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How Police Investigators View Credibility of Victims of Sexual Assault Crimes

LaKesha Richele Boone
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Walden University
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Abstract

How Police Investigators View Credibility of Victims of Sexual Assault Crimes

by

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MPA, Albany State University, 2014

MS, Albany State University, 2010

BS, Johnson C. Smith University, 2007

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy & Administration

Walden University

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a sensitive topic, and research has become increasingly popular. Most literature focuses on stigma, attitudes, and perceptions that victims and law enforcement have about each other. Law enforcement officers are responsible for making charging decisions based on their investigations and ways by which they determine credibility and reliability of victims. It was unclear what criteria law enforcement officers use to ascertain relevant flaws in victim character and credibility. The purpose of this study was to explore how law enforcement officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. The feminist legal, just world, and rape myth acceptance theories were the theoretical frameworks for this study. Using a generic qualitative approach and thematic analysis, six participants were interviewed to gather information on personal beliefs underlying views of investigators about sexual assault victims and effects of training, police subculture, and other factors influencing police perceptions of victims of sexual assault. Findings suggested consistency of victim testimonies, victim reputation, and mental health were significant factors in terms of assessing credibility. Additionally, decisions were mainly guided by law enforcