavior by giving him the benefit of the doubt. Conversely, sexual assaults that do not contain these qualities instead trigger the process of giving the benefit of the doubt, thereby compelling participants to define a disclosed incident not as sexual assault, but as something else that is consistent with the desire to believe in the non-maliciousness of the offending party’s intentions. To illustrate this with just one example from the present study, Julie explained, “If she knew him, I don’t think it’s something that the guy does all the time. He probably just, you know, obviously made a bad decision.” This example reveals how, for incidents that do not resemble the “real rape” stereotype, participants are quick to give the perpetrator the benefit of

the doubt and to interpret the disclosed incident as something other than sexual assault. The question then becomes: If the incident was not sexual assault, then what was it? Two related interpretations are typically offered, both in the present study's data and in outside sources, leading directly to the final two propositions.

Proposition Five: *The excuse of miscommunication is employed for incidents of sexual assault that do not resemble "real rape," a move that results from the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt for non-heinous crimes.*

The term "miscommunication" will be used here as an umbrella phrase that captures the overarching sentiment of each of the various euphemisms this study's participants used in place of "sexual assault" (e.g., taken advantage of; regretted sex; he said, she said). While each of these euphemisms has its own peculiar connotation, they all are equivalent to the implication of the term "miscommunication": the victim perceived herself as not having consented to sexual activity, while the perpetrator perceived her as consenting. Additionally, this term has been the most widely researched in prior sexual assault literature, thereby providing the most information on how this particular euphemism for sexual assault is employed as a tool to uphold the desire to believe in the non-maliciousness of the perpetrator's intentions (see, e.g., Frith, 2009; Frith and Kitinger, 1997; Kitinger and Frith, 1999; O'byrne et al., 2006; see also O'byrne, Hansen, and Rapley, 2008; but, see also Jozkowski, 2008, on the phrase "taken advantage of").

Concerning the present study, it appears that this term (and its ilk) is employed by participants as a way of preserving the *want to believe* in the non-malicious intentions of not only the perpetrator, but also the victim. Doing so likely allows the participant to feel as though s/he were giving both parties the benefit of the doubt and remaining neutral in his/her judgments.

Neutrality is clearly important to participants, as evidenced throughout the previous chapter. This is particularly evident in the mutual friend perpetrator scenario, as well as in the overall tendency to offer ambivalent encouragement concerning formal help-seeking for non-stranger perpetrator scenarios (again, see Table 3).

However, and as the final proposition will illustrate, the neutrality that participants seek to cultivate by giving both parties the benefit of the doubt often collapses, and can instead evolve into the attribution of malicious intentions to the victim. To explain this collapse, it helps to return to the third component defining our foundational idiom, namely, the *want to believe*. As explained above, this component leads to making use of various supports, such as apologies and neutralizations, to assist in interpreting the offending party's intentions as something other than malicious. The use of euphemisms to describe sexual assault is another example of supporting the *want to believe*. However, euphemisms offer rather flimsy support. Considering the standard definition of "euphemism,"⁴¹ and relating it to that of "giving the benefit of the doubt,"⁴² both terms essentially seek to accomplish the same goal; that is, upholding a favorable impression despite evidence to the contrary. Since supporting a euphemistic act (such as the act of giving the benefit of the doubt) by employing a euphemism consists of rather unsound logic, miscommunication as an explanation for sexual assault tends to break down when considered closely.

The ease with which the explanation of miscommunication collapses is evident in the following exchange between the researcher and a participant. While Susan initially interpreted a

⁴¹ "That figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favourable implication or less unpleasant associations, instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended" (Oxford English Dictionary).

⁴² "To give a verdict of Not Guilty where the evidence is conflicting; to assume his innocence rather than guilt; hence, in wider use, to incline to the more favourable or kindly decision, estimate, or the like" (Oxford English Dictionary)

hypothetical sexual assault disclosure as miscommunication, upon further questioning, she quickly decided that this was not only an insufficient, but a nonsensical, explanation.

Susan: Maybe it was a miscommunication thing.

Nicole: Do you think that there ever actually are miscommunications? What's a miscommunication?

Susan: Leading him on or something along those lines, I guess.

Nicole: I guess I'm just wondering what that looks like in real life.

Susan: I don't really know what it looks like in real life because I don't really think there is a miscommunication. Obviously, you can tell if someone wants to sleep with you or if someone doesn't. If someone's resisting your advances, then they don't want to sleep with you. If someone says no, then they don't. It's not like, oh, they're just playing hard to get.

Nicole: It's just something I've been thinking about. When you stop and think about it, if you actually try to picture a miscommunicated sexual encounter...

Susan: You can't. It's really ridiculous to try to picture that happening.

Although this participant decided that miscommunication is not an accurate explanation for sexual assault, other participants who interpreted a disclosed incident as such went to great lengths to preserve this belief, as described in the previous chapter (e.g. checking the victim's story consistency, urging the victim to discuss the incident with the perpetrator). This may help us understand the second interpretation that participants arrived at when choosing not to define a disclosed incident as sexual assault, detailed through the final proposition below.

Proposition Six: *The victim's refusal to accept the interpretation of miscommunication results in the attribution of malicious intentions to her, and to the withdrawing of the benefit of the doubt from her, which then results in interpreting the disclosed incident as a false allegation.*

Attempting to understand how explaining sexual assault as miscommunication can evolve into interpreting a disclosure as a false allegation requires an understanding of the reasoning behind the lengths that participants went to uphold miscommunication as an explanation. One is required to perform quite a feat of logic to reach the point at which miscommunication can be adhered to as an explanation for a disclosed sexual assault. Below, the nine steps required to

interpret a disclosed incident of sexual assault as miscommunication are detailed, illustrating the entailed tautology of this explanation:

- A. He did not comprehend her refusal signals.
- B. She did not communicate her refusal clearly enough so that he could comprehend it.
- C. Therefore, he did not know that she was not consenting and that his actions were unwanted.
- D. Therefore, he did not know that he was doing anything wrong.
- E. His ignorance indicates the non-maliciousness of his intentions.
- F. Since he did not have malicious intentions, his transgression was social rather than criminal.
- G. This incident therefore was not a crime. Sexual assault is a crime.
- H. This incident was not sexual assault, which is a crime.
- I. If this incident was not sexual assault, what was it? Miscommunication.

We may explain the transition from interpreting a sexual assault disclosure as miscommunication to interpreting it as a false allegation by arguing that, after working through the many steps required to reach this interpretation, participants then conclude that miscommunication is the correct interpretation and that alternative explanations are no longer up for discussion. Moreover, miscommunication permits participants to maintain the appearance of neutrality by giving the victim the benefit of the doubt, as well, since miscommunication also implies the victim's ignorance of the distinction between consent and refusal. Rationalizing an incident in this manner permits the "saving of face" for all individuals involved (see, e.g., Goffman, 1967). However, if the victim disagrees with this interpretation and maintains an interpretation of the incident as sexual assault, disclosure recipients may view her rejection of their interpretation as equivalent to lying. In fact, her disagreement may be conceived of as offering *clear evidence* of her malicious intentions (recall from the previous chapter, particularly the mutual friend scenario, that the evidentiary standards participants placed on the victim and perpetrator were vastly different). Four specific aspects of the data discussed in the previous chapter appear to suggest an ever-present potential for participants to transition from neutrality to

the attribution of malicious intentions to the victim, and the resultant removal of the benefit of the doubt from her. These are discussed below, in no specific order.

First, participants exhibited a tendency to accept the perpetrator's interpretation of the incident as final. This is especially evident in the mutual friend scenario, when participants described wanting to find out his version of events under the assumption that he would tell them whether or not a sexual assault occurred. Were he to explain that sexual assault did occur, participants would accept this interpretation of the incident, which would inform their subsequent responses to the victim. Likewise, if he were to explain that a sexual assault did not occur, participants would accept his interpretation. Despite participants' hopes of neutrality when interpreting this scenario as "he said, she said," it is nonetheless what *he says* that tends to hold the most weight in their evaluations of the incident. This is also evident in the boyfriend perpetrator scenario, in which the main recommendation was for the victim to talk about the incident with her boyfriend. Anita's statement exemplifies this point, as well as how quickly interpreting the disclosed incident as miscommunication can transition to interpreting it as a false allegation:

He may not know that he's doing it [sexually assaulting her]. He may get the sign that she wants him to try harder. He may not think that she's actually saying no, he may think she wants it. He may not have thought he sexually assaulted her... That's why I would tell her to look at everything from her [own] perspective, and also from his, before she says 'I was raped, I was [sexually] assaulted,' before she goes to the police and makes a false report.

Talking with the perpetrator is a solution intended to help her understand his perspective (that he thought she consented), as well as to help her understand that she needs to make her lack of consent easier to interpret in the future, and is presented as preferable to formally misrepresenting the incident by making a false report.

Second, the tendency to reframe the victim as the sexual aggressor, particularly in the casual date scenario, incites giving the benefit of the doubt to the perpetrator and simultaneously removing it from the victim. If she were sexually aggressive, then the perpetrator's ignorance of her non-consent is not only easy to assume, but is entirely understandable. Sexual aggression on her part entails consent, rather than refusal signals. This is exemplified in the following statement from Christina regarding how a casual date perpetrator scenario could occur: "Say my friend texts somebody and is like 'I'm willing to do this,' but then, in the moment, she's like 'I'm not ready for this.' The guy thinks she is, but he doesn't realize [she isn't] because she originally said she was. I think that's when [girls] get into trouble... They're all talk but no walk." The female's sexual aggression indicates that her casual date did not have intentions that could be remotely described as malicious, and her persistence in claiming to have been sexually assaulted implies that she is the one with questionable, and possibly malicious, intentions.

Third, throughout all of the non-stranger scenarios, participants frequently made remarks indicating that there are only two possible outcomes in interpreting a disclosed incident. Either she can be "okay with it," which entails interpreting the incident as somehow consensual, or she can instead "get him in trouble," which is the presumed result of interpreting the incident as sexual assault. Participants clearly preferred the first option and described the various ways that they would assist the victim in accepting this interpretation. They also described the various negative effects that the second option would have on the perpetrator, all of which leave open the possibility that the victim has malicious intentions, and therefore could be lying about the incident. Since the effects of getting him into trouble are tangible (i.e., registration as a sex offender, rescinding of academic scholarships, not getting a job) and the effects of the incident

on the victim are not tangible (i.e., she did not sustain injuries, she is not exhibiting overt distress), then her rejection of the first option leads to the questioning of her intentions.

Fourth, and finally, the majority of participants either subtly or overtly expressed an assumption that the victim would be lying when disclosing. While examples of both overt and subtle assumptions concerning the falsehood of the victim's allegation abound in the non-stranger scenarios covered in the previous chapter, there is no single scenario that can be pointed to as exemplary. As a result, some additional examples will be offered here. In terms of overt assumptions, Elise stated, "The reason I say that [a lot of women lie about sexual assault] is it's probably my personal experience, because I know a lot of very shallow girls that have done that, and I think it's a little ridiculous, but that's also because I know the guy." Likewise, Kirstin explained, "I think people, like myself, have a tendency to believe women more than they do men in sexual assault problems, and, unfortunately, women take advantage of that fact, and I think there are quite a few innocent men that have been put in jail on rape charges when it wasn't really what happened." Examples of subtle assumptions include Brenda, who stated, "I think, for the most part, it's [sexual assault disclosure] something to take seriously. At least, until you find out whether or not it really did happen." Similarly, Robert expressed, "I mean, if I believe her, then I'd say so. Umm, I mean, it'd be kind of hard to believe her. I would still believe her, but there would definitely be a second guessing in my mind." Such statements, whether overt or subtle, indicate that the potential for the victim to be falsely accusing a non-stranger is a ubiquitous possibility in the minds of most participants.

As prior research illustrates (see, e.g., Gavey, 2015; Lisak et al., 2010; O'byrne et al., 2008), the concern with false allegations of sexual assault is insidious in our culture. As a result, this is an explanation that individuals are ready and willing to employ when confronted with a

situation that does not provide *clear evidence* of the perpetrator's malicious intentions (i.e., stranger and injuries), and that does not support the desire to maintain an appearance of neutrality when faced with a lack of clear evidence.

To make a leap from interpreting an incident as a miscommunication to interpreting it as a false allegation requires reframing the victim as having malicious intentions. This may appear extreme in light of participants' claims that "it is good to have both sides." However, it is hoped that the above points, as well as the fact that victims and perpetrators were clearly held to different evidentiary standards, have illustrated the various ways in which this study's participants made this leap and were able to attribute maliciousness to the victim.⁴³

Summary and Conclusion

Below, the six propositions constituting this study's grounded theory will be placed together and then summarized.

Proposition One: In many realms of life, we respond to transgressions against norms, including criminal transgressions, by giving the offending party the benefit of the doubt.

Proposition Two: Certain crimes, however, are so heinous that they allow us to disengage from the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt.

Proposition Three: Heinous crimes have certain qualities in common. The first primary quality is that the perpetrator is a stranger. The second primary quality is that the victim sustains injuries.

Proposition Four: The "real rape" stereotype exemplifies a heinous crime.

⁴³ It is important to offer the caveat that not *all* participants in this sample provided unsupportive interpretations or responses in either the hypothetical scenarios or in actual disclosure experiences. However, participants whose interpretations and responses were unequivocally supportive were outliers, meaning they comprised a very small contingent of the overall sample.

Proposition Five: The excuse of miscommunication is employed for incidents of sexual assault that do not resemble “real rape,” a move that results from the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt for non-heinous crimes.

Proposition Six: The victim’s refusal to accept the interpretation of miscommunication results in the attribution of malicious intentions to her and the withdrawing of the benefit of the doubt from her, which then results in interpreting the disclosed incident as a false allegation.

To summarize these propositions as succinctly as possible, they provide a complete answer to the third research question of *why* certain characteristics of a disclosed incident of sexual assault can influence confidantes’ interpretations and responses to the survivor. The two most significant characteristics of the “real rape” stereotype are the stranger perpetrator and victim injuries. The presence of either or both of these characteristics indicates the malicious intentions of the perpetrator and thereby permits third parties to disengage from their natural inclination to give the benefit of the doubt to another’s transgressions. Hence, disclosure recipients interpret such incidents as sexual assault and advise the victim to seek help from formal support sources. The absence of either of these characteristics constitutes a lack of proof of the perpetrator’s malicious intentions.

Lacking such evidence, disclosure recipients maintain their willingness to give the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt, choose to interpret the incident as a form of miscommunication, and formulate responses to the victim aimed at not getting him “into trouble.” Miscommunication as an explanation for a disclosed incident is also intended to aid the confidante in appearing neutral to both parties. However, if the victim does not accept this interpretation, the disclosure recipient may invoke the ever-present possibility that she is the one with malicious intentions. If she chooses to get him “in trouble,” she thereby leaves various

“tangible” evidence of injuries on him (such as his scholarship being taken away, his not being able to get a job, and his having to register as a sex offender, as well as possible prison time).

The resulting interpretation of the incident is that it is a false allegation on the part of the victim.

Charmaz (2006:130) states that, in a grounded theory study, the researcher not only seeks to comprehend the perspectives of participants, but also to understand “how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships.” The purpose of grounded theory theorizing involves illuminating the differences and distinctions between individuals and then explaining how certain social forces, such as norms and/or public opinion, maintain and perpetuate these differences and distinctions. As discussed in earlier chapters, the aim of this study’s grounded theory is to explain how the interpretations, responses, and perspectives of college student disclosure recipients are shaped by, and contribute to the shaping of, the often negative social milieu faced by sexual assault survivors. The examples given following the first proposition illustrate how the tendency to give the benefit of the doubt is built into the larger social fabric, and the following propositions reveal the ways in which drawing on the often negative social milieu surrounding sexual assault victimization serves to perpetuate it.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998:15), a grounded theory is “a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena.” The series of cumulative propositions comprising this study’s grounded theory was developed to provide a full answer to the third research question. The simple identification of the three social issues that appeared to be underlying participants’ interpretations and responses to sexual assault disclosure would merely serve to describe the study’s substance, rather than to explain it. The explanation of how and why

the themes found through data analysis are connected, and the integration of these themes, should make it evident to the reader that this study's grounded theory emerged from its data and offers a sophisticated analysis of the connections between these themes. Moreover, the framework presented through these six propositions should be applicable to the same phenomenon outside of this particular study's sample. The upcoming, concluding, chapter will more thoroughly revisit the aims and evaluation criteria of this study.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

Overview

Prior research indicates that college-age females are among the age group with the greatest likelihood of experiencing sexual assault victimization (see, e.g. Cleere and Lynn, 2013). Although sexual assault survivors are not likely to report their experiences to law enforcement, or to seek help from other formal support sources, they typically disclose their experiences to informal support sources (see, e.g., Starzynski et al., 2005). The individuals most likely to receive such disclosures are the friends of survivors (see, e.g., Paul et al., 2013). Past researchers have gleaned some information about the content of informal support sources' reactions to sexual assault disclosure, as well as the consequences of these reactions for victims (see, e.g., Ahrens and Campbell, 2007; James and Lee, 2015). However, there is a dearth of information concerning confidantes' reasons for giving such reactions; including how and why they formulate particular reactions to a survivor's disclosure of sexual assault. This is an important area of research because a better understanding of the perspectives of disclosure recipients could highlight for researchers and practitioners aspects of sexual assault victimization that are misunderstood by college students, and which contribute to the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors, the underreporting of sexual assault, and the lack of social support for survivors more generally.

This dissertation has filled a large gap in sexual assault disclosure research by using findings from a qualitative multi-case study to develop a grounded theory that explains variations in responses to sexual assault disclosure. This study has contributed to the body of literature on

sexual assault and disclosure in three major ways. First, the findings have illuminated the significance of the victim-offender relationship in general, as well as specific relationships, for informal support sources' interpretations and responses. Second, this study has identified and explained the influence of three social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization that previously had not been connected with the disclosure process. Finally, this study has developed a grounded theory that explains the interconnection between victim-offender relationships and these three social issues and how they work together to influence interpretations and responses to sexual assault disclosure. Each of these discoveries provides a concrete area of focus for the development of future educational initiatives seeking to reduce common misconceptions about sexual assault victimization.

This chapter will conclude the dissertation by first addressing how this study has filled the gaps identified in the literature review. This will be followed by a discussion of the limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research. Finally, the chapter will close by revisiting the evaluation criteria proposed in the methods chapter and addressing how this study has fulfilled these criteria.

Filling the Gaps in Prior Literature

This section will revisit the gaps in prior research discussed at the conclusion of Chapter Two. It is organized into the following subsections: 1) facilitators and barriers to formal reporting; 2) victim acknowledgment; 3) positive and negative social reactions; 4) confidante perspectives; 5) influential incident characteristics; 6) social issues; and, 7) summary. This section will address how this study has attempted to fill each of these gaps, as well as the ways in which it has succeeded or fallen short. As a result, this section will elucidate many of the present

study's limitations and suggestions for future research, which then will be more fully explored in the upcoming sections.

Facilitators and Barriers to Formal Reporting

As discussed in Chapter Two, prior research concerning sexual assault survivors has identified numerous facilitators and barriers to formal reporting to law enforcement. Certain incident characteristics may facilitate formal reporting. These include a stranger perpetrator, injuries to the victim, and the perpetrator's use of a weapon (see Sabina and Ho, 2014 for an overview). While a sexual assault incident's lack of resemblance to "real rape" may be considered a barrier to formal reporting, additional barriers from victims' perspectives also have been identified. These include concerns that the incident will not be taken seriously by law enforcement officials, getting the offender into trouble, experiencing retaliation, and being judged harshly by others who learn about the incident (see, e.g., Sinozich and Langton, 2014). The question was raised as to whether it may be the case that, like victims, sexual assault disclosure recipients account for similar facilitators and barriers when determining their interpretations and responses. The gap identified was that no prior study has considered this likelihood.

Findings from the current study suggest that disclosure recipients indeed take into consideration many, if not all, of the same facilitators and barriers previously ascribed to victims' formal help-seeking decisions in empirical studies. In terms of facilitators, disclosed incidents resembling "real rape," specifically those involving a stranger perpetrator or victim injuries, were the most likely incidents to be responded to with recommendations to seek formal assistance. Participants also referenced many barriers to their recommending formal support, which

correspond with those identified by past researchers. For example, Fisher and colleagues (2003) found that 13.7% of their sample of 4,446 college women reported having experienced some form of sexual assault victimization within the past academic year. Of these victims, 6.4% reported their victimizations to law enforcement, while 93.6% did not. The following reasons were given by victims who chose not to report, in order of commonality: 1) not serious enough (81.7%); 2) not sure a crime or harm was intended (42.1%); 3) police would not think the incident was serious enough (30%); 4) did not want other people to know (20.9%); 5) afraid of reprisal from assailant or others (19%); and 6) did not want family to know (18.3%). Participants in the present study described such concerns as barriers preventing them from interpreting a disclosed incident as sexual assault and/or providing a strong recommendation to the victim to report to law enforcement or to seek other forms of formal assistance.

Filling this gap helps to shed further light on why sexual assault among college women is so greatly underreported. Not only are the victims themselves taking such facilitators and barriers into account, but so are members of their peer groups when responding to disclosures. Victims' likely knowledge of this fact may contribute to a cyclical process of the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors – they sense that they will be judged according to others' acceptance of these facilitators and barriers, therefore they are unlikely or unwilling to report to law enforcement (as well as to seek assistance from other formal support sources), which thereby perpetuates misinformation about the true scope and magnitude of this form of victimization. As Liebowitz and Roth (1994) have argued, sexual assault survivors likely make help-seeking decisions based on culturally prevalent beliefs about rape even if they do not actively endorse these beliefs. As the present study shows, those who act in the role of confidantes for survivors appear to do the same, thereby perpetuating these culturally prevalent beliefs.

Victim Acknowledgement

As discussed previously, many college-age females who experience sexual assault victimization are not likely to acknowledge their experiences as such. A number of past researchers have argued that the low rate of victim acknowledgement may have severe repercussions. It leads to low rates of formal reporting, which contributes to the underestimation of the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault and results in the individuals who are most at risk receiving inadequate attention (see, e.g., Carretta et al., 2015; Harned, 2005; Pitts and Schwartz, 1997; Wilson and Miller, 2005). Moreover, low victim acknowledgement may have social repercussions. According to Harned (2005:410), lack of acknowledgement impedes social and political change by preventing recognition of the pervasiveness of male violence against women and by keeping women from uniting to solve legitimate common problems.

Altogether prior research indicates that despite debate on the particularities of its benefits, victim acknowledgement of sexual assault can be a powerful force both for victims and for the larger society. The gap identified in past literature was that it is unclear whether confidantes' responses to sexual assault may affect victim acknowledgement, and thereby contribute to this problem. Unfortunately, this study's design did not permit an exploration that would directly fill this gap. Doing so would have required interviewing the victims who disclosed to relevant participants in the sample.

Nonetheless, the present study begins to address this gap by drawing attention to the ways in which participants vocalized their interpretations and responses, as well as the thought processes driving their reactions, both of which may negatively influence a disclosing victim from acknowledging an experienced incident as sexual assault. Further, findings from this study

indicate that participants were unlikely to interpret most disclosed incidents as sexual assault, and that they would make an effort to persuade victims to interpret the incident similarly. Since most victims confide in their friends, if this finding can be replicated outside of this study (and extended to victims' perspectives), a contributing source of the lack of victim acknowledgement may have been uncovered.

Positive and Negative Social Reactions

Past research has revealed that the reaction a confidante gives to a disclosure can have an important influence on the victim in terms of whether or not they acknowledge their victimization, whether they experience additional psychological trauma, whether they engage in formal help-seeking behaviors, and whether they choose to disclose again in the future (Miller et al., 2011). The types of reactions given by confidantes are typically divided into positive and negative social reactions. Positive reactions include various forms of emotional support, tangible aid, and information support, and have been shown to have either neutral or beneficial effects on survivors' recovery processes following disclosure (Ahrens et al., 2009; Ullman, 2010). Negative reactions, conversely, are correlated with detrimental effects on survivor recovery, such as increased self-blame, greater uncertainty about how to label the event, silencing of future disclosures, and increased PTSD symptoms. These reactions include victim blame, distraction, stigmatizing responses, egocentric responses, and controlling responses (Ullman, 2010).

A gap was identified in that no published study to date has examined disclosure recipients' reasons for reacting positively or negatively to sexual assault disclosure. The present study has attempted to fill this gap by better illuminating the thought processes of college student confidantes and by connecting the incident characteristics identified by them to specific

culturally prevalent beliefs surrounding sexual assault victimization. Furthermore, it has attempted to theorize about confidantes' reasons for reacting positively or negatively by situating participants' descriptions of their attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs within a theory that was grounded in their own descriptions but also accounted for larger social forces.

Confidante Perspectives

Research examining disclosure from the perspectives of confidantes has shown that many believe they were helpful to survivors and were able to offer sufficient and effective support (Ahrens and Campbell, 2000). However, past studies also have found that many confidantes express feelings of uncertainty as to what survivors needed or insecurity about how to best help them (Banyard et al., 2010). In addition, many confidantes report experiencing various distressing emotions, such as anger and disbelief, problems with the victim's reactions to the incident, and not wanting to know about the sexual assault incident (Branch and Richards, 2013). This line of research suggests that a better understanding of disclosure recipients' perspectives could illuminate ways to begin better assisting them in their roles as confidantes to disclosing victims. Such empowerment would likely provide greater support for sexual assault survivors, more generally, by working toward alleviating the negative social milieu surrounding sexual assault victimization. However, past research has not yet uncovered whether and to what extent confidantes' disclosure experiences affect the form or content of their reactions to survivors.

The present study was not able to fill this gap in the literature, since the interview protocol was not designed to explore participants' psychological or emotional processes during disclosure. As such, feelings of distress or anger for participants who did not address this issue themselves can only be speculated upon. Nonetheless, the findings illustrate potential areas in

which disclosure recipients may feel unprepared to offer greater support to victims, even when doing so aligns with their intentions. For example, many participants in this sample expressed a general awareness of help-seeking resources, such as the campus women's center, medical and psychological assistance, hotlines, campus police, and local law enforcement, yet they were typically vague about what, specifically, such resources could offer a survivor or whether this recommendation would benefit her in any meaningful way. This likely contributed to their general reluctance to strongly suggest such forms of advice, which indicates that greater empowerment through education and awareness-raising campaigns may, if nothing else, help others respond to victims in ways that, according to past research, are interpreted by survivors as positive, such as by offering tangible aid and information support (see, e.g., Ullman, 2010).

Influential Incident Characteristics

To date, five studies have explored how potential confidantes would respond to specific hypothetical disclosure scenarios. These studies have examined how variations in sexual assault scenarios correspond to variations in confidante reactions, specifically in terms of recommendations for reporting, beliefs about appropriate punishment, and attributions of blame either to the survivor or to the perpetrator (Amacker and Littleton, 2013; Ben-David and Schneider, 2005; Deming et al., 2013; Ruback et al., 1999; Untied et al., 2012). Two consistent findings from these studies are that the degree of alcohol intoxication (of both victims and perpetrators) and the nature of the victim-offender relationship are important considerations in confidantes' responses to disclosure. Additionally, two studies, to date, have examined actual reactions to sexual assault disclosure (Dunn et al., 1999; Paul et al., 2013). Unfortunately, these two studies have not explored whether the characteristics identified in hypothetical research are

influential to actual responses to disclosure. Instead, their findings confirm the conclusions from research that examines the general proportion of negative versus positive social reactions.

As such, two gaps in past research on responses to sexual assault disclosure were identified. First, likely due to the lack of qualitative research represented in the small number of hypothetical studies, it is unclear whether these two incident characteristics represent an exhaustive list of those most influential for disclosure recipients. Second, it is unknown whether and how these incident characteristics influence actual responses to disclosure. The present study has begun to fill these two gaps, but has not been able to provide a full picture for either.

In terms of the first gap, whether victim-offender relationships and alcohol consumption are two of the most influential characteristics for disclosure recipients, the present study instead suggests that victim injuries take precedence over alcohol consumption, and that participants' emphases on victim injuries were directly related to the victim-offender relationship at hand. A number of other characteristics also were identified as influential for participants in this sample, but data analysis indicated that they had secondary status to the two characteristics of victim-offender relationship and victim injuries. Table 3 delineates additional influential characteristics. Although alcohol consumption was raised by participants, particularly in their considerations of incidents perpetrated by acquaintances or boyfriends, this did not come across in the present study's data as an especially meaningful incident characteristic. Instead, like other incident characteristics also discussed during interviews (such as the timeframe between the incident and disclosure, whether an incident was completed or attempted), data analysis indicated that alcohol consumption appeared to be one of several characteristics that participants drew upon to support their initial impressions and likely responses. As such, this study's findings support past research concerning sexual assault and alcohol consumption (particularly concerning "the drinking double

standard,” see, e.g., Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, and Saenz, 2003; Masters, Norris, Stoner, and George, 2006), but suggest that this third-party concern is simply drawn upon as additional evidence for the upholding of prior assumptions.

Concerning the second gap, namely, whether the characteristics identified as influential for interpretations and responses to hypothetical scenarios carry over into actual responses to disclosure, it became increasingly apparent throughout data analysis that the present study cannot reliably address this issue. There are two reasons for this omission. First, doing so would likely require survey methodology for the following three reasons: 1) to ensure the linearity of pathways from characteristics to interpretations and responses (both hypothetical and actual); 2) to generate responses to either hypothetical or actual responses that were less likely to be influenced by the content of prior questioning or by interviewee/interviewer interaction (such as response bias); and, 3), to permit sampling that results exclusively in participants who have previously received sexual assault disclosures.

Second, presenting an effective comparison and contrast of hypothetical and actual disclosure responses using this study’s qualitative results would have greatly increased the length of this dissertation, in addition to greatly affecting its layout. The researcher concluded that doing so would have ultimately led the reader to the same conclusions concerning the findings and to the same ultimate grounded theory (meaning that the researcher could not identify any significant distinctions and would simply have been presenting additional evidence, albeit in an additional chapter). Although it is regrettable that such additional evidence was not provided to the reader, the researcher (not having distinguished any substantial differences) took into account the entirety of the collected data when analyzing results and when formulating the grounded theory. The reader is invited to revisit Table 2 for a summary of participants’ actual responses to

sexual assault disclosures, as well as to request de-identified transcripts of these participants' interviews.

Social Issues

Prior studies concerning sexual assault disclosure mainly have situated their findings within pre-existing theoretical frameworks, particularly within that of rape myth acceptance. In the present study, several additional social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization were reviewed as possibly relevant to disclosure recipients' perspectives and as potentially extending the scope of understanding the disclosure process. As such, a gap was identified in relation to the effectiveness of current disclosure-related theorizing and the potential for innovation.

To address this gap, the present study took into consideration additional social issues related to sexual assault victimization that not only were discussed at length by prior scholars as being relevant to sexual assault more generally, but also that were raised consistently by participants in the present study. These issues were the "real rape" stereotype, miscommunication as an excuse for sexual assault, and concerns with the possibility of false allegations. As presented in the previous chapter, this approach to generate original theorizing about a rarely explored phenomenon has led to this study's grounded theory. It is hoped that this grounded theory will fill this identified gap, particularly through the development of testable hypothesis and additional research endeavors.

Summary

This section has sought to revisit the gaps identified in prior research that were discussed over the course of Chapter Two, as well as to address how the present study attempted to fill these gaps, where it was able to, and where it could not. This discussion has raised a number of

limitations of the present study, as well as several possibilities for future research. These will be discussed in greater depth below.

Limitations of the Present Study

A number of limitations of the present study have been raised in the above section. However, several additional limitations have come to light throughout the duration of this project, which require addressing. This section will first review the previously raised limitations and then discuss additional limitations.

Previously Raised Limitations

First, concerning victim acknowledgment, the current study could not address whether confidantes' responses to sexual assault disclosure may affect victims' acknowledgement of their experiences. This study's design did not permit an exploration of victims' perceptions of how disclosure recipients' responses affected their own interpretations or labeling of sexual assault incidents or their subsequent help-seeking decisions.

Second, this study could not address the ways in which distress and other emotions affected participants' interpretations and responses to hypothetical or to actual sexual assault disclosure scenarios. The dearth of such information results from the researcher's lack of knowledge and training on such psychological issues more generally, as well as how to incorporate such considerations into a qualitative study. Although some participants chose to describe their feelings when thinking about sexual assault disclosure, not enough information was gleaned from the sample as a whole to make any firm conclusions.

This study also did not directly address whether the characteristics identified as influential for interpretations and responses to hypothetical scenarios carry over into actual responses to disclosure. As described above, there are several reasons that the present study could not address this issue. However, it is hoped that the previous discussion and the information presented in Table 2 illustrates to the reader the researcher's reasons for considering such a discussion as equivalent to the presentation of additional evidence supporting the main points made in the findings and grounded theory chapters, as well as an "educated guess" as to when saturation has been reached, as discussed in the methods chapter.

Additional Limitations

Unrelated to gaps identified in prior research that were unable to be filled, this study has three additional limitations. First, this study only concerned heterosexual sexual assault experiences with female victims. Addressing the negative social milieu surrounding the sexual assault victimization of male or transgender individuals, as well as those involving perpetrators of the same sex, is certainly important. This study sought to address the responses to disclosure that would likely be received by the individuals that past research has gleaned to be the most common and at risk age group. However, as discussed at length, the true scope of sexual assault victimization is difficult to determine due to low levels of reporting and to lack of victim acknowledgment.

The dearth of prior research and data on special populations of sexual assault survivors contributes to an accumulation of difficulties for conducting a relevant grounded theory study. These difficulties include: 1) perceiving of a general disciplinary perspective; 2) building upon this perspective to conceive of a productive research problem; 3) selecting a site and population

wherein this problem can be studied; and, 4) the researchers' ability to be alerted to interesting conceptual puzzles that challenge prior assumptions. While the techniques of grounded theory methodology could be used to resolve each of these difficulties, the task is currently too great for any grounded theorist to generate a theory that is inclusive of all possible type of sexual assault victims (see, e.g., Weick, 1984).

Concerning the second limitation, this study's sample was largely homogenous and was mostly comprised of white females in their first year of college. The responses generated during interviews may be related to participants' relative lack of life experiences and interactions with sexual assault survivors. A more heterogeneous sample would be required to test this study's grounded theory. However, this limitation should not lead one to discount the findings of this study for two reasons. First, a growing body of social science research suggests that susceptibility to changes in attitudes declines steadily after early adulthood (see, e.g., Visser and Krosnick, 1998), meaning it is likely that the attitudes expressed by this sample's participants will be held throughout the life course, barring any successful intervention.

Second, the researcher has gleaned from various media that many older individuals, including some who hold advanced degrees and/or prestigious positions, express negative attitudes toward sexual assault survivors similar to those verbalized by this study's sample. Three examples will be provided.

The first example concerns the use of euphemisms to describe reports of sexual assaults. Heather MacDonald of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research stated in an interview for the documentary *It Happened Here* (2015):

All I can say is, if campus rape is a problem, you would not have the proportion of females on campus ever rising. You would have a wave of single-sex schools. You would have parents saying 'I'd rather send my daughter to a convent than have her walk into a crime scene.' The core of what is called campus assault

today is a result of the drunken hookup party scene. Regrets and second thoughts of something that was far more ambiguous than somebody right now coming in and saying, 'I expect you to have sex with me or I'm going to club you.'

She went on to describe: "Here's all that a campus administration needs to tell its female students to eliminate this alleged rape epidemic a hundred percent. Very simple steps. You don't get drunk. You don't get into bed with the guy. You go home that night without sleeping with him. This stops it a hundred percent." This statement illustrates the way in which interpretations of miscommunication can evolve into accusations of false allegations.

In terms of concern for the consequences sexual assault allegations, McMillan and White (2015) interviewed eleven British forensic medical examiners who regularly conduct forensic exams of rape complainants. They state that those sampled "expressed a level of concern about the consequences of a rape allegation for the suspect, one rarely stated in relation to the victim. In particular, an evident theme was the notion that men's lives would be 'ruined' by, at best, mistaken women, and at worst, vindictive women" (2015:289). Venema (2016), in her modified grounded theory study, described similar attitudes among American police officers in their responses to reported sexual assaults.

As a final example, K.C. Johnson (a professor at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center) and Stuart Taylor, Jr. (a journalist), in their book on the Duke lacrosse case, described their impression of the double standard surrounding sexual assault reporting: "This double standard in effect presumes the guilt of all accused males and the truthfulness of all accusing females. And the stigma inherent in identifying a man as an alleged rapist is far, far worse than that inherent in identifying a woman as an alleged victim." Based on these examples, as well as others not included (see, e.g., Beres, 2010; Beres, Senn, and McCaw, 2014; Felson, 2002; Gray, 2015; Krakauer, 2015), the three main social issues identified in this study likely

influence the larger social milieu surrounding sexual assault victimization, regardless of the age or experience of an individual.

The third limitation of this study was that the findings did not address potential gender-based differences in interpretations and responses to sexual assault disclosure. It is likely that there are salient distinctions in the ways in which males and females react to survivors; however, such gendered differences were not explicitly considered during the analysis of this study's data or in the presentation of findings. This is lamentable, especially considering that some participants drew attention to their impressions that males and females would respond differently to disclosure. For example, Jessica explained:

I don't think guys understand the situation as much because they're on the other end of it for the majority of the time. They might not understand how she feels, whereas a girlfriend would be like, 'Okay, I understand. He was bigger than you, you said stop but you couldn't do anything.' A guy would be like, 'Just push him off, just say no,' and they might not completely understand where she's coming from or what she's feeling.

Since the aim of this study was to build a grounded theory addressing sexual assault disclosure more generally, male and female participants were grouped together, and thus possible differences were not distinguished.

Recommendations for Future Research

Concerning victim acknowledgment, there is a dearth of research on this topic from the perspectives of victims. Pitts and Schwartz's (1997) findings, which indicate that survivors are less likely to acknowledge victimization if they feel blamed by the friends to whom they disclose, have not been replicated. Although there is an academic debate about the importance of acknowledgement for sexual assault survivors, this debate not been informed by the perspectives of those who have experienced such victimization. Moreover, in relation to the current study,

very few published studies have explored how the reactions of disclosure recipients might influence victims' own interpretations and acknowledgment of incidents (see Harned, 2005, for an exception). It is likely that such an exploration could be accomplished through a mixed methods study. A sample could be recruited via a screening survey that makes use of behaviorally-specific questions, followed by in-depth interviews that seek to determine differences in the processes and after-effects of acknowledgement and non-acknowledgment among participants.

Future research also could address confidante distress. The current study, alongside past research, reveals a number of potential reasons that disclosure recipients may feel unprepared to offer support to victims, even when doing so aligns with their intentions. Their lack of knowledge of the specific benefits and resources offered by formal support sources likely contributes to a general reluctance to advise formal help seeking. A clearer identification and specification is needed about what college students know and what they do not know, concerning both the nature of sexual assault and how best to respond to sexual assault victimization. Such information could assist practitioners in their attempts to target areas of ignorance and to enact effective interventions, particularly targeting college students.

Finally, it is hoped that this study's grounded theory can be developed into testable hypotheses or used as a framework for explaining the disclosure process both beyond this study's sample and beyond sexual assault victimization. Perhaps the grounded theory presented here could account for the cultural attitudes toward other forms of violence against women and responses to the disclosure of such experiences. Relatedly, future research also could explore whether this study's grounded theory could account for responses to similar forms of violent

victimization against other populations, such as males or transgendered individuals, or whether additional social forces surrounding such forms of victimization need to be considered.

Ultimately, the true test of theory's utility is its ability to illustrate useful actions that can reduce the frequency of incidents or the harm stemming from incidents. In the case of this study's theory, the primary types of useful actions that it illustrates are ones that would contribute to reducing misinformation about sexual assault victimization, and that, eventually, would lead to the theory no longer being a useful explanation for interpretations and responses to disclosure. This study's theory can assist in achieving that goal by revealing areas of misinformation to target through further research and various types of educational interventions. However, the ultimate goal of such useful actions is that they would contribute to falsifying this theory, rather than to upholding it.

Criteria for Evaluating Grounded Theory

This section will revisit the criteria for evaluating grounded theory developed in Chapter Three. It is hoped that the reader will use these criteria, as well as his/her own evaluations of the dissertation thus far, to draw conclusions about whether this dissertation achieved its projected aims. Additionally, the reader is invited to take into consideration an objection to grounded theory methodology raised in Chapter Three: whether the grounded theory presented is “so tightly data-driven and data-focused as to render it useless outside of the study from which it has been generated.”

Clarity

As described in the methods chapter, a grounded theory study should fulfill the promise of this methodology not only by proposing a theory, but by proposing one that is presented

clearly and is easily grasped by readers. The researcher's analysis should offer interpretations and conclusions that readers can comprehend. Furthermore, the researcher should make evident how the study contributes to knowledge and how it can contribute to improving circumstances in the study's particular setting, as well as in the larger social context.

First, to achieve clarity, the researcher avoided the use of jargon that typically plagues descriptions of qualitative research, and that muddles the conceptions of those who do not engage in such research. Moreover, the researcher endeavored to explain, as clearly as possible, the meaning behind such jargon when used by other qualitative scholars referenced throughout the methods sections. Second, the criterion of clarity also applies to the researcher making evident to the reader the logic behind the interpretations and conclusions concerning the findings, as well as how these led to the grounded theory. Again, great care was taken to assist the reader in reaching similar interpretations and conclusions during the fourth and fifth chapters. Third, concerning the final element of this criterion, an effort was made to describe, explicitly, the contribution of this research endeavor to the larger body of work on sexual assault disclosure, as well as to provide a blueprint for future research efforts and for the practical application of this study's findings and grounded theory.

Transparency

According to this criterion, the researcher must be transparent about each step of the data gathering and analysis processes, about how specific themes were discovered in the data, and about how greater abstraction of these themes resulted in the grounded theory. Another researcher, so inclined, should be able to follow these steps and to replicate the study's

methodology. Moreover, it should be evident to the reader how conclusions were reached based on the data and how the researcher arrived at the theory.

The main objective of this criterion, in the researcher's opinion, is to describe the methods used in an original work in such a way that others, so inclined, either could replicate the study or could use the described methods as a guideline for developing similar research on another topic. In the present study, much attention was paid to making transparent the methodology and the data analysis process, as well as to describing the logic behind conclusions. It is hoped that such efforts have resulted in a study that is not only replicable, but has conclusions that readers find agreeable.

Plausibility

The criterion of plausibility entails not only that the theory be clearly presented, but it should make sense to the reader and should constitute a plausible interpretation of the data. The researcher must develop strong logical links between the data, the analysis, and the conclusions. Furthermore, the researcher must show that sufficient data has been gathered to merit his/her claims by providing enough evidence for the reader to form an independent assessment and ultimately concur with the researcher's conclusions.

To achieve this criterion, great attention was paid to ensuring the following: 1) that the theory presented was logical, meaning that it does not involve self-contradiction or create a tautology; 2) that the theory was stated in plain language, with few ambiguous terms, for the sake of both avoiding self-deception and assisting in ease of later testing; and, 3) that the theory accounts for known facts regarding findings from the present study's sample, empirically

validated results from other study, and general knowledge about the ways in which society functions.

Originality

The themes developed by the researcher should be fresh and should offer new insights, and the analysis of these themes should provide a new conceptual rendering of the data. The study must have social and theoretical significance, which the researcher must make evident to the reader. Lastly, to establish originality, the researcher also must give a clear explanation of how his or her grounded theory challenges, extends, or refines current ideas, concepts, and practices.

First, originality was achieved through conceiving of an interesting problem surrounding sexual assault disclosure that has not been addressed directly by prior research in this area. Second, this problem was formulated in relation to larger social issues that have not previously been connected to this topic, thereby providing a new conceptual rendering of relevant data from both the present study and past research. Care was taken to make evident the social and theoretical significance of the themes and grounded theory developed in this study, as well as the ways that this endeavor has extended our greater understanding about the process of sexual assault disclosure from the perspectives of confidantes. Finally, originality relates to the potential fruitfulness of a study in terms of its ability to suggest a line of research and practical action that would not have otherwise be undertaken. The current chapter, in particular, has sought to highlight the various opportunities for additional research and application implied by the study's findings and grounded theory.

Falsifiability

The aim of grounded theory methodology is to generate, rather than to test, theory. However, the theory should have the potential to be adapted into testable, falsifiable hypotheses. The researcher should illustrate how the discovered theory can move beyond explaining the phenomenon according to the study's particular sample and can be modified so as to become generalizable.

Specific operationalizations of the propositions that make up this study's grounded theory were not developed here. However, an effort was made to compose the propositions in such a way that they could, in principle, be transformed into testable, falsifiable, hypotheses, thereby generalizing the applicability of the grounded theory to populations outside of the study's sample. Doing so at a later time will help in evaluations of the utility of the practical recommendations for educational interventions suggested by this study. As discussed earlier, an ideal goal for this research is that the focused targeting of misconceptions surrounding sexual assault victimization will lead to the falsification of this study's grounded theory, rather than the upholding of it.

Summary

It is difficult for the researcher to present an assessment of whether or not the grounded theory, as well as the content of the preceding (or current) chapters, has fulfilled the objectives of the criteria described above. However, great care was taken during the writing and revising stages to ensure that each were fulfilled to the best of the researcher's ability. The task is now left to the reader to determine whether these criteria were successfully met in this study's attempt to answer its three research questions and to achieve its described objectives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study of college students was to build a grounded theory that addresses two phenomena. First, how recipients of sexual assault disclosure formulate their interpretations and responses based on specific aspects of the sexual assault being disclosed. Second, how their interpretations and responses are influenced by perceptions of larger social issues surrounding sexual assault victimization. The first chapter presented an overview of the problem, the problem and purpose statements, the research questions, and the rationale for this study. The second chapter presented a critical review of the literature related to sexual assault, disclosure, and social issues. An in-depth discussion of grounded theory methodology and a description of this study's sample and design were covered in the third chapter. The fifth chapter presented findings, organized according to the five victim-offender relationships, and the sixth chapter presented this study's grounded theory in six cumulative propositions. The current chapter has addressed the gaps this study sought to fill, limitations, possibilities for future research, and the evaluation criteria proposed previously.

This dissertation will conclude with some remarks made by participants that highlight the contribution of this study to the larger body of sexual assault literature. Lisa's statement illustrates the problem this study intended to investigate: "I feel like [sexual assault] is such a bad thing to happen to people and I feel like people get away with it a lot... Mainly because the victims are afraid to come forward, which is probably based a lot on the advice of their friends." Breanne succinctly describes the potential solution to this problem: "Everybody knows to be safe, but I don't think there's a lot of education on how to deal with friends that have been through [sexual assault]." Not only has this dissertation sought to uncover the ways in which the responses of friends of sexual assault survivors can negatively affect the victims themselves and

the larger social milieu, but it also has sought to uncover the means by which researchers, practitioners, and educators can begin working with potential confidantes to make substantial changes in our culturally normative responses to sexual assault victimization. Continued research and educational interventions on sexual assault victimization and related social responses will hopefully alleviate culturally prevalent attitudes such as that expressed by Lilly, who claimed, “Rape’s a scarlet letter. People view people differently when drama happens.”

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Table 1. Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Year	Citizen	Frat(Sor)	Parties	Relationship	Confidante
Lisa	Female	White	18	1	US	Sor	Yes	Yes	No
Jennifer	Female	Black	18	1	US	No	No	No	Yes, 2
Mary	Female	Hispanic	21	4	US	No	Yes	No	No
Jeffrey	Male	White	19	2	US	No	Yes	No	No
Anne	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	No	Yes
Mike	Male	White	19	1	US	No	No	Yes	No
Tom	Male	Asian	23	3	SK	No	No	No	Yes, 2
Courtney	Female	White	18	1	US	Sor	Yes	Yes	No
Andrea	Female	Hispanic	18	1	US	Sor	Yes	No	Yes, 2
Brenda	Female	White	19	2	US	No	Yes	No	No
David	Male	White	18	1	US	No	No	No	No
Lilly	Female	White	19	2	US	No	Yes	No	Yes, 2
Elise	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	No	Yes
Jessica	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	Yes	Yes
Karen	Female	White	18	1	US	Sor	Yes	No	Yes
Amanda	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	No	No
Robert	Male	White	19	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Diane	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	Yes	Yes
Heather	Female	Asian	18	1	US	No	No	No	No
Tiffany	Female	White	19	1	US	No	No	No	No
Lauren	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	No
Kim	Female	White	19	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rachel	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	No
Kirsten	Female	Black	18	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Julie	Female	White	21	4	US	No	No	Yes	No
Anita	Female	Black	22	3	US	No	No	Yes	Yes, 2
Breanne	Female	White	23	1	US	No	No	Yes	Yes
Megan	Female	White	19	2	US	No	Yes	No	No
Martin	Male	White	19	2	US	No	Yes	Yes	No
Christina	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, 2
Philip	Male	White	19	1	US	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Linda	Female	White	19	1	US	Sor	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leigh	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	Yes	No
Samantha	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	No	Yes
Catherine	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	No	No
Kelly	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	No	No
Abigail	Female	White	18	1	US	No	Yes	No	Yes
Susan	Female	White	18	1	US	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Sample Sexual Assault Disclosure Experiences

Pseudonym	Timing of incident	Timing of disclosure	Offender	Response
Jennifer	Middle School	Middle School	Unknown	Listened, emotional support
Jennifer	High School	High School	Acquaintance	Advised formal reporting
Anne	Childhood	College	Acquaintance	Listened, emotional support
Tom	High School	High School	Unknown	Advised reading self-help book
Tom	College	College	Mutual friend	Helped get evidence for reporting
Andrea	Middle School	Middle School	Acquaintance	Advised to tell parents
Andrea	High School	High School	Acquaintance	Emotional support, recommended counseling
Brenda	College	College	Stranger	Friend had already reported, emotional support
Lilly	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Interpreted as false, recommended counseling
Lilly	College	College	Mutual friend	Listened, emotional support
Elise	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Interpreted as false
Jessica	Childhood	College	Parent	Emotional support
Karen	High School	College	Boyfriend	Emotional support
Robert	High School	High School	Mutual friend	Emotional support, interpreted as false
Diane	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Advised to break up
Kim	High School	High School	Mutual friend	Got his version, interpreted as false Listened, emotional support, friend had already reported
Kirsten	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Interpreted as false, advised telling family
Anita	Middle School	Middle School	Parent	Interpreted as false until experienced same, school report
Anita	High School	High School	Brother	Interpreted as false until experienced same, school report
Breanne	High School	High School	Mutual friend	Interpreted as false
Christina	Middle School	Middle School	Acquaintance	Told other victim Listened, emotional support, told her it was her own fault
Christina	Middle School	Middle School	Acquaintance	Listened, emotional support, told her it was her own fault
Philip	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Questioned disclosure purpose
Linda	High School	High School	Acquaintance	Interpreted as false, friend had already reported
Samantha	High School	High School	Acquaintance	Listened, emotional support
Abigail	High School	High School	Boyfriend	Advised counseling and not reporting
Susan	High School	High School	Acquaintance	

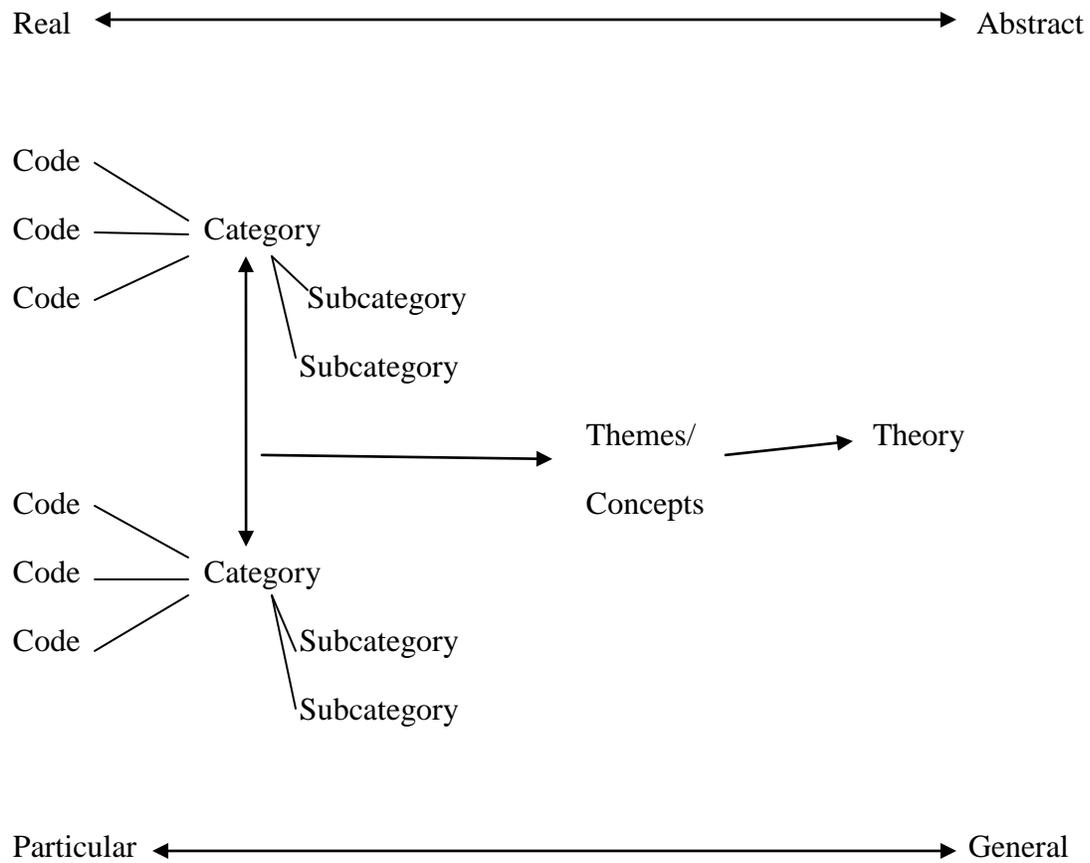
Table 3. Interpretations and responses.

Victim-Offender Relationship	Interpretations	Responses	Conclusion
Acquaintance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mutual interpretation 2. Victim relationship with perpetrator 3. Verbal/physical resistance 4. Victim presentation 5. Others' points of view 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confront perpetrator 2. Report (ambivalent) 3. Report (strong) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With 3 caveats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Repeat perpetrator ○ "Obvious" sexual assault ○ Sober victim 4. Medical attention (ambivalent) 5. Other 	"She was taken advantage of" = not sexual assault
Casual Date	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dating rules 2. Victim aggressor 3. Verbal resistance 4. Physical resistance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reporting not recommended 2. Report (ambivalent) 3. Report (strong) 4. Confront perpetrator 5. Other 	"She led him on" = not sexual assault
Boyfriend	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previous consensual sex 2. Miscommunication 3. Regretted sex 4. Proof 5. Verbal/physical resistance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Report (if proof) 2. Reporting not recommended 3. Talk to perpetrator 4. Other 	"It is ambiguous, likely a miscommunication or regretted sex" = not sexual assault
Mutual Friend	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confidante's relationship with perpetrator 2. Disbelief 3. Moral obligation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Investigation 2. Check consistency of victim's story 3. Mediation 4. Report (ambivalent) 5. Report (strong) 	"He said, she said" = not sexual assault
Stranger	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unambiguous 2. Innocent victim 3. Obvious malicious perpetrator 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Report (strong) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 benefits (not caveats) 2. Medical attention 3. Other 	"Obvious" = sexual assault

Table 4. Perpetrator of first scenario.

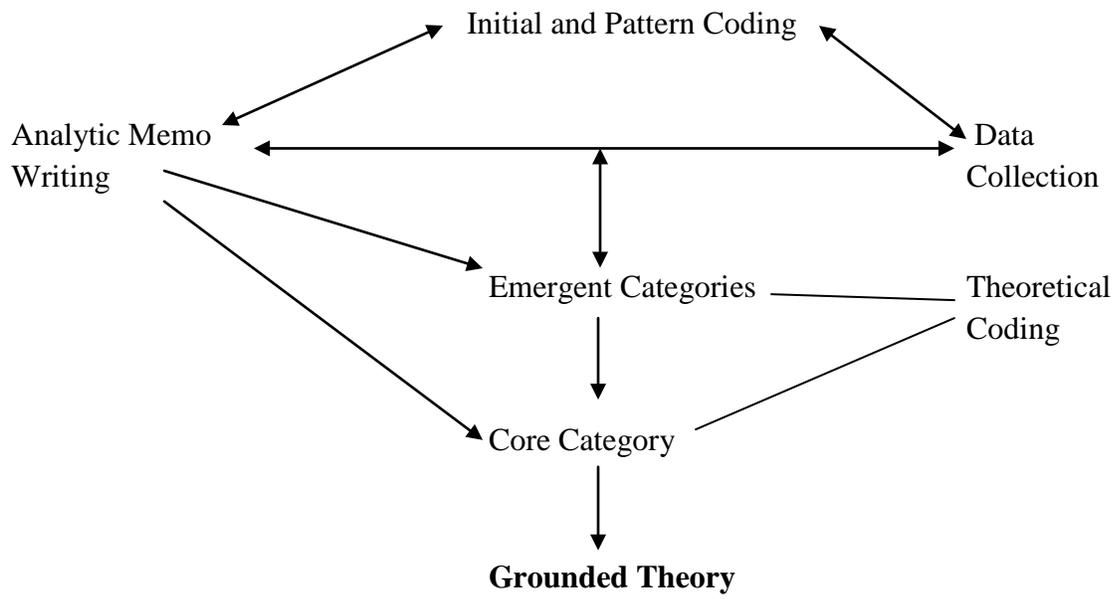
Perpetrator	Percent (N=38)
Acquaintance	76.3 (n=29)
Stranger	10.5 (n=4)
Casual Date	7.9 (n=3)
Boyfriend	5.3 (n=2)

**FIGURE 1:
A GROUNDED THEORY MODEL OF MOVING FROM CODES TO THEORY***



*Adapted from Saldana (2009:12).

**FIGURE 2:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF GROUNDED THEORY***



*Adapted from Saldana (2009:43).

**APPENDIX A:
INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Interview guide:
Sexual Assault Incident Characteristics and Confidante Responses

A. Introductory statements and agreements

Thank participant. Administer consent form. Provide copy. Answer any questions.

INTERVIEWER NOTES

Date: _____

Start time: _____

End time: _____

A2. What race does this person appear to be:

White; Black; Hispanic; Middle Eastern; Asian/Indian; Native American;
Combination; Don't know

A3. What gender does this person appear to be:

Male; Female

B. Personal background

“I will start out by asking you a few very general questions about your background.”

B1. How old are you? _____

Do not want to say

B2. What is your current year in school? _____

B3. Are you a US citizen?

Yes No _____

B4. Are you involved in a fraternity\sorority?

Yes No

B5. Attend fraternity\sorority parties? If so, how often?

B6. Are you in a relationship?

Yes No Exclusive Open

B6. Drug use \ Alcohol use

C. Scenarios and responses

“Now I would like to go over some different scenarios of sexual experiences. I’m going to ask questions about how you would respond if a friend or other college student confided this to you.”

Ask about what comes to mind as a possible sexual assault scenario a friend could confide to them. After description of scenario, ask how they would respond and why.

Keep probing about different scenarios if they are coming up with them on their own; order them below.

If not coming up with scenarios, bring up different types as below; order scenarios as you bring them up.

(Unwanted sexual intercourse and unwanted oral sex means that these were done without consent through the use of force or threats.)

- A. *Stranger, completed / attempted, unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim not intoxicated.*
- B. *Stranger, completed / attempted unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim voluntarily intoxicated.*
- C. *Stranger, completed / attempted, unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim involuntarily intoxicated.*
- D. *Acquaintance, completed / attempted, unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim not intoxicated.*
- E. *Acquaintance, completed / attempted, unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim voluntarily intoxicated.*
- F. *Acquaintance, completed / attempted, unwanted sexual intercourse \ unwanted oral sex, victim involuntarily intoxicated.*

C1. What advice would you give? Why?

C2. What else would influence your advice? (E.g. degree of resistance, extent of injuries, location or setting)

C3. Would you recommend reporting the incident to police? Go to hospital? Seek other assistance? Like what? (E.g. press charges, file disciplinary complaint at UC, get an STD and/or pregnancy test, spiritual counseling, psychological counseling, consult campus sexual assault coordinator)

C4. Why does this seem like good advice for this scenario? What is the intended outcome?

C5. How effective do you think this advice would be?

C6. What else would you do to support the person confiding in you? (E.g. accompany to emergency room, testify in court)

C7. Why wouldn't you recommend X (e.g. reporting to police)?

C8. How responsible is the victim for this event?

C9. How responsible is the offender for this event?

C10. Does this matter in terms of the advice you give?

C11. Does the passage of time matter? Would you give different advice if this happened within the past day, week, month?

C12. Has anyone ever confided in you about being sexually assaulted?

C13. If so, what did you tell him or her?

D. Future Contact (if relevant)

Would you be willing to be contacted by me for either:

A. follow-up questions

B. a future, unrelated interview (monetary reimbursement)?

If yes, preferred contact info: _____

(Confidential; this won't be included in transcript)

**APPENDIX B:
FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Interview guide:
Sexual Assault Incident Characteristics and Confidante Responses**

A. Introductory statements and agreements

Thank participant. Administer consent form. Provide copy. Answer any questions.

INTERVIEWER NOTES

Date: _____

Start time: _____

End time: _____

A2. What race does this person appear to be:

- White; Black; Hispanic; Middle Eastern; Asian/Indian; Native American;
Combination; Don't know

A3. What gender does this person appear to be:

- Male; Female

A4. Study explanation:⁴⁴

Just to give you an idea of this study, I'm trying to research how people would respond if their friend came to them and told them that they'd been sexually assaulted. So, we're going to go through some different scenarios of a friend coming to you and saying she's been sexually assaulted, and I want you to tell me how you would respond. What you're thinking, what advice you'd give her, and that sort of thing. Just so you know, there aren't any right answers here – I'm more interested in how *you* would actually react and what you would think in these situations, rather than in what you think you *should* do.

B. Personal background

[Audio recording starts at this point.]

⁴⁴ This is a transcript of what I generally said, but was not scripted. Starting with the third interview, I began the conversation by explaining to participants what I was researching and the format of the interview. This was included because initial participants appeared confused about the purpose of the study and seemed to think that they had to provide specific answers rather than engage in a loosely formatted conversation. This explanation seemed to put participants at ease by reassuring them that “there are no right answers.”

“Just to start off, let me ask you some background questions.”⁴⁵

B1. How old are you? _____

Do not want to say

B2. What is your current year in school? _____

B3. Are you a US citizen?

Yes No _____

B4. Are you involved in a fraternity\sorority?

Yes No

B5. Attend fraternity parties? If so, how often?

B6. Are you in a relationship?

Yes No

C. Scenarios and responses

“Off the top of your head, what’s the first sort of situation you could see happening where a friend had been sexually assaulted and was coming to you to tell you what happened? What could you see happening to a friend?”⁴⁶

Keep probing about different scenarios if they are coming up with them on their own; order them below.

If not coming up with scenarios, bring up different types as below; order scenarios as you bring them up.

- A. *Stranger*
- B. *Boyfriend, not sexually active in relationship, verbal pressure*
- C. *Boyfriend, not sexually active in relationship, physical force*
- D. *Boyfriend, sexually active in relationship*
- E. *Friend of confidante*
- F. *Acquaintance of victim, on a date*
- G. *Acquaintance of victim, at a party*
- H. *DFSA⁴⁷ at party*

⁴⁵ Verbiage has been changed to represent actual interviews.

⁴⁶ This was changed to better explore what college students first think about when they imagine sexual assault. Whatever their first scenario was, I would ask probing questions about how they would respond and what their thought process involved in determining that response. I would then move on to scenarios that slightly changed their initial response; for example, “What if it was the same situation, but instead of it being an acquaintance of hers from class, it was a mutual friend of yours?”

⁴⁷ “DFSA” stands for drug-facilitated sexual assault. This was included to explore the phenomenon of “drugging” and how confidantes would respond to friends saying they think they were drugged and sexually assaulted.

I. *DFSA at bar*⁴⁸

- C1. Would you advise her to do anything in that situation?
- C2. What else would influence your advice? (E.g. degree of resistance, extent of injuries, location or setting)
- C3. Would you recommend reporting the incident to police? Go to hospital? Seek other assistance? Like what? (E.g. press charges, file disciplinary complaint at UC, get an STD and/or pregnancy test, spiritual counseling, psychological counseling, consult campus sexual assault coordinator.)⁴⁹
- C4. Why does this seem like good advice for this scenario? What is the intended outcome?
- C5. How effective do you think this advice would be?
- C6. What would you say to your friend if they were on the fence about following through with your advice?
- C7. You didn't mention X (e.g. reporting to police). Is that something that would come to mind?
- C8. How responsible is the victim for this event?
- C9. How responsible is the offender for this event?
- C10. Does this matter in terms of the advice you give?
- C11. Does the passage of time matter? Would you give different advice if this happened within the past day, week, month?
- C12. Has anyone ever confided in you about being sexually assaulted?
- C13. If so, what did you tell him or her?
- C14. If you gave any advice, do you know whether or not it was followed?
- C15. Do you have any questions for me or anything you would like to add or suggest?

⁴⁸ The scenarios changed according to those that initial participants brought up, some of which I had not considered when creating the early protocol. Also, I removed the distinction of attempted versus completed because early participants suggested that their response/advice would not change based on this. Finally, I removed any definitions of the term "sexual assault" in order to assess what participants considered the term to include.

⁴⁹ I removed the question about what participants would do to support the survivor for two reasons: 1) responses seemed to be based on what the participant considered socially acceptable and thus were largely formulaic, and 2) most participants brought this up naturally over the course of conversation.

APPENDIX C:

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT 4

Nicole: I just want to ask you a couple background questions. How old are you?

Participant: 19.

Nicole: What's your year in school?

Participant: I'm a sophomore.

Nicole: Are you a US citizen?

Participant: Yes, I am.

Nicole: Are you involved in a fraternity?

Participant: No.

Nicole: Do you ever attend parties at fraternities or sororities?

Participant: Sometimes. Not as often as my roommate would.

Nicole: How often?

Participant: Well, on the first week of school, he was gone at a frat party almost every night and I think I went to maybe one that weekend. That was it, really.

Nicole: So, I guess in a normal month, one a weekend?

Participant: Maybe about one a weekend, I guess.

Nicole: Are you in a relationship?

Participant: No.

Nicole: (Explains study) With that in mind, off the top of your head, what's a maybe likely scenario you could encounter where a friend were coming to you, what are the characteristics of a likely scenario?

Participant: You mean, if someone needs my help? Usually it would just be to talk about something or like if they need help doing something. Pretty much that's it.

Nicole: To talk about...

Participant: Problems. I'm kind of like the ear for someone to talk to.

Nicole: Okay, if a girl were looking for a friend to come to, you might be a good one?

Participant: Yeah, probably.

Nicole: So what sorts of, just like sexual assault types of scenarios could you see somebody coming to you with in consideration of your group of friends or the fact that you're in college?

Participant: Perhaps an abusive significant other or... This is all hypothetical. Nothing's really happened like that before.

Nicole: This is all hypothetical, yeah.

Participant: I guess the main one would be an abusive boyfriend or girlfriend or something. Something like that. How should they deal with it, I suppose? I'm not really sure.

Nicole: There's no right answers.

Participant: I know.

Nicole: So, for an intimate partner or significant other. If it were a situation where a friend were saying he sexually assaulted me, what should I do, are there any sorts of specific questions you might ask?

Participant: First I'd want to make sure that she's okay physically and mentally because, you know, I'm in Human Sexuality and we just got done talking about things like rape and sexual assault. The last thing you'd want to do is go find the guy and beat him up for her. Something I didn't really focus too much on like why that was a really bad thing, but it's not good. So, I guess

I would just try to make sure that she was okay. If she wanted to take this to the police or something like that, it's really all up to her on what she decides.

Nicole: Of course, you're right. It is in the end up to her.

Participant: But I'd be pissed, yeah.

Nicole: As someone who's kind of being put in the position of being a confidante, I guess it would be kind of expected that you would give some advice or go through different options of things she could do if she chose. So, you mentioned going to the police. Are there any other sorts of tactics you could suggest in addition to that?

Participant: In addition to going to the police?

Nicole: Yes.

Participant: I'm not sure, really.

Nicole: What about something as simple as medical attention?

Participant: Oh, well, right. I mean, of course, on top of going to the police, you might want to get looked at, see if something is wrong. If she's hurt.

Nicole: Would you specifically advise that she go to the police or get medical attention?

Participant: I would advise it but I wouldn't pressure anyone into doing anything.

Nicole: Would different aspects of the assault influence whether that were the advice that you gave?

Participant: I suppose, yeah.

Nicole: Can you just describe two types of scenarios? Like, one where you would give that advice and one where you wouldn't.

Participant: Okay. Like if... Can you give me a second?

Nicole: Yeah, take your time.

Participant: Okay, describe a scenario where I would give police advice or something and another where I wouldn't.

Nicole: And we don't have to stick with the boyfriend sort of thing.

Participant: Okay, I know. This is a real touchy subject. Well, I would say if she was raped, then definitely, you need to go to the police and you need to get some medical attention because something could definitely be wrong after that. I would definitely advise that because there's not a whole lot I personally could do because I can't go out and find these guys and just whoop their ass, on top of the fact that I'm just one person. The police could probably find them and do that but I can't. I guess in the previous situation, like an abusive boyfriend, you might not have to call the police or something at first.

Nicole: Why is that?

Participant: I'm not sure. I don't know.

Nicole: Is it because you know where to find him?

Participant: Essentially, yeah. I would say that's it. If it becomes, if it actually becomes a problem, like sexual assault or something like that, then she can come to her friends, in other words, me and my friends, who can kind of deal with this in a way that doesn't just go straight to whooping the guy's ass.

Nicole: So, deal with it in what other kinds of ways?

Participant: First of all, talking about it and make sure it doesn't happen again. If she still wants to go back to him for some reason, essentially assuring him that this won't happen again because I care about my friends.

Nicole: It kind of sounded like maybe you and another friend would go and talk to the guy?

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: I see. So, not go and beat him up but try and talk to him?

Participant: Right, exactly. I don't think everything has to go straight to violence.

Nicole: Or to arrest.

Participant: Right. We can talk about it.

Nicole: What if he was like, whatever she's telling you is a lie, it didn't happen?

Participant: Well, of course I'm gonna need to hear both sides of the story. That's originally why I'd go and talk to him and see if it makes any sense. If she's really making it up. If there's evidence, you know, like she's got a black eye or something like that, then you did something wrong. Don't try to pass it off as oh, she's lying. So, it's always important to get both sides of the story first.

Nicole: Okay. Evidence of violence makes it a little easier for you to tell which...

Participant: Who's lying really.

Nicole: Of course, that's a little more complicated without obvious evidence of violence.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: Does that matter at all or does that just make you more so want to talk to the person rather than try to get authorities involved? Like if it's not obvious that there's physical violence.

Participant: Right. If it's not obvious, I'd probably talk to the person first but if it's blatantly obvious, then you should probably get the police involved.

Nicole: I see. I assume in a situation like the first one you were talking about, where a friend's coming to you about her boyfriend, in that scenario, you probably know the boyfriend, too. Like, if a friend's comfortable enough coming to you.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: What about if it's something where you might not know the guy? If it's something like someone she met at a party or someone like that. But she's still friendly with him or knows him from class.

Participant: Right, right. If she comes and talks to me and tells me about it, on top of suggesting police or whatever, if she's been hurt or something like that, I would definitely ask her, is there anything you want me to do about this or anything specific you would like me to help with or something like that.

Nicole: What kinds of things would someone want help with?

Participant: I'm not sure. I mean, if she wants help dealing with him or if that's why she came to me, then tell me.

Nicole: Like, let's go find him and confront him some way?

Participant: I guess, yeah.

Nicole: That wouldn't be your reaction whether or not she wanted that?

Participant: Wait, I'm sorry.

Nicole: So, finding out who did this and confronting him in some way. She would have to specifically ask you to do that?

Participant: Well, yeah, I mean, I'm not gonna go and pick a fight with some guy but if my friend needs some help, I'll help her out.

Nicole: What about if it's not someone that she knows and not someone that you know. So just like a scenario where she's attacked by a stranger? Would that make any difference for the type of advice that you would give?

Participant: I think we talked about that in the rape scenario? She definitely needs to go to the police and definitely needs to go to like the hospital or something. So, yeah it does make a difference if I know the person or if I don't.

Nicole: I just want to make sure we're on the same page. So, the main difference that it makes is like you think that if it's a stranger then it's more imperative that she get authorities involved and if it's someone known, it's kind of more a decision?

Participant: Right. We can legitimately find out what happened if we already know the person. We know a little bit about them, we know who they are, essentially. If it's some random stranger that just came up and did this then we know nothing. We don't know where he is, we don't know who he is, so we might want to leave that to the police. But I believe that relationship issues, you can deal with those just by talking, by talking about it.

Nicole: Okay. Even in instances with rape or some kind of unwanted sexual contact in a relationship?

Participant: A rape is unacceptable anyway, either way. So, like I said, if she comes to me and she wants to call the police, then call the police. But if she does not want to get the police involved, I won't pressure anyone into doing that.

Nicole: What if she can't make up her mind?

Participant: I would suggest calling the police if she can't decide.

Nicole: Does it matter if it were a completed sexual assault, like the person succeeded...

Participant: No, even in the attempt, it's still, it's still unacceptable so everything would still be the same.

Nicole: Would you be influenced at all, in the type of advice you would give, would it matter at all how much resistance she put up to the attack?

Participant: Not necessarily, no

Nicole: Okay, so, let's just say for her boyfriend, for example, like if they were already in a sexual relationship prior to this and he came on to her and she was saying no but she didn't kind of force him off of her, do any physical resistance, just verbal, would that make a difference in how what happened between them should be interpreted? As rape or not rape?

Participant: I'm not sure. I mean, no means no, bottom line. I'm not really sure. If she didn't physically refuse... I'm not sure.

Nicole: Would you maybe ask additional questions? Trying to get to the bottom of it? What sorts of information would you need in order to figure out whether one of these more ambiguous scenarios is rape or not?

Participant: I would have to know what happened, exactly.

Nicole: Let's say you could find that out. You want to know what happened. What is it about what happened that helps? You know what I mean?

Participant: Kind of. I do. I'm trying to think.

Nicole: That's fine. We've got plenty of time.

Participant: Please repeat the question.

Nicole: What sort of information is important for you to know... If a friend came to you with a situation like this, that's kind of ambiguous, which a lot of sexual assault scenarios could be ambiguous, what sort of information would you need to know about the situation in order to kind of be like, oh, this was rape or this was attempted rape or this was just a misunderstanding?

Participant: Okay. Did she actually say no. What happened after that, essentially. If she actually resisted. Um... I'm not sure what else.

Nicole: That makes sense. So, I guess... It wouldn't be very ambiguous if she said no, if he completed it anyway, and if she was trying to resist him physically.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: That's a nonambiguous situation. And then we talked about how she can say no and if he doesn't listen, then is that still ambiguous if she doesn't physically resist him? Like, try to push him or something like that?

Participant: People can misread signals all the time but I don't think that that's a call for rape. Me, myself, I consider to be oblivious when people are hitting on me because I just, sometimes I just don't get it. But, because people by nature are confusing.

Nicole: Yeah, exactly.

Participant: Like, you wanna be secretive or mysterious, I guess. So, if she didn't really physically resist, then perhaps she was leading him on. I don't know.

Nicole: What if she did physically resist but never said like, no, stop. Is that any different or similar?

Participant: She was physically resisting but she never said no?

Nicole: Mmhmm.

Participant: That one's confusing. There's actually a comedian who did a joke about that. I know, this is off topic but this is kind of what I'm thinking, it's this exact situation. There's a comedian and a waitress came up to his room and they were making out and she was getting really into it so like he tries to take it further and she stops him and this repeats. And then she leaves, they didn't have sex. The next morning, she comes up and talks to him, so why didn't you have sex with me last night? And he's like, you were resisting, you obviously didn't want to. She's like, no, I wanted to. But his waitress found it kinky if men just snap and go for it. It's like no! He's not gonna rape her on the off chance that she's into that! There are people out there like that.

Nicole: Yeah, that is kind of a relevant sort of scenario because it brings up these different, like the ways in which physical interaction can be ambiguous and interpreted differently by different people and there's kind of two elements to that. So, there's men who think that women resisting is kind of them asking for more but then there are women who resist in order to ask for more. And it's kind of like you don't know who's who.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: So it is ambiguous. Does the fact that someone would even be confiding this to you in the first place kind of make it a little bit less ambiguous?

Participant: The fact that someone's telling me about what happened. I'm sorry, I have a small vocabulary. Could you define ambiguous, exactly?

Nicole: Vague or difficult to interpret.

Participant: Okay, well, people can come to me with their problems. I'm usually kind of helpful. So, the fact that someone would come to me with this isn't really that hard to understand. I'm a pretty trustworthy guy.

Nicole: Yeah, I guess the difficulty in interpreting comes more for you. The type of advice you would give somebody kind of depends on how you would interpret the situation.

Participant: Okay.

Nicole: So, you were saying before, if something is clearly rape, and it's obvious rape, and you know what's rape, then you would say go to the police. I'm not gonna force you to go to the police but I would strongly suggest that you go to the police. If something, like you were saying, with maybe a boyfriend...

Participant: Like maybe a relationship.

Nicole: ...And the girl didn't really know what to call it, maybe you would go and talk to the guy and be like, let's all get to the bottom of this.

Participant: What happened, exactly.

Nicole: So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that the way that you understand the situation seems to impact the advice that you give.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: But, it's not always easy.

Participant: Sometimes it's hard to understand, yeah.

Nicole: I guess, going back a couple questions ago, we were talking about what sort of information do you need to know in order to help you with the way that you interpret an event...

Participant: Essentially I need to know just about everything because when I make a decision, I want to make an educated decision.

Nicole: And how would that go with what you were saying about how you would feel kind of reluctant, if I understand you correctly, you feel a little hesitant to tell somebody what you think they should do?

Participant: It ultimately is up to the victim what they do because this happened to them, it didn't happen to me. All I can do is offer advice and suggestions. The decision is ultimately theirs.

Nicole: What about different sorts of party incidents because those have their own sort of complication that's different than dating. So, something like going to a party and the girl drinks a lot and wakes up somewhere the next day and comes to you and is like, I don't know what to do.

Participant: She wakes up and can't remember is what happened?

Nicole: I don't know. I mean, maybe.

Participant: Well, because that actually happened to me.

Nicole: What do you mean?

Participant: Last year, I was living in [redacted] and I went over to my neighbor's and these two girls just started pouring me drinks and I wasn't even paying attention. Long story short, I woke up the next day missing one of my shirts, one of my shoes, and my belt. And I found two of those things over at their apartment.

Nicole: What did you do?

Participant: I don't know! I have no idea what happened after.

Nicole: I mean, what did you do after that?

Participant: Oh, nothing. I was just really weirded out. I didn't know what to do. Something happened. I honestly don't know what happened and just that was what was freaking me out about it.

Nicole: Did you talk to your friends about it?

Participant: A while back I told my brother. And then he, he's over in Korea right now. I told my brother and then he told his bunk mate or whatever the Air Force calls them. He was like, you guys, my little brother got drunk and he got taken advantage of, that's awesome! Because I honestly have no idea what happened.

Nicole: And it's interesting, too, to think about how that's probably not what he would have been saying if it was his little sister.

Participant: Right, exactly. He probably wouldn't have been saying that if [redacted] had that happen to her. Ugh.

Nicole: Did you ask the girls?

Participant: I was too creeped out. But they were looking at me funny when I came over to get my stuff. They were like... I have no idea what happened.

Nicole: I think that's actually kind of a common college scenario from what I understand. Though I don't know how...

Participant: So, from experience, I wouldn't really know what to say. Because I didn't know what to do.

Nicole: For yourself. But did you try talking to your friends? You said you told your brother about it and then it sounds like you waited kind of a while to tell him.

Participant: I think he's the only person I've told about it... Yeah. Yeah, he's the only person I've really told about that. And his response didn't really help. So, yeah, like I said, I wouldn't really know what to tell her about that one because I personally have no idea.

Nicole: Um...

Participant: Sorry that was kind of a useless response.

Nicole: No, it actually wasn't. It kind of just caught me a little off guard. It's actually a really interesting aspect to this study and kind of, I guess, a little bit like proves what I'm trying to study here. You said you didn't really talk to anyone about this. You didn't know what to do. And when you talked to someone about it...

Participant: I got an even weirder response.

Nicole: Yeah, and then, so I guess that's why I'm trying to look at what is it that gives people, like compels someone to give good advice versus a bad response and that sort of thing.

Participant: Exactly, yeah.

Nicole: So, that was helpful. Just a little surprising. Okay, well, what about a scenario though where it doesn't go to the point of being blackout but like intoxicated and maybe...

Participant: Okay, if you can still remember and things like that, I mean, when you're intoxicated, you can't give consent so it really is still rape, however you slice it.

Nicole: Even if the other person's intoxicated, too?

Participant: See, then it gets into a gray area because you don't know if either party consented to it or not. Like, legitimately did. I would think that both of them would need to talk about what happened. Like, do you remember last night? And he's like, yeah. If he remembers, you might want to have a discussion about what happened.

Nicole: That seems helpful. More so than running to the cops and filing charges or something because of the fact that it's a gray area. Does it kind of depend on the response and how that conversation goes, whether anything should happen?

Participant: I would say so.

Nicole: So, if he were like, oh, sorry, then...

Participant: Well, I mean, regardless, if they both can still remember the night, you still might want to talk about that, actually what happened. Because, I mean, yeah, I mean, if they talk and it's like alright, that probably shouldn't have happened but it really is the end of it, but we're still talking about sexual assault, right?

Nicole: Yeah, sexual assault and how to know when something's sexual assault.

Participant: Right, because if both parties were just smashed but they can still remember the night, you might want to talk about that.

Nicole: That it might be a mistake but a different type of mistake?

Participant: Right, because I mean if both parties are drunk, you really don't know if either individual gave consent so I don't really think that's fair to just straight jump to rape. You might want to talk to the guy first.

Nicole: And that's a little different than if just like one person was drunk, you're saying?

Participant: Right.

Nicole: Okay. Yeah, that makes sense. Let's see. What about a situation where a girl and a guy were on a date and she was like, hey, come up to my dorm room or something like that and then does that kind of mean that anything goes?

Participant: She's flirting with him? Hang on a second. Can you rephrase that? I'm a little confused. I got it but like...

Nicole: Yeah, so...

Participant: So, she essentially invites him up, okay.

Nicole: Yeah. And does that mean that, is that an invitation...

Participant: I would think that maybe she'd be hinting at it because this is college, you've got to sign someone in, so why else would you bring someone up to your dorm? Just like, hey come up to my dorm. Maybe she wants to show you something in her dorm. Maybe she does want to have sex with you. I don't know. But you'd better be sure.

Nicole: I guess that last part's a little bit what I'm getting at. There's still like, the same rules apply as for any other sort of scenario? That's not an automatic saying yes to having sex or is it?

Participant: No, you'd better be sure that that's what she wants to do when she goes to her dorm, not like, for example, I had some girls come up and they decided to play some video games. So, that's what we came up to my dorm to do. So, I'll use that as an example. Maybe that's what she wants to do. Maybe she doesn't want to have sex with you. So you have to be sure before you pull your dick out.

Nicole: Normally it would just be sufficient to say no.

Participant: Yeah, at least to me, yeah.

Nicole: Let's say that your friend came to you for advice, like we've been talking about, and it was a scenario where it was pretty clear that it was a rape and you advised her to go to the police and go to the hospital to get tested and that sort of thing and file charges. Would you do anything else in support of the person? Would you accompany them to the hospital or to the police?

Participant: Yeah, of course. Yeah.

Nicole: So you wouldn't just be like here's my advice, see ya.

Participant: Here's my advice, go do it. No, that's not, no. I'm a pretty nice guy.

Nicole: What if it were something like you could see down the line, you're still gonna be involved, you maybe have to go to court or something. Would that dissuade you from being that involved?

Participant: Like if I would have to go to court and testify or something? No, I'll help my friends out regardless.

Nicole: What about advising something like, do you think it would ever make a difference to you in terms of advice that you're giving, to go to the police and file charges or to go to the campus police and maybe try to get like a disciplinary action filed against somebody?

Participant: I would say if it was a relationship, I would probably go to the campus police first. But, you know, if it was some stranger, you might want to tell the Cincinnati police about that because that means that he's probably still out there.

Nicole: In a situation where you know the person, the UC police might be more helpful as a first resort?

Participant: Right.

Nicole: How come?

Participant: Well, I mean, there's help buttons all over campus so the campus police are obviously very responsive. They're readily available, I guess, so the actual police might not have time to come and talk to you but the campus police would probably be there a lot sooner.

Nicole: I guess it's their job to prioritize UC students. Is there anything else that might differentiate the two for you in terms of maybe consequences?

Participant: If I knew the guy, the kind of consequences he should get or something like that?

Nicole: Yeah. I mean, the consequences for you going to the police are probably different from the consequences of going to the UC police.

Participant: Right. So, the scenario is still that my friend was sexually assaulted, correct? And I'm trying to differentiate if I knew the guy and if I didn't, which police force essentially I would go to. Well, and why consequence-wise. I'm not exactly sure. It just seems to make more sense that way, I guess.

Nicole: To go to which one?

Participant: In a relationship on campus, probably the campus police. But sexual assault by some stranger, either on campus or off, maybe the Cincinnati police.

Nicole: I was thinking more like, so, if you go to the campus police, they kind of have different consequences. They can still have you file official charges and go through the criminal justice system, but it seems like there's also the option of being like, we can go to their department head, we can see if they can get them suspended, other options that the city police don't have. Would that factor into your advice at all? It doesn't have to. That doesn't even have to be something you would consider.

Participant: I'm not sure. I'm not really sure.

Nicole: What about, would there ever be a situation where you would advise your friend to get counseling? Like spiritual counseling or psychological counseling?

Participant: Yeah, I might suggest it if I can see signs that she's still distraught about the whole thing, which, chances are she will be. I'm still kind of a little messed up from what happened last year. It doesn't really show but I'd probably recommend it.

Nicole: Would you recommend that right away? You said that it might depend on the way that the friend were processing it?

Participant: Right. Because some people can handle certain things and some people can't.

Nicole: But that's interesting that you bring up yourself and say that it doesn't really show and you said you haven't really talked to anyone about it.

Participant: No, I haven't. I don't know. I'm confusing. I'm a confusing individual.

Nicole: Okay. But if somebody did come to you and you knew this happened a couple weeks ago or a couple months ago...

Participant: If they recommended, if any of my friends came up and recommended, dude, you might want to get some counseling, then I might want to get some counseling because if anyone knows me better than myself, it would probably be my friends or my family. Dude, you might want to talk to somebody.

Nicole: So, that's kind of relevant for my questions about the different time frames that this could have. So, does it make a difference if somebody says this happened last month or last night or a couple months ago in terms of how you would advise them?

Participant: Maybe and maybe not. I'm not sure.

Nicole: It depends, again, I'm sure, on...

Participant: It really does depend on how long it was and, I mean, because, like, in my situation with what happened, I didn't really feel like I needed to talk to anybody about it until... My brother called me one day and was like how you doing at UC, something, something? I'm like, oh, it's fine. He wanted to know if I had sex with anybody yet and I brought that up and he was like, oh dude! That's awesome! I was like, no, it's kind of not. So... I mean, time wise, I'm not

really sure because, from experience, I haven't really talked to anybody. My brother kind of brought up the topic and I informed him.

Nicole: And just talking about your situation still, it seems kind of clear that the advice that someone could give you now is probably different in terms of what would be helpful that like last year.

Participant: Right, when it happened.

Nicole: So, that probably contributes to why you say the timeframe does matter. Because you can't always advise the same things.

Participant: Exactly. I'd say if someone told me closer to the date when it happened, I would suggest what I have.

Nicole: And then, maybe if it were further away, that might relate more to different types of advice?

Participant: At this point, you really just need to talk to someone about it.

Nicole: What about for a situation that's a little bit less ambiguous? So, something where the person knows for sure they were raped by maybe an acquaintance or whatever. Does the certainty of it having been...

Participant: Go to the police.

Nicole: Still? Even if it's a while...

Participant: Oh, if it was a while ago? I'm not sure if the police could do anything but you definitely should still probably talk to someone about it. I could try but I'm not a psychiatrist.

Nicole: Okay, so you're saying they should get counseling?

Participant: Yeah, they might want to do that.

Nicole: Would it be helpful at all to go to the police in that situation?

Participant: I could see how it might be helpful, psychologically. Just knowing that the police know that something like that happened. So, psychologically, I guess it could be helpful.

Nicole: We've covered pretty much every scenario that's possible, maybe in a college setting.

Participant: Hahaha.

Nicole: I have two last questions for you. One is that some people have said things about people giving false kind of confessions. So, you can't always believe what somebody says right away because maybe they have a different reason for telling you that.

Participant: Right.

Nicole: Is that something that would cross your mind at all if somebody would come to you with this?

Participant: Well, for example, my situation. I was so drunk, I blacked out before I even left their apartment, so I don't know. I have no idea what happened. It's just that my brother, who was like telling his roommate, that didn't help. Because signs kind of point to it but I can't jump to any conclusions because I don't know what happened. But it doesn't look good, that's all I know. Wait, I'm sorry. What was the question, exactly?

Nicole: If somebody were to...

Participant: Give false confessions.

Nicole: Would you ever suspect somebody of giving a false confession if they came to you and told you about something that happened to them?

Participant: I'm usually... Like if they were lying about this or something like that?

Nicole: Would you suspect them? Is that something, when you're thinking like man, should I tell them to go to the cops, should I tell them to do this, and would another thought be...

Participant: I mean, you've got to read people's body language, too, because I think I'm pretty good at calling people on their bullshit. So, you've got to not only listen to what they're saying but you have to pay attention to their body language and things like that to see if this is actually genuine or if they're just trying to get someone in trouble.

Nicole: Do you think that there are types of scenarios that somebody could come to you with that are more likely to be false? I mean, something like, oh, my boyfriend did this. Maybe they just wanted to get him in trouble?

Participant: I could see that happening. Somebody might want someone to beat up their boyfriend or something like that. I don't know.

Nicole: I guess I'm just wondering if there's anything specific about a situation that would make you question someone...

Participant: Well, if this helps explain it, yeah. Sometimes my sister's boyfriend is just really stupid. He does something really stupid. So, my sister, like when my brother came back in town, she was like, you know what, just go get him really drunk, just blackout drunk, Have him pass out on his bed and when he does, punch him square in the ass so when he wakes up, he thinks he got raped. I'm like, what?

Nicole: Wait, who said that?

Participant: My sister. She was so pissed off at her boyfriend that she wanted my brother to get him belligerently drunk and punch him in the ass so when he'd wake up he'd think something happened.

Nicole: Wow.

Participant: So, some people would just want maybe their boyfriend, if he said something stupid, just to do something like that. Make him think something happened just to screw with him. He didn't do it but my sister was talking to my brother about this and he was like, do you want me to just punch him in the ass so when he wakes up...

Nicole: Okay...

Participant: I come from a very interesting family.

Nicole: It sounds it. Well, he is in the Air Force, you said? They have a different sense of humor, maybe.

Participant: Oh, yeah.

Nicole: Okay, my last question is... So, you told me about the situation with you and your experience confiding in somebody. Has anybody ever confided something in you like that, where you were giving them advice? About sexual assault, not just anything.

Participant: About sexual assault. Nobody's really come to me with anything about sexual assault. So, I'm not exactly sure.

Nicole: That's fine. If so, I guess I was just gonna ask you what sort of advice you gave them. So, if it's never happened, that's fine. That's it for my questions and that was really helpful. Did you have any questions?

Participant: No.

APPENDIX D:

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT 12

Nicole: We'll just start with some background questions. How old are you?

Participant: I'm 19.

Nicole: What's your current year in school?

Participant: I'm a sophomore.

Nicole: Are you a US citizen?

Participant: I am.

Nicole: Are you involved in a sorority?

Participant: No.

Nicole: Do you ever attend fraternity parties?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: How often?

Participant: Probably every other week.

Nicole: And are you currently in a relationship?

Participant: I'm not.

Nicole: So, what's the first thing that kind of comes to mind for you about a potential scenario that a friend could come to you about, like if your friend were to tell you she was sexually assaulted, what sort of thing, like characteristics of that...

Participant: I think the most common is rape but I think that's less likely. She'd probably come to me more about being felt up or put in a position where she was uncomfortable.

Nicole: What kind of scenario do you think that sort of thing could happen to her?

Participant: I definitely think at frat parties. I've heard it, in personal accounts, happening with friends who just sort of misread signals or were really drunk and misread signals, so I would expect it to be a stranger, but actually, in my own experience, it's been more not with strangers, when friends come to me.

Nicole: Would you mind telling me about some of the times of when you found yourself in that position, of listening to a friend talking about...

Participant: Yeah, most recently, it was two people who are very close to each other. They're definitely not strangers and I would consider them good friends. The guy was very, very drunk and he's a lot stronger than the girl, which is not uncommon, and he didn't rape her or even, I mean, what he did wasn't encouraged, but if she pressed charges, I would raise my eyebrows. He just kind of like pushed her against a wall and she was just asking to be let go. And he didn't do anything but she obviously was less strong in this scenario and did want it to stop and he didn't let it stop and he was too close to her for her to be comfortable, which I think could be considered sexual assault.

Nicole: How did she get away from that?

Participant: It was in a public scenario, it was at a party, so people told the guy, like, you're out of bounds.

Nicole: I see. So, she came to you afterwards?

Participant: She actually hadn't remembered exactly what had happened. She remembered being very upset.

Nicole: Oh, was she drunk, too?

Participant: She was very drunk, which, I don't think it would have happened if she hadn't been so because, like I said, the guy was very drunk but he's a good person and they've always been flirty but he knows, in his sober mind, he knows the boundaries there. And so she was drunk and she remembered being very upset and wanting it to stop but couldn't remember what happened and so she asked what happened.

Nicole: Oh, and you had witnessed it?

Participant: Yeah, I was sober the whole time.

Nicole: Is this a situation where you felt like you needed to give her any kind of advice or help her figure out what to do?

Participant: More in like social advice, like she wasn't sure how to proceed with their friendship, not so much like do I need to make sure this doesn't happen again kind of advice.

Nicole: Are they still friends?

Participant: Yes, very much so.

Nicole: Is that the only time something like this has ever come up?

Participant: As far as specific cases, that's the only time someone has come to me and said how should I proceed. I know, obviously, lots of friends, being in more or less serious form, sexually assaulted but they didn't come up to me and ask how to, what to do next.

Nicole: But there were situations where like someone disclosed...

Participant: Yeah, gossip, basically.

Nicole: Oh, so, it wasn't like the person that it happened to? It was more...

Participant: It was the person that it happened to but they were talking about it to a group of friends, just like kind of bitching about the situation, rather than like, should I tell somebody.

Nicole: Can you describe that?

Participant: Yeah. So, like, a girl-talk scenario, we're driving somewhere, or, you know, eating a meal, and they're like, I'd appreciate if you didn't tell anyone, but my boyfriend or my hookup buddy is being overly aggressive; this, this, and this has happened. And she's not asking for us to do anything or tell anything, she's just, you know, how you complain about anything else.

Nicole: So, in that sort of situation, do you find yourself giving advice though?

Participant: I do and I think everyone's ears perk up like if this is repeated, you know, listening, does he do this often, so if it crosses an invisible line in each of our heads, then we'll act. But for the most part, I don't try to tell them what to do.

Nicole: So, you're more of a support, like listening.

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: And it's usually, it sounds like, maybe not a situation with like an actual rape or anything.

Participant: No, stuff that, honestly, if you like said to some kind of law enforcement, they would probably want you to take action because, I mean, you don't have to actually have sex with someone to rape them, but stuff that, because of certain scenarios or because, I honestly think the girl didn't have completely innocent intentions, that none of our friend group thinks it's serious enough to do something about.

Nicole: Have there been situations where it has seemed really serious?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: How is that different?

Participant: That's different because they don't necessarily want you to inform anybody, like it definitely crosses an invisible line that we're all thinking about and we all believe that someone should do something but they explicitly say that they don't want it handled.

Nicole: Have you been a part of a group of friends where you kind of had to like listen to that and you were asked not to do anything?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: What happened in that situation?

Participant: Her boyfriend had, well, she said, I was not there. In her words, had raped her. She did not want to have sex and he forced it upon her. She gave various reasons of why, in that scenario, it's not okay but not worth bringing legal action into it.

Nicole: This is really interesting to me because it's one of the scenarios I normally ask about hypothetically and it's one that doesn't come up a lot as one that people have experienced in real life.

Participant: Well, yeah. So, that's basically what happened. I wasn't even extremely close friends with her, I just happened to be in the environment she was discussing this in and she, the reason she did not want to proceed, okay, you could tell, this happened in high school, she could what? Tell a guidance counselor, who would, at some point legal action would be taken into account and she was upset with the situation but she doesn't want her boyfriend to get into that much trouble. She would like things to stop but she would rather handle it on a personal level than bring, you know, take it to court.

Nicole: Were her and the boyfriend sexually active before this?

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: So, then, how did she personally differentiate this from like...

Participant: Just a regular...

Nicole: Yeah.

Participant: I mean, she didn't want it to happen and she thought it was very clear. I don't know if alcohol was involved or not. But that's how she differentiated it. She did not want it to happen and he did.

Nicole: And so she just wanted to talk to her friends but didn't want anyone to do anything and she was adamant about it.

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: Did anyone feel like they should do anything anyway?

Participant: People thought about that and what eventually happened is because, like I said, we all agreed this was not okay and I wasn't even a close friend of hers, just like as a fellow human being, we all thought this was not okay, she eventually did go to the guidance counselor but that was so that, she needed a platform to tell her parents. That was not a platform to, I don't know, seek...

Nicole: Press charges.

Participant: Yeah, press charges or seek some kind of vengeance. It was just so she could alert her parents and she didn't feel comfortable doing that by herself.

Nicole: How did she get to the point, I mean, if you even know this stuff, but it's interesting, how did she even get to the point where she wanted to confide in her parents? Was that through the influence of her friends?

Participant: For sure, the influence of her friends. I think, now this is me guesstimating and I have no knowledge of psychology or anything, I think she wanted to because, I mean, one example of her just wanting to tell people was she was telling a group of friends and more of just a loose friend, me, like I wasn't her inner circle. So, I think she wanted to tell people because she wanted it to stop and she realized, if I just keep it in my head, it's just gonna keep happening.

When you're a senior in high school, parents are a good outlet for things like that, when you just want it to be contained on a small level. People feel safe with their parents.

Nicole: So, this was an ongoing thing with the boyfriend?

Participant: I don't think so. I think, I mean, if I had to categorize him as aggressive or calm, I'd say he was aggressive but that was the only for sure instance I'd heard of him raping, in her words.

Nicole: That's interesting. Thanks for telling me about this. It's just funny, these kinds of scenarios that a lot of people aren't really prepared to deal with them because there's a lot of complication involved, just, especially with a boyfriend, it becomes a lot less black and white than another type of person.

Participant: Well, I actually think the parent thing was interesting because I don't know how that would have been handled in college. The only, there's no small level of dealing with that. When you're in high school, parents can appropriately deal with situations, to some extent, but that middle man goes away, once you leave home. So, if that situation happened here, and she didn't want any intense punishment to happen to her boyfriend...

Nicole: Yeah, what kind of resources do you think she could go to?

Participant: I know there are like women centers and stuff but even all of those, the next action that they would take would be, I'm assuming, I've never, this is not factual at all, this is just what I think. I think what they would do is bring in some kind of legal action.

Nicole: What about a psychiatrist or like a psychologist?

Participant: Oh, definitely that, but that's not free, I think. I think, just because of money and time and logistics and paperwork, acquiring a psychologist would be, just that would be a deterrent not to, to just keep quiet.

Nicole: And even something like university police? That still faces, like does that still seem like it could have legal...

Participant: Yeah, I think a general fear is that you're just trying to fix it a little bit, just make it stop, but you accidentally get it on his record, he can't get a job, he gets charged as a sex offender, all this stuff where, I mean, you don't agree what he did was right and you want it to stop but you don't think like his crime was egregious enough to... Especially if it's someone you know. I mean, if it's a stranger, I personally would not feel guilty at all taking legal action but in situations where it's a boyfriend or, like what I said at the beginning, a friend who you know really well, you want it to stop but you don't want him to suffer intensely.

Nicole: What about like a trusted teacher or someone on campus?

Participant: Oh, I have never encountered that in real life with friends or myself but...

Nicole: I just mean, is that someone that would cross your mind, like someone to talk to?

Participant: Oh, I thought you meant if they were sexually assaulting. I was like, yeah, I would not feel guilty about...

Nicole: No, of course not.

Participant: Um, I do think that's a good outlet. I think that'd be tough on them. I would feel guilty coming to them because I don't know if they're, I don't know what they have to do prior to becoming a professor, if that's even on their radar. I think they would probably take the same route as if I went to a women's center or if a friend went to a women's center. So, I think it just a different route to the same end.

Nicole: What about situations where underage drinking or drug use is involved? I think that kind of hits on some of the same difficulties you're talking about, where like there's potential

consequences to confiding in anybody. Do you think that this runs through people's minds when then they're thinking about talking to someone or bringing this up, like pursuing legal action?

Participant: Yeah, well, I think, in the high school situation, that may have been one of the reasons she didn't immediately run to her parents because you can totally see protective parents immediately calling someone, immediately putting together a rape kit, immediately like blowing what she wants to be kept relatively quiet into a town-wide event. Yeah.

Nicole: What about on a college campus?

Participant: Um... I honestly, like sadly enough, I think the greatest deterrent would be social things with that. I mean, you would not confide in a lot of people because you're afraid that it's become a gossip point and you don't want your friend group to view you and that guy as like a contentious situation.

Nicole: So, maybe, okay, so maybe you wouldn't want to confide to your friends because it could just become, like it could spiral out of control because...

Participant: Or you don't want people to know, just in general.

Nicole: If it were a situation where somebody's at a party and they're drinking and they're underage and they're assaulted, like sexually assaulted, by an acquaintance, like someone that they know maybe from school or something, but they're not really close friends with, and they came to you and told you about this, what kind of advice would you, could you see yourself giving?

Participant: I would probably say, you know, head to a middle man, like the UC women's center. Depending on, well, first I'd ask, like, what do you want to happen? Like, in your dream scenario, do you want him, do you want some kind of legal action taken? Do you want this to just be quieted? Do you want to just get a slap on the wrist? What do you want to happen? And if she's hoping for things not to blow up in everybody's face, I would say, I mean, UC women's center and places like that are like trained to deal with this, I bet they would have options, maybe not the options you want, but more than just keeping quiet.

Nicole: So, you're saying like, she should probably weigh the pros and cons of getting involved with the authorities?

Participant: Well, I would ask, do you want that to happen? If you could control everything about the situation, would you just want him to apologize? Would you just want him to say it would never happen again? Do you want a restraining order? What do you want? And then from there, I would suggest, you know, if you want it just to be on a personal level, for him to recognize that this was wrong, for him to show regret and say he's not gonna do it, then do you want me to go with you to his house or his apartment and we can talk about it? You know, it depends on what she wants.

Nicole: Okay, so, that makes sense. So you're saying, what is the victim seeking from getting other people involved? If she's seeking more of just an acknowledgment from him and maybe an apology, it might be more helpful just to do things on a very personal basis?

Participant: Mmhmm.

Nicole: Do you think that there could be a situation where she was hoping for something more extreme to happen to him? Like, do you think that it would have to involve a different type of situation for that to be justified?

Participant: No, I, basically, my impression of how college campuses are set up, and legal systems, if any woman, particularly young women, young and in college, complain at all about being sexually assaulted, they can make it blow up as big as they want and so, if she thought it

was a terrible crime, even if he just like felt her up and she wanted legal action to be taken, serious legal action, I think she could.

Nicole: Is that something you would recommend?

Participant: Um... I think it depends on the circumstance. Especially how well you know the person and what your history was. I don't condone any sexual harassment but I've definitely known guys very closely who were just, when they had sticky situations, like the one I was mentioning earlier, sticky situation with the girl when he just like pushed her up against a wall for a while, they are not dating but they hook up on occasion and so I can see how he would be confused and he should have definitely stopped but I think that situation is less heinous than if a stranger came up and did that because the guy who I know could defend, he was like, she was sending signals, the same situation happened in the past where they did end up hooking up, as opposed to a stranger who doesn't know and just came up and felt her against a wall. And would have no defense for that.

Nicole: What if the same situation, the friend, the two friends of yours and they sometimes hook up, what if that situation had escalated, though? I mean, I know that they were in public but like if it happened in a more private place and had escalated?

Participant: Well, then I would define it as sexual assault when one of them, girl or guy, says I would like this to stop. And then if it continues then I would consider that sexual assault and deal with it how intensely they feel it should be dealt with.

Nicole: Do you think that's a case where it could warrant legal action?

Participant: Oh, yeah. I think legal action could, if the victim wants it, could be warranted at almost any level of sexual assault.

Nicole: How do you respond, though, when the victim doesn't, like can't make up their mind? Because you've been describing these kinds of like, well, there's this and there's that, and like that's obviously the same thing she'd be going through, like weighing, like, he's my friend, but he hurt me, and this and that, like how do you assist them, kind of processing this and figuring out what it is, how they interpret it?

Participant: Um, well, I would talk to them and, because I've had successes, not related to sexual assault, but just with emotional traumas, going to centers and psychologists, I would suggest that.

Nicole: That seems really helpful. And then maybe once they kind of had a better understanding of what the event meant to them, make a decision?

Participant: Mmhmm.

Nicole: One difficulty I could perceive with that is like maybe waiting too long, in terms of like, let's say the sexual assault happens and your friend comes to you maybe the next morning and you give this advice and she follows it and goes to talk to a counselor or something. Like, that takes a certain amount of time, and then if she came to the conclusion with the counselor that she did want further action, would that, would it be, would she still be able to go to the police, do you think, or the doctor?

Participant: I think she could. I think it makes it a stickier situation because that brings up the question, you know, in court, or from the boyfriend's lawyer or guy's lawyer, why did you wait? Just, I feel like that diminishes her argument. If it was really that serious, wouldn't you have dealt with it the instant you had been aware? So, I think it makes it more difficult. I don't think, I don't think anyone would turn that down. Like, I don't think anyone would say she doesn't have a case but I think it would create skepticism.

Nicole: Would that factor in at all for your recommendation to her?

Participant: Honestly, I probably wouldn't have thought about it at the time but now that it's a thought in my head, sooner than later's better, I don't know much about it. I'm sure once she talked to like a shelter or like a psychologist, they obviously have dealt with this and they know what the best timeframe, so, I'd feel more comfortable, I'd still suggest it because I'd feel comfortable sending her to more knowledgeable hands.

Nicole: And, then again, there are more immediate people, rather than calling up the psychologist through your HMO or something.

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: And there's more immediate help centers, so, there wouldn't necessarily be a time constraint. What if... What if it was a situation where it was an attempted rape instead of a completed rape? Would you change the type of advice that you gave, at all?

Participant: I don't particularly know why, but I would feel more immediate in the advice, just because, a rape that has happened has happened. A rape that didn't happen might happen. You should do something about it.

Nicole: So you think that like if she weren't going to respond right away, that's kind of putting her more in a...

Participant: Yeah, like impending danger. You realize this is a threat, so do something about it.

Nicole: Do you think that depends on the particular person that attacked her?

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: So how does the type of person make a difference?

Participant: I mean, everyone knows sketchy people, so, I know guys who I don't consider rapists but I know are aggressive and like I wouldn't personally be with them but like if a friend was and she had mentioned that a situation got heated, I would say, well, okay, you need to address this because you just gave me evidence that this might escalate quickly.

Nicole: So, if it's someone that she either comes into contact with on a fairly regular basis or could run into them again?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: It would seem like maybe they were targeting her particularly or do you think that they could go after anybody?

Participant: I think either situation is plausible.

Nicole: So, is it that other people have kind of a concern of him being free to commit the same thing again?

Participant: Um...

Nicole: Is that something that would factor in to your reaction to somebody confiding in you?

Participant: Yeah, I could see that as a threat. Though I know this isn't the best case, I know, the best thought to have about it, but I would be more concerned with dealing with how he is affecting the person who's confiding in me. I'm less concerned about the mass populace of women that he's in contact with. I don't want him to attack them but I don't care that much. I care about dealing with her at the moment.

Nicole: Would it ever occur to you, if a friend disclosed to you a sexual assault scenario, would the thought ever cross your mind that maybe she was making it up or telling you this for a different reason?

Participant: I do know girls who have flat out lied about being raped, or, girl. I would probably judge on the scenario. I don't think it's completely implausible that I would expect them to be lying but, gut reaction, I wouldn't expect them to be lying.

Nicole: Could you tell me about the incident where you knew that someone was lying?

Participant: She was just an acquaintance. She confided at a public forum, it was a retreat, and I had talked to her throughout the, you know, it was like a weekend trip, and then, you shared personal stuff at the end and hers was like, for the past three years I've been telling people that a guy had raped me. She flat out said it then, for attention, and he didn't. That was not the first time she admitted that but she had just started, because it had started to take legal action and she had to back off of that quite a big lie, the past couple of weeks she had started to tell people like no, the scenario's wrong. But, prior to hearing that, I would have believed her.

Nicole: It would never have occurred to you that someone would do that or you would have believed her, specifically?

Participant: It would have occurred to me and there are cases, not necessarily when someone has directly told me, but through gossip when someone has said, even with shady guys, even with guys I wouldn't be surprised at all that they would rape someone, just because I know the girl or because I am familiar with the situation, there are times when I would be skeptical. Or, I would believe that something definitely happened but I wouldn't imagine this Law and Order situation where he came at her from an alley.

Nicole: I don't know how often that actually happens. Do you think that, I mean, going back to possible alternative reasons for telling someone that you had been sexually assaulted when really you hadn't, what are the different reasons that a woman might have for doing that? You mentioned attention.

Participant: The cases where they either accused rape or something similar that I know and that they haven't confided in me personally but that I have heard through social interactions, my guess for all of them was the girl went out that night with not perfectly innocent intentions, got very drunk, did something, and then regretted it the next morning. I think in one of the most prominent cases, she was using that as an excuse, like, okay, so she didn't want to admit that she had done these things. Obviously understandable; it happens to everybody. But she didn't take legal action when her story totally could have been and what she had all said was true, it would have been a piece of cake and it sounds like she'd want to, but she didn't, and my guess is because it didn't really happen. And even if you're trying to present a better light for yourself and trying to make yourself feel better at the situation, convicting someone for something they didn't do would upset anyone emotionally to the point where they wouldn't take legal action, even though they're saying this thing really happened.

Nicole: As someone who has, it sounds, pretty extensive experience with the consequences of disclosing sexual assault in terms of it affecting a woman's reputation, like it might make people question her, look at her actions, and judge her based on what she does and that sort of thing, is that something that would factor into your recommendation for your friend? Would you be concerned about how it could be interpreted by other people if it becomes public?

Participant: Yes, I would be concerned. I mean, like rape's a scarlet letter. People view people differently when drama happens. But all the advice I would give her, none of it's like say this at a public forum, it's all like go to these confidential resources, so I don't think my advice would alter that much. I think that's a thought I already had, it's a subconscious thought.

Nicole: Does that kind of drive the sort of advice you would give?

Participant: Yeah, I would suggest things because I know things are confidential and that's another reason why I maybe wouldn't suggest going to the police because it's not an established, I mean, I trust law enforcement, but I don't necessarily trust them to deal with the situation emotionally.

Nicole: So you think that it could create additional negative consequences?

Participant: Yes, for sure, whether on the guy's end or the girl's end. People will judge both in different ways. Sometimes the way they judge the girl can be positive. Like, girls who lie about rape, obviously there's a lot going on, but one benefit is they are seen as a victim, which can be good. I think people lie in different ways to seem as a victim and sexual assault is just a higher level of that.

Nicole: What are some of the other consequences it could have for the guy or the girl if this were to go to the police and there were an investigation, which could be kind of public?

Participant: Well, I know an unfortunate case, and again, they didn't confide to me. This is just a situation that I know of from high school where the guy was 18 and the girl was 16. Or 15. In my social sphere, it did not seem weird. If you look at the law, it was probably not okay and technically considered pedophilia just because he was 18, which I'm not arguing that, but they dated for a long time, they broke up. After they broke up, the girl's parents, she asked her father to press charges against the guy for pedophilia, even though, and again, I'm not in this situation, but from what I know, everything was consensual. This is a silly situation.

Nicole: Maybe she was angry?

Participant: Yeah, exactly, and now he's marked as a pedophile and hasn't been able to get a real job and he has a college degree.

Nicole: So, she pursued this.

Participant: She pursued this through the end, as far as you can go with legal action, got it on his record. So, it's unfortunate that he was having sex with his girlfriend at the time, who happened to be underage, just because you're in high school and 50% of the school is underage. I think that's a pity. And that's a negative side effect for him. And sexual assault may have happened but I don't know, but that's just one negative effect that can happen if you cry wolf.

Nicole: So, you're potentially affecting someone for the rest of their lives.

Participant: Yes. Just my layman's impression, if something like sexual assault, especially rape, is taken to court, it's not dealt with lightly. No one pays a fine for raping someone.

Nicole: So, it's dealt with very harshly for the accused. Even if it was a situation that wasn't ideal, it might not have been as harsh as the legal system would see it?

Participant: Just my personal opinion, I feel that it is as harsh as the legal system sees it but I think that the victim, girl or guy, may not want it to be dealt with as harshly. As an outsider, I view that rape, even a husband and wife, should be dealt with. I would not scoff at it being dealt with harshly but I can understand that the victim might not want it to be. And that's the fear of taking it legally.

Nicole: Are there any negative consequences for the victim accusing somebody and pursuing legal action?

Participant: Well, it will for sure affect your relationship with the accused. I mean, nobody wants that. Especially if it's a situation where you were close to your attacker because you realize this was wrong and you don't want it to happen again but you still may love them and don't want them to have negative feelings toward you because you're prosecuting them.

Nicole: One scenario I've heard about that seems like it could happen anywhere is like maybe a girl being sexually assaulted by someone who's really popular, like a football player, somebody who's like big man on campus, and then if she does make any complaints against him, then she's shunned by the whole school. If she doesn't make any complaints, it's because she's afraid of that happening.

Participant: I can for sure understand that and I think a lot comes into play, like scholarship money, especially with athletes. Are you gonna take away, I personally think you should take

away his whole college education if you think he was truly in the wrong and should not have attacked you, but I can totally see how that would be a concern, either socially, or, for me, that's just what comes to mind because I rely heavily on my scholarship. I would freak out if someone pressed charges against me and through the public knowledge of this, that was taken away from me. Well, not only have you tainted my name, but I'm not gonna get a college degree now.

Nicole: Do you think it's likely that a school would react, that a woman who disclosed something like that, the people in the school would react really negatively towards her?

Participant: I think it depends on how much she blew it up. I would not be surprised if that happened, if she, not just went through legally but also socially made it a big deal, which I think she has the right to do. So, if I heard a situation where a particular NCAA college kid got so much bad press about this that they took away not only his spot on the team but his place in the college and the money with it.

Nicole: Let's see. What about situations where it's a little more ambiguous, like maybe like a dating situation where a girl invites a guy up to her dorm after a date and they make out or something and then she asks him to stop. Is there any kind of like responsibility that the girl has if he doesn't listen to her and he doesn't stop? Was she kind of leading him on?

Participant: Leading on's a tricky term.

Nicole: It's kind of old fashioned.

Participant: I don't think... I think when the day is done, if she wanted something to be done about that situation, like if he ended up traditionally raping her, like what you see on movies, she can do whatever she wants legally or socially to get some kind of retribution for that. I don't... I can see how the guy would be confused but the moment she says stop, I think that's where the confusion ends. Then she's not leading him on. If she said stop, I don't think she's leading him on.

Nicole: Just to complicate this a little, I read this book recently that made me think about things a little bit differently. It's by this criminologist and he was talking about how sometimes in situations, like intimate situations between a guy and a girl, it's kind of like a series of being told to stop. So, he'll do one thing and she'll say stop and he'll go back to the earlier thing and then he'll try it again and she doesn't say stop anymore. Just from my thinking about it, I can see that happening. So there is this kind of playful request to stop. So how does that factor in to when people know how to stop or are there times when it's too ambiguous to ever say whether something is a sexual assault?

Participant: I think there are cases when it's too ambiguous, especially when two people are close. I think the situation's always stickier when you know the person. And I think that's why there's studies on it. Because it can be too ambiguous.

Nicole: I know. I don't expect you to have an answer to that, it's just something I've been thinking about. It kind of gives a new twist or a more realistic way of thinking about the sort of inviting you to the dorm situation because it's not, it does have a really old fashioned feel if you think about, okay, come up to my dorm room, let's do some heavy petting, now stop and then the guys gets up and leaves. That's not really how situations play out in real life and so I guess if a friend of yours came to you and was describing something like that, would you kind of be reluctant to interpret that as a sexual assault?

Participant: Well, I know this is silly and could never be translated into rules of how to deal with a situation, but there are differences of saying stop and *stop*.

Nicole: So is that something you would ask her about?

Participant: Yeah, I would ask. And I would ask her intentions. When you said stop, did you really mean it? I would ask what she envisioned happening and then what actually happened.

Nicole: Would it matter in that situation if she gave physical resistance, too?

Participant: Yes because I think personally, and in my relationships, what you do physically is what you actually mean, and what you say tends to have less a concrete view of what you're thinking.

Nicole: Can you explain that a little bit more?

Participant: Yeah, okay. I think, in a situation, if a guy came at you, it would be more instinctual to push him away than to say stop. That's harder to track in a situation and harder to compare because if it was only two people in the room. I guess with words, no one's keeping a record of words in the room, but I think actions are more easily interpreted where just because I'm a girl and I think I'm shoving him away, that could seem less aggressive to him but if I had to choose between communicating that I would like you to get away from me, I would push rather than say go away, especially in an instant moment.

Nicole: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I've also heard about scenarios where the woman will say stop or no and then not show any physical resistance. One of the reasons for that that's given is they were afraid to show physical resistance, like even though it wasn't violent at the time, they thought maybe it could become violent.

Participant: In those specific scenarios, I can understand the fear of action-reaction. I push him and he pushes back or not necessarily that he would push back but that creates a platform for him to react at least as aggressively, whether it's physically pushing or sexually aggressive.

Nicole: Does that come into play at all if somebody says well, I said no but I didn't do any physical resistance?

Participant: Personally, I think saying no should always be enough. If you mean it and you, I mean, intelligently approach how you're saying no, I think that should be enough. I think it's wise to also enforce that with physical signs.

Nicole: If possible.

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: And then someone who just ignores all of these signs, that's a clear cut case.

Participant: Yeah, I would, if she's verbally explaining no, clearly and physically, then I think the accused made a conscious decision to ignore them.

Nicole: And in that situation, if a friend were confiding in you about that, would you still give the same sort of advice that you've been giving?

Participant: I don't know why but I feel like in more aggressive situations, I would be more, I would encourage her more to take aggressive action against it. Maybe because there's less debate. There should be less debate in her mind of whether this was appropriate or not so if someone came at me like he pinned me on the bed, I would give her more direct instructions, like go to the police, as opposed to we were feeling around and bad things happened and I wish they didn't. Then I would probably take that as a lighter case and I think you should be able to argue them at the same intensity but in a real world scenario, I would treat them differently.

Nicole: Would you be more likely to advise going to the police because it might be easier for her to...

Participant: Argue it? I think it would be easier for her to argue it but that's not why I would suggest her to go to the police. I would suggest it because I'm guessing there's less confusion in her head of whether she was okay with this or not. If you're in a committed relationship and a bad thing happens but you can understand the confusion, you still don't like it but you are

thinking about it. If he actively went at you when you were saying no, I feel like there's less confusion in her mind of, is this okay or not, did I like this or not. That's why I think there's more of an immediate reaction to go to the police.

Nicole: So, in addition to giving a friend advice, would you do anything to further support them? Maybe accompany them to the police or to the hospital?

Participant: Yeah, I'd for sure do that. If it was really serious and she's completely incapable of acting appropriately at all, I would not feel bad about going to the police. Maybe not straight to the police but either approaching UC, I know there's a psych. I don't know. I would either go to the women's center or some kind of middle man and say I have a friend, I know she was raped, she's not acting but something should be done.

Nicole: So if a situation were very serious, in your opinion, and she weren't following your advice, and she weren't taking these steps...

Participant: I wouldn't feel that guilty about taking them myself. Again, that would vary like, how well do I know her, how well do I know the guy, how well do I know the situation, is this happening a lot.

Nicole: If she came to you a month later or a couple weeks later, would that make you think anything besides that or in addition to that?

Participant: No, I can understand why you wouldn't say something immediately. If it happened to me, I mean, I spent a month thinking about a lot of things that are a lot less serious than sexual assault so I can understand why she'd take a month to decide what she wants to happen.

Nicole: So, if it were a situation where you weren't questioning whether this really happened or not, you pretty much knew that it was serious, would you advise her any differently because of the amount of time that passed?

Participant: Probably not. Really, what can you do though? It's not that I'm not advising her because I think the situation hasn't changed, more just like what can you do?

Nicole: So, in this situation, it wouldn't make a lot of sense to go to the police right away or go to the hospital and get checked out?

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: Is there anything else you might advise her to do instead? You were talking about counseling before.

Participant: I definitely, I probably would suggest some kind of organization that specializes in this before I would suggest going to a counselor just because if it's literally all they do every day, I would think they're the best place for it and then they would probably have better resources of psychological help.

Nicole: That's it for my questions. Do you have anything else you want to add or anything that I'm not thinking about that would be helpful for understanding this sort of thing?

Participant: Not really. I think it was interesting that we assumed it was guy on girl for all of this. I mean, I know that's the majority of cases, but.

Nicole: It doesn't have to be.

Participant: I've never really been confronted with the opposite.

APPENDIX E:

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT 30

Nicole: I'll just start with some background information. How old are you?

Participant: I'm 18.

Nicole: And are you a freshman?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: Are you a US citizen?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: Are you involved in a sorority?

Participant: No.

Nicole: Have you attended any fraternity parties since starting here?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: Is that a frequent thing, like every weekend?

Participant: When I first got here, but after a while, no.

Nicole: Are you in a relationship?

Participant: Yes.

Nicole: Off the top of your head, what's the first sort of situation you could see happening where a friend had been sexually assaulted and was coming to you to tell you what had happened?

What could you see happening to a friend?

Participant: I guess getting drunk at a frat party and getting taken advantage of because she was drunk or even raped, I guess. Now that I'm on campus, that side of campus, maybe a work situation, like a boss taking advantage of his power. Not even a guy, a girl, guys can too, like a woman boss taking advantage of an employer because she has the power and the guy doesn't want to get fired or whatever. And then off campus, it's Cincinnati, so, walking off campus, you could easily just get taken advantage of. Especially being a girl, I could see that happening. My friends, we walk together but there has been situations where my friends have been like, I don't want to be in this situation, I want to go back by myself, and I'm like, you can't go back by yourself, you have to wait or I'll come with you. Other than that, I mean, that's a situation I could see happening.

Nicole: That's interesting you bring up the workplace scenario. No one's ever mentioned that one to me, yet. I just want to think about that for a minute. Let's say it's a female friend of yours and maybe a male boss was doing this workplace sort of thing, and she came to you and was explaining that. Do you think in a situation with the workplace, do you think that would be something where he was touching her and that sort of thing, or would it be more like a verbal...

Participant: Depending on where you work, there's places where you work in a fast food place, I don't think it'd be touching because that's in front of everybody, but I could definitely see it being verbal, like behind closed doors. But if you worked in more of a... like, my friend worked in more of an office type thing where closed doors are a frequent thing, then yeah, I could see it being touching but I mean, it really depends on the environment it's in.

Nicole: Would you advise her to do anything in either of those situations?

Participant: I mean, if it's a temporary job, like fast food, I'd say just quit. It's not worth it and tell the person above your manager. But if it was more of a stable job that she actually enjoyed, then I'd say you need to go above the person and if that person can't do anything, you go straight

to the company because usually the person, they have rules against that and they're not gonna break them.

Nicole: In that kind of situation, it's something that could be handled internally and the company would take it seriously?

Participant: I mean, I would hope so but it's hard to say because it's your word against the person who's above you but I feel like in most situations, workplace harassment, you're not the only one. There's usually another person or if there's not another person that works with you, I bet there was another person that worked before you that had to quit because they couldn't handle it so if you got all those people together, honestly, you could probably, but if it's just you, you can't just keep silent about it. You have to find people who are in the same situation.

Nicole: What about the situation, the other one that you mentioned, being at a party and drinking. What did you say for that?

Participant: I just feel like, being a freshman, I've seen girls get really drunk at parties because this is first year, no parents, freedom, and from what I've seen there hasn't been anything but I feel as if it is the guy's responsibility to say I'm not gonna take advantage of this girl because I'm not drunk but the girl might be. Really, I feel, if my friend was to come and say she got taken advantage of at a frat party, you would go to that fraternity because there are people above the brothers. There's the house mom and there's the people who run the organization. I mean, you have to, as much as it may not be the popular thing to do, that's unacceptable and you'd have to, I'd say, go to the people and most of the time, guys will be on the girl's side for that. They'll be like, hey, that's not cool, you're on probation. I feel like, basically, you need to go up to not even, if it comes this far, I don't know if the fraternities here have authorities or not but you'd have to go to a supervisor because it's just like...

Nicole: You think it's possible though that the fraternity could handle that sort of thing internally and punish the person?

Participant: Yeah. I mean, I think there's ethnic codes they have to follow. That's just a basic rule everyone knows. Don't take advantage of people when they're drunk and I think if anyone was to hear about that, they'd be like, okay, that's not cool, you need to not be in this situation, you need to leave.

Nicole: What if it were a situation where your friend's at a party drinking and maybe she went off with somebody and they were kissing or whatever and she told him to stop and then he didn't stop and he ended up forcing himself on her. Is that the same kind of taking advantage when you're drunk or is that a little bit different?

Participant: I think, to me, it's not the same thing. I think if you are fully aware of what's happening and that is still happening, that situation is a lot different because you are fully aware of it and you can say stop but if he does take advantage of her like that, I think mentally he's messed up but I mean, she really needs to go to somebody. I don't think she should put herself in that situation, either. She should realize that I'm fully aware of what's going on, I don't know this person, I shouldn't be put in this situation. I've always learned not to be put in that situation. Just don't go off with somebody you don't know. If she knew the person, that's a whole different story.

Nicole: We could say it's somebody she knows a little bit from school.

Participant: Then I'd just say you need to tell somebody who can do something because if you don't, he's just gonna keep doing that to other girls and it's just going to be an ongoing thing until somebody actually stops him because if he's willing to do that with you, imagine somebody he knows better or someone he doesn't know in general.

Nicole: Who's the somebody that you would recommend that she go to? Is that the same kind of fraternity person that's in charge there or would you say go to the hospital or the police or...

Participant: Just from what I hear, I would say go to the authorities, but I mean, in those situations, it's really hard to say because if you could get the whole fraternity in trouble for that and if it's one person, I'd go to the person who's in charge of it all and have her or him handle that and then maybe go and talk it out. If it's multiple people in a multiple fraternity, then I'd go to the authorities. It's just, you've gotta be careful not to get one person in trouble and get the whole people in trouble because I mean, they're letting that go on in their house but maybe they don't know about it. I would say just go to the person who is in charge first and then if they don't work anything out, then go to the authorities, because it's easier to do it that way.

Nicole: What do you think the person in charge would do? Would they want to kick the guy out or something like that?

Participant: I would say so. I mean, I would hope they wouldn't be okay with, they would understand that this is what's happening, but it's hard to say because I don't know how they work really and I don't know if they would be like you can't do this anymore or whatever. In that situation, then I would go to the authorities if no one's gonna do anything.

Nicole: If they did kick him out of the fraternity, do you think that would be a sufficient punishment or that it would keep him from ever doing it again?

Participant: I would think so because I feel like when you're in, when guys are in fraternities, they have this certain power to them, like I'm boss around here, and I feel like it would knock him down a couple pegs and be like I really messed up, I basically lost all or a lot of my friends from doing this, I don't think I'd do it again. But it's really hard to say because I don't know how they think.

Nicole: If it were a party but either not at a fraternity or else at a fraternity but the guy that she was accusing wasn't a fraternity guy...

Participant: Then I would go to the authorities because he doesn't belong to any certain group that he could get punished or kicked out of. If it was at a party, I would definitely say you need to go to somebody that can do something because that's the worst thing is keeping it in because he's gonna do it again. He did it one time, he'll do it again. I'd definitely say that, you need to tell somebody.

Nicole: Do you think that she'd be reluctant at all to go to the police?

Participant: Not willing?

Nicole: Yeah, so she comes to you and tells you about this sort of scenario and you say I think you might want to go to the police and what if she were like well, I just don't know. Would you try to convince her more?

Participant: I would. I mean, it's really hard to say because if I was in that situation, I'd be reluctant, too, because I feel like I don't want to make it a bigger deal than it actually is. But it is a big deal but when you're in that situation, I feel like you'd be like, oh, I'm almost embarrassed about it. I feel like it's our duty as women to look out for each other and if you're being sexually harrassed or taken advantage of, then you need to really, just for the good of women, go and stop that person. Especially if he goes here. I mean, if he's an outside person who doesn't go here, then report him but if he goes here, make sure you do because he can get in trouble for that and he can get kicked off campus in general, so if you can do something about it, then do something about it.

Nicole: That's an argument you might make to her?

Participant: Yeah.

Nicole: Do you think that would help convince her? Is that something that...

Participant: I think she'd be a little nervous to. Honestly, I would say go to the campus police before the Cincinnati police because if it's a campus problem, if it happened on campus, then it's a campus problem. Go to them because they can handle it. I wouldn't want him to get in trouble with the whole city of Cincinnati because, I mean, that's a lot of just extra things to handle. The campus police I feel like would do a better job of reporting it and telling the president here, admissions or whatever. Cincinnati police might not handle it the same way. They might be like well, go to jail or whatever, get charged with something, but here I feel like they'd actually be like we'll tell somebody, we'll send out an alert. I just feel like it's better to come here if that happens because they'll be able to do something right away. Cincinnati police, you'd have to go around and fill out paperwork and here I feel like it's easier.

Nicole: I see what you mean. You said you think she might be reluctant to report it to any kind of authority maybe because she felt a sort of like embarrassment?

Participant: I feel like a lot of times women or just victims in general think it's their fault because, how could I let myself be put in that situation? Because a lot of the times it is that you are put in that situation that you don't just get taken off the street most of the time. Most of the time you know the person, you have a relationship with that person in some way, and I feel like a lot of the times they're a little bit embarrassed that they put themselves in that situation but they have to realize that their intent when they were put in that situation was not the intent that happened. They really did not think about all that could happen and it's just a heat of the moment thing. You're like, okay, maybe we'll just make out or whatever, but the guy is not thinking that. Especially being in college, hooking up with somebody does not mean the same thing as hooking up when you're in high school and a lot of times girls don't really think about what guys think. Having two older brothers, I kind of have an understanding that guys think differently than girls. That's an obvious thing, but most guys are decent enough not to do that, but there are those guys who just honestly think the girl wants it. But I think the problem that happens is a lot of times girls don't make it known they don't want it. They will say it and then when they're like... Say my friend texts somebody and is like, I'm willing to do this, but then in the moment she's like, I'm not ready for this, but the guy thinks she is and doesn't say it or says it but he doesn't realize it, because she originally said she was or I think that's when you get in trouble so I think girls, before they're put in that situation, they need to lay it down and be like I'm not gonna do this.

Nicole: That's interesting you bring up texting in advance. Is that something that people do?

Participant: Yeah, a lot of times.

Nicole: Sexting?

Participant: Yeah, and basically being a tease and that's when girls get taken advantage of, is because guys think that they want one thing when really girls don't want it, they just say they want it. They're all talk but no walk.

Nicole: Maybe they're just being flirty and they don't realize that the other person's taking it very seriously.

Participant: Exactly. So that's when I would honestly just give my friends advice. I still do give my friends advice, before you text a guy, don't make it too serious because you're gonna be put in a situation maybe one day where, just don't say anything that you wouldn't do because guys think you want one thing and really you don't.

Nicole: Let's say that it's somebody that people knew from campus, your friend and the guy are people from school, and if she went to the police and they did an investigation or something,

then people could find out about it, just through word of mouth. Do you think that could affect her reputation at all?

Participant: I would think it would affect his more than anything because 99% of the time, everyone will be on the person's side who got taken advantage of because they feel bad for them. The only people that will probably stick with the guy is their close friends but even still. I think the only reputation it might give her is that, don't, try not to get too serious with her because she... I mean, it depends what the guy said or if he's like, oh, she said that but... Honestly, I don't think it will affect her reputation too much, just maybe people will feel kind of sorry for her, but it will affect the guy's reputation a lot, so really it's kind of like a he said/she said kind of thing. You really don't know what happened so you can't really make judgment off what people are saying besides the facts.

Nicole: What if she's describing that same kind of situation, at a party, doesn't really matter if it's fraternity related, but drinking and maybe she says no and he still forces her to. Forces himself on her. And she came to you and was describing that same exact thing but the guy was a friend of yours, too?

Participant: That would be a really difficult situation because you'd have to believe one person over the other, and if you were better friends with the guy, you'd be like, I don't know who to pick, but obviously you don't joke about that stuff and you don't lie about that stuff, but sometimes unfortunately girls do. I mean, they over-exaggerate stuff. I know for a fact, I know people who have over-exaggerated about that stuff. Really that didn't happen but they made it sound much worse than it was. I think I would listen to one side of the story then listen to the other side of the story and kind of just pick out the similarities and figure out what actually happened, and if my friend did come up to me and say that, I think I'd say I want to sit down with both of you together. I mean, as much as it would be hard, it would be better to figure out what to do before, I mean, if the guy was like I'm really, really sorry, this is never gonna happen again... But if the guy's like whatever, I didn't do that, then it's obvious he did it. But if the guy apologizes, maybe I would say you probably do need to report this but still you need to be civil about it. But if the guy is being rude about it and doesn't want to, then I would be like report it, don't care, I'd cut off the friendship because if that happened to her, that can happen to me. I think that's a lot of the time what girls need to do. Even still, I don't know what I would do in that situation to be honest. That would be a really hard situation.

Nicole: What would be hard? Deciding what to recommend to her?

Participant: Just because I wouldn't want my friend to get in a lot of trouble, like the guy to get in a lot of trouble because if he went here, he could possibly get kicked out, but I mean it just would be so hard to pick who to believe because, like I said, girls a lot of times make up situations or say stuff that really didn't happen just because in their mind it happened at the time. That is the one situation that I hope never happens because I don't know what to do about that situation. I would say go to another person.

Nicole: She should go to another friend?

Participant: Go to another friend who's not friends with the person and figure out what to do because I just couldn't do that. It'd be so hard.

Nicole: I understand. What about if it's a situation with being out somewhere and drinking and someone put something in your friend's drink?

Participant: I would definitely say you need to report this right away.

Nicole: As soon as she told you about it, you'd want her to go to the police?

Participant: Yeah, definitely. I would say go to campus police and Cincinnati police because campus police, they could send out a warning saying don't do that...

Nicole: For the women to watch out?

Participant: Yeah, for the women to watch out. Because they send out things. And then for the Cincinnati police, I would say that is, they should be charged for that because although it is the same thing as taking advantage of somebody, that involves drugs and that involves illegal things and honestly that should be punished because that's illegal to do. I mean, it's illegal to take advantage of somebody, but it's also, that's like twice the things that you shouldn't do.

Nicole: What if she couldn't remember a lot of what happened? She wasn't sure who the person was and that sort of thing. Do you think that the police would be able to investigate that?

Participant: If she remembers the place it happened at, then she should go back to that place and figure out who was invited or who saw something. I'd say go to the police right away but then I'd be like you need to figure out what happened. If it happened in an area she's not comfortable with, I'd say just report it and have the police watch out like if another report comes in. I mean, it's really hard to say what I could do in that situation for her because I know as much as she did, so I think you'd just have to be, I don't even know, to be honest. That situation's kind of iffy but I know it does happen because people do black out and I think you should never go out by yourself so if you're with people who saw it happen or with people who knew the person or saw the person, I'd meet up with those people and be like can you please tell me everything you know. The people you know probably know a person at that party who knows that person who knows that person so eventually you'd find out but I think that my word of advice would be, to anybody, just don't go out by yourself because you're gonna end up, you could be put in a situation like that.

Nicole: Do you know any kinds of specific tips, things that could help you prevent getting your drink drugged and that sort of thing?

Participant: My mom told me right before I left, she's like don't ever ever ever ever put your drink down. She's like, have it in your hands at all times. She's like, don't ever let somebody give you a drink. She's like, unless you see where it comes from, do not take it, and if it's in a can, okay, that's fine, just don't put it down because it's in a sealed can. I'd say for that situation, pairs of four even. Just don't go out with less than two people because that person could also be taken advantage of like that. So, I'd say go in groups, don't ever put down your drink and just be smart about it. Know your limit, too, because a lot of people don't know their limit. Don't even get to figure out what your limit is. Just be safe.

Nicole: So the stuff with watch out, don't take a drink from somebody, don't put your drink down, keep it in your sight all the time, is that the sort of thing that you think that most women know?

Participant: Not from what I've seen around here. A lot of people just put it down and will take pictures, you know? From what I see, a lot of people still do the can stuff, but they still put it down, which is stupid because you need to have it in your hand or don't drink because if it's a matter of oh, I don't want to get caught carrying this, then don't drink because the guy could easily, I keep saying guy but girls get taken advantage more than guys, but a person could put something in your drink and you not know, just because you know where it came from, just because you saw it, does not mean the person, when you put it down, does not mean someone's gonna slip something in there. I mean, I'd just say have it on you at all times. Don't ever ever put it down.

Nicole: So, it seems to you like most people don't really know to follow those rules?

Participant: No.

Nicole: If somebody did know those rules or maybe a friend of yours, you'd talked about this before, because it sounds to me like something people might just mention to each other before a party or something like that, so if a woman did know these rules but then didn't follow them, and was sexually assaulted, do you think that it makes her any more responsible, like she should have been following that advice?

Participant: I mean, I don't think you can, you never should blame somebody for getting assaulted at all, I just think that she should learn from her lesson. Obviously, it's not at all her fault. She probably just forgot or she wasn't thinking, but I think the next time, she should know not to do that next time. I think it's not her fault at all, it's just hard to say. There's certain times where girls, or people, just need to be smart about things and they're not and a lot of times that's when they get taken advantage of. Just trusting somebody too much is another thing, too. They just need to be safe. Don't ever trust anybody that your parents wouldn't trust. It's really not her fault, I just think she should have been thinking a little more.

Nicole: But it doesn't mean that the guy has less responsibility or anything like that?

Participant: No, no. It's all his fault so it's just, hopefully, it will be a warning to all.

Nicole: What if your friend came to you and she was in a relationship but she wasn't ready yet to have sex with her boyfriend and he was kind of pressuring her and maybe nagging her and saying if you don't have sex with me, I'm gonna dump you or something like that, and she kind of gave in to that even though she still didn't feel like she wanted to. Is that something that you would consider sexual assault?

Participant: Yeah, definitely. These situations happen all the time, I feel. Not really to anybody I specifically know, but it's like you hear about them. I'd say to her to break up with him and then she'll use that excuse, but he loves me. Well, if he loved you then he wouldn't have pressured you into having sex with him and he wouldn't have said he was ready until you're ready. I'd say break up with him and you need to tell, honestly, go to his parents, go to your parents, and then go to the police. Let his parents know what happened.

Nicole: That's a good punishment.

Participant: I mean, if his parents aren't, like he lives with other people, I mean, tell someone who is an authority figure to him because they're gonna make sure he gets punished for it. The cops are gonna make sure he gets punished for it and your parents will definitely give you the better advice and say break up with him. If it comes to the point where he's abusive towards it, a lot of times that's what happens is women get forced to have sex and they're like I want to break up and the guy becomes abusive towards it and that's when it gets difficult because women don't want to report it and I'd say as much as it's gonna be scary, I'd still say tell his parents and tell the cops. I mean, they're gonna do something about it.

Nicole: And then for a situation if it was more physical and physically forcing her to, even though it's a boyfriend, you would still recommend the same sort of thing?

Participant: Yeah, just because he's your boyfriend doesn't mean that he cares about you. If he really loved you or really cared about you, he would not have done that. A lot of women don't see that and I think it's sad they do because people just, parents, I feel like, don't warn their children about that when they're starting dating. They're just like, okay, be safe, but they don't warn about, and especially being in college now and having a boyfriend, you might not know a lot about him. He might have put on a total front for you and...

Nicole: They usually do.

Participant: Exactly. He could have put a total front on for you and then you find out who he really is once you start having sex. I went to a Catholic school so we got the whole sex talk all the time and a lot of the situations they were talking about were like you'll be in love and you'll start having sex and then it will start getting abusive and then he'll start forcing himself and you won't want to do it anymore and he'll still force it. That's when it kind of gets tricky because you do want to be with him and you just don't like who he's become and so I say you need to just go to the cops with that one. Too many of those go undocumented and too many people don't tell enough and then it ends up happening to the next girlfriend, to the next person.

Nicole: It's interesting that you bring that up and relate it to a situation where the boyfriend and the girlfriend already were sexually active because a lot of people have a really hard time trying to understand how can there be sexual assault in a relationship where there's already sex happening and it sounds like you have more information about how that's possible than a lot of people.

Participant: Yeah, I just, coming from a school that taught that and my parents taught that and I don't know how much I'm allowed to tell you but I have a boyfriend of four years...

Nicole: Everything is completely confidential.

Participant: Alright. I mean, I don't, I know what I would do in that situation. I would not think about his feelings. I would think about my feelings and that's why I feel like I'm more able to understand what it's like, how I feel about it, because it's like if you love somebody so much then you're not gonna want to hurt them and even if you are doing that stuff, then you just have to end it because I just feel like if I was put in that situation right now, I'd be done. That's another thing that I've noticed, too, is that girls will be in relationships for a really long time and then it will start getting abusive and they'll be like we were so happy when it first started but it's like people change and if people change then they change. You're not the same person you started dating three years ago...

Nicole: Especially when you're teenagers.

Participant: Exactly. Being in college, I've noticed a lot of relationships change.

Nicole: It's a whole different lifestyle.

Participant: Exactly and it's crazy, like I dated my boyfriend all through high school so I knew all about him and then when we got here, we grew apart and then we got back together but for the first couple weeks we were just like we can't do this and it was so weird because I got to see how other girls felt, like guys coming up to them, and it was just weird and you feel like, especially, oh, guys are paying attention to me, but it's like girls need to realize that guys do that to everybody. You're not the first person they told were beautiful, you're not the same person, and I think in college you really just need to realize that, like in high school, fine, you can have boyfriends who don't respect you but are kind of jerks to you because then you can just break them off, it's not going to be a big thing, but when you're in college, this is where it actually starts, where relationships can actually mean something and I think girls forget that a lot of times and they'll just date random guys who will take advantage of them, who will hurt them or harass them, and you have to keep in mind that... I always learned that when you're about to go out with somebody or be in a relationship with somebody, can you imagine yourself being with them forever? Because if you can't, if they're jerks to you, if they're rude to you, if they take advantage of you, then they're not material that you should be dating. I just think girls need to be safer. I mean, yes, it is the guy's fault most of, like all the time, but girls need to realize they cannot put themselves in that situation and if they do, they can't pretend, I know this sounds bad, but they can't pretend they didn't see it coming because it's like you put yourself in a situation with a guy

you didn't know. You don't know anything about him and it's gonna end up happening. Something bad's gonna end up happening.

Nicole: One piece of advice I've always appreciated, not that this is related to the interview, just to what you're talking about, is to look at how the guy treats his mother and I think that's proven to be true.

Participant: Exactly and the guy's sister, too, especially his sister because you have to love your mom, but your sister you can be as rude as you want to.

Nicole: It goes with what you're saying, maybe it shows you how they'll treat you after they've kind of taken off their mask and you get to know them a little bit better.

Participant: That's why in college you really have to be careful because you don't know the person. They could literally just be totally something new in college because no one knows them, but I mean, and that's what I think happens.

Nicole: Let me kind of switch the subject though. You mentioned this a while ago just as a sort of possibility. Women who say they were sexually assaulted but they're actually just saying that for a different sort of reason. What are the different kinds of reasons that someone might have for saying that?

Participant: Well, attention, a lot of the time is attention. Or if she's unhappy with herself, she'll be like okay, maybe people will pay attention to me. A lot of times it's just a cry for help because they're unhappy with the relationship or they're unhappy with that friendship they had or they can't, they're a little bit drunk or a little bit tipsy and they can't put all the pieces together of what happened. Really nothing happened, it's just a lot of times girls will just assume the worst and I mean, really what is the definition of sexual assault if you think about it? Is it full on? I mean, people will think a guy forcing himself to kiss you as sexual assault, especially in the workplace. Yes, it's sexual assault but it's not... It's a guy just being a jerk a lot of the times when they think that happens.

Nicole: How often do you think it happens though where a woman says that she was raped and she's actually saying it for these other reasons? Do you think that's a frequent event?

Participant: Oh, yeah, yeah. When she has sex and she regrets it or if she wasn't ready but she thought she was and she kind of went with it. I mean, technically that is, but she didn't voice her opinion.

Nicole: Do you think those sorts of things do happen often?

Participant: Oh yeah, I personally know people who have said that.

Nicole: Can you tell me the story of that?

Participant: I've just heard from, okay, my one good friend from back when we were in grade school, we were really young, but she was on a Disney cruise, which was really weird, and she had gotten, we were really young but it was old enough to realize what she's doing, she had gone on a Disney cruise and some guy had offered her something to smoke, which made no sense to me in my mind, and then...

Nicole: How old was she?

Participant: She's a year younger than us but she's in our grade so she was like 13, so it was kind of ridiculous, but she said that she was raped on a cruise but she told us that she had just gotten, she had had oral sex or something like that, but she lied to us saying that she had gotten raped, but she then still continued to talk to this guy like nothing was a big deal. And then she came out and said she had sex and we were like well, what happened? Because none of this makes sense to us. First you said that you did this one thing and then you still continue to talk to

him and then you said you got raped. I don't know the story of what really happened even today because she kept adding on to it.

Nicole: It kept changing?

Participant: Yeah, it was like she had all these psychological problems from it but I think she really just felt like she couldn't do anything about it and it was just like, we don't know what happened, so did you or did you not? And then I just hear stories all the time of girls just regretting it and being like oh, I got raped. You know, underclassmen when I was in high school. There was this girl, she said she got raped but it was really, this guy doesn't even talk to girls, let alone, like what situation were you in because none of the pieces made sense. A lot of the times, pieces just don't make sense and you're like okay, that makes no sense to me.

Nicole: With the friend in the Disney cruise, did she ever talk to her parents or anything or just to you guys?

Participant: Well, what ended up happening was we kept saying don't talk to this guy, this is weird. To back up the story, at first she didn't tell us anything that happened. She just said she was talking to this guy and she liked him so much and then she's acting in a really bad mood at this sleepover we had and then she told us that she had woken up with pain down there and was like I don't know what happened, she didn't know. But she's like he just fingered me or whatever. We're like okay, that's a little... okay. She wasn't gonna tell her parents and then she was on the phone with another person and the way her house was set up, what you could hear in the basement was what you could hear on the level floor, so she was talking to her friend on the phone in the basement and her parents overheard her and then they talked to her. And then she started getting all these psychological, she had no problem until her parents found out, so that's what I think happened is her parents found out and then she was like oh... But I don't talk to her anymore because she became kind of like weird and mental about it and then she moved. A lot of the things that happened, she's a military kid, too, so she already had a lot of issues with that and making friends and I think it just all broke down at once.

Nicole: You felt like you couldn't really... Well, first of all you were very young. But, second of all, with her kind of changing the stories, it's not like you really even knew what to tell her to do?

Participant: Exactly. I actually, when I was in seventh grade, one of my really good friends, her parents got a divorce when she was really young and then her dad ended up engaged to this one girl who we knew, the families knew each other and my family knew them and we all knew each other. We were all really good friends and they ended up getting engaged and living together and altogether they had five kids and my one friend's stepbrother, at the time or whatever, he let his friend rape my friend.

Nicole: What?

Participant: If that makes sense. My friend's stepbrother had a friend over and the stepbrother's friend raped my friend. We were really, really young and she didn't tell anybody until a year after it happened and I was trying to consult my friend, the second girl who I knew, and I told my friend about the first friend, and the first friend was kind of upset that I did that, that I told her, but I was like, she's going through the same thing you were, you need to talk to each other about it because it's like I don't know what you two are going through and I, for a fact, know the first one actually did happen because she told me right after it happened but I was so young, I was like I don't know what to tell you about that. Tell your parents.

Nicole: That's the Disney cruise one?

Participant: No, that's the one with the stepbrother. That was seventh grade. And then the next one we were in eighth grade. I was like, for the first one, I would have said go to the cops or whatever.

Nicole: If it were now, as an adult?

Participant: Yeah, but I was so young. And then the second one, you couldn't have done anything. It was on a Disney cruise, you don't even know the guy, he was from a different state.

Nicole: In the first instance, did she talk to her parents eventually?

Participant: Her parents got divorced and her mom was super weird but she told her mom but her mom didn't say anything and then her mom kind of just was like, but then it took her a while to tell her dad. She told her dad after the fact because they ended up breaking up, the dad and the stepmom, they ended up breaking up and then she told her dad. Because she didn't want to ruin what her dad had but in reality the daughter came first.

Nicole: You recommended that she talk to her parents but she didn't even say anything until a year later?

Participant: Yeah, she didn't really tell anybody until a while after it happened and it was such a hard situation because in the end, somebody was gonna end up getting hurt and it was like she really just didn't want her parents, I think she didn't want her dad to have to sacrifice a relationship because it pretty much was the stepbrother's fault. He let it happen but it wasn't him particularly, it was the friend.

Nicole: I can't even imagine being 12 or 13 and having a friend tell me that. I wouldn't know what to say.

Participant: It was such a hard thing to talk about because I was like, I'm 13, I don't even know what you're talking about, really. I didn't know the severity of it. I didn't know how bad it was at the time.

Nicole: I'm not sure if you mentioned this at all, what about getting STD tests or pregnancy tests, is that something you'd recommend that a friend do?

Participant: My friends obviously didn't have their period when this happened but now, yeah, I'd be like you need to get tested. I would just say no matter what.

Nicole: That's something you'd think of to recommend in one of those situations?

Participant: I would definitely say an STD test. Maybe a pregnancy test but I mean, I would pray that a guy would be smart enough not to do that but I don't know how guy's minds work like that so I'd say get an STD test but a lot of times when you get those tests anyway, you know when you go to the hospital, most of the time they do that anyway, so I would definitely say you need to get tested.

Nicole: I can't remember if you mentioned this either, psychological counseling. Is that something you would suggest that a friend do?

Participant: Just because I've seen the effects, I'd say yes but I mean, it really depends how she takes it. If she takes it like really, really hard, I'd say yes, but if she's like okay, I'm really upset about it, I'd be like... It's just so hard to say because it's like what can they talk about? They can just talk about what friends can talk about unless it's really, really bad. But I mean, I would say maybe talk to somebody that's experienced this or who has been through it because that's the best way.

Nicole: Maybe a support group?

Participant: Exactly, not really a professional.

Nicole: What about the timeframe since it happened? So in all of the circumstances we've been talking about, it seems like this could have happened the night before or maybe the same day.

Would it make a difference at all to you if she brought it up and it happened a couple weeks ago or a month ago?

Participant: I think there kind of is a timeframe because I mean, if it happened the night before, you can specifically remember every single detail if you weren't intoxicated but you probably can remember every single specific detail. But weeks later, you might not remember everything or you might try to block it out mentally so I'd still say you need to talk to somebody but I think there really is a timeframe for that stuff. If I was in that situation, I'd tell somebody right away. I'd tell. But I think if you just keep it inside you and you're gonna eventually just try to block it out of your mind and you're not gonna remember everything that you remember a month from now in full detail. You might remember the place it happened but you might not remember the time, you might not remember everything about it. You might not remember the date of it happening but you might just remember it happened at this general time.

Nicole: Would you recommend that she speak to the police about it still?

Participant: Yeah, but, I mean, I think even still, they might not do anything right away. Especially here. If you say it happened three months ago, they're not gonna report it as much as they would report it the night before.

Nicole: It might change the way that they investigated?

Participant: Exactly.

Nicole: But it wouldn't change what you recommended? Or maybe you would discuss that?

Participant: I feel like you could tell the cops and they might have heard of other situations in the past month or so of it happening again and you can say this is obviously the same person but it's really hard to say when the timeframe is because most of the time you do mentally block stuff out of your mind. I'd say it still would be just as bad to hear it but how much empathy I'd feel would be so much more if I heard it the night before or the night it happened or the night after it happened or even the week after it happened. If it was months after, it'd be hard to talk about but it probably wouldn't be as hard because you'd kind of accept it, that it happened, and it's kind of okay. You'd move on, and the person that it happened to, not moved on, but would be like, I accept this, this is what happened, there's not a thing I can do about it. But you could have if you would have just told the day it happened.

Nicole: What about if a woman invites a guy up to her dorm after a date and she makes out with him or something and then tells him to stop. If he doesn't stop, is that kind of understandable? Was she leading him on?

Participant: It really depends on what the situation is. If you know the guy and you've done other stuff with him before and you're like, no, I don't want to, that kind of is leading him on because I'm sure if you've done stuff before and then you say that, it is leading him on because why this time? What the heck, why this time? But if you don't know the person, that is really bad to do and I would say you need to tell somebody. It just, really, I think it is really bad to do that and it is taking advantage of somebody. You're not really leading him on but he could be thinking, it's the heat of the moment thing, he could be like, this is weird. Different mindsets.

Nicole: I guess that's it for my questions. The only other one I was gonna ask was whether you ever had a friend confide in you something similar to this and it sounds like yes. You told me about those two times. Was there any other similar situation?

Participant: Hold on. I'm just trying to think back. Actually my best friend, she's fine now, she doesn't have any issues, but her mom had a boyfriend at the time, she was so young she doesn't even really remember a lot of it, but she spent the night at his house and she felt really weird in the morning and she thinks something happened while she was asleep.

Nicole: She told you this a long time after?

Participant: She was 8 at the time and she told us in 8th grade. She told us the night it happened.

Nicole: You have a lot of these experiences with friends telling you stuff.

Participant: Yeah, and I would hope to be a good advice giver. I have a lot of empathy for people and I can kind of feel how they feel, but it's like, if I don't know every detail, I can't give you advice, because you could be missing the most important detail that you think is minor.

Nicole: I really don't know what kind of advice a kid can give a kid in middle school. That's it for my questions. Do you have anything else that you wanted to add or suggest?

Participant: No, this wasn't bad. I thought I was gonna be asked about mine, like nothing like this has ever happened but I have friends, okay.

**APPENDIX F:
PSYCHOLOGY SUBJECT POOL RECRUITMENT INFORMATION**



Department of Psychology UC Psychology Research Participation System

Nicole Lasky (Researcher)

Close **System Message:** Study updated.

Study Information

Study Name **Sexual Assault Incident Characteristics and Confidante Responses
Standard (lab) study**

Study Type This is a standard lab study. To participate, sign up, and go to the specified location at the chosen time.

Visible to participants: Approved

Study Status

Inactive study: Does not appear on list of available studies

Duration 60 minutes

Credits 4 Credits

Description The purpose of this research study is to examine factors that contribute to encouraging sexual assault survivors to report their victimization to police and/or to seek medical or psychological services. Students will be interviewed about how they would advise a survivor based on specific factors and characteristics of sexual assault incidents.

Eligibility Requirements The research study is open to full-time undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati's Main Campus, ages 18-24, who are comfortable speaking English.

Restrictions

Prescreen Restrictions YES

Additional Study Information

Automatic Credit Credit will be automatically granted for timeslots where no action was taken,

Granting that are more than 48 hours old. Automatic credit grant is done once per day.

Participant Sign-
Up Deadline 24 hours before the study is to occur

IRB Approval
Code 2013-3624

Researcher Information

Researcher Nicole Lasky
Lasky Nicole

Principal Investigator
413-519-4423

APPENDIX G:
Adult Consent Form for Research
University of Cincinnati
Department: School of Criminal Justice
Principal Investigator: Nicole Lasky
Faculty Advisor: Bonnie Fisher

Title of Study: Sexual Assault Incident Characteristics and Confidante Responses

Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?

The person in charge of this research study is Nicole Lasky of the University of Cincinnati (UC) School of Criminal Justice. Professor Bonnie Fisher is guiding this research.

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this research study is to examine factors that contribute to encouraging sexual assault survivors to report their victimization to police and/or to seek medical or psychological services.

Who will be in this research study?

About 40 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if:

- You are between the ages of 18 and 24.
- You are enrolled full-time as an undergraduate at the University of Cincinnati's Main Campus.
- You are comfortable speaking English.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?

You will be asked to participate in an interview. It will take about one hour. The interview will take place in a private reserved room in the Tangeman University Center. The interview will be audio-recorded. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate.

Are there any risks to being in this research study?

You may be exposed to minimal emotional distress by being in this research study.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?

You will not get any benefit because of being in this study. However, being in this study may help researchers understand types of advice given to sexual assault survivors.

What will you get because of being in this research study?

To thank you for your participation, you will receive Subject Pool credit in accordance with the

Department of Psychology's SONA system.

Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?

If you do not want to take part in this research study you may leave at any time. You may choose to end the interview or refuse to answer particular questions.

How will your research information be kept confidential?

If you participate, everything you say will be kept confidential, meaning only the research team will know what you said. Anything said on the audio-recording will be transcribed within several weeks and then the recording will be destroyed. We will keep the recording in a locked cabinet in a locked office at the University of Cincinnati until that occurs. Your signed consent document will be kept in a separate locked cabinet and will be destroyed three years after the study is completed. No personal information, such as phone numbers or email addresses, will be collected or kept. The data from this research may be published but you will not be identified by name. Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes. The data cannot be used for any other purpose, including legal action.

What are your legal rights in this research study?

Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you have questions about this research study?

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Nicole Lasky at 413-519-4423 or laskynv@mail.uc.edu. Or, you may contact Professor Bonnie Fisher at 513-556-5828 or fisherbs@ucmail.uc.edu.

What if you have any complaints about this research study?

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?

No one has to participate in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. If you decide to participate, you may end the interview at any time for any reason. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you do not want to participate, that is entirely okay.

Agreement:

I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated



consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

BY TAKING PART IN THIS INTERVIEW, YOU INDICATE YOUR CONSENT FOR YOUR ANSWERS TO BE USED IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR REFERENCE.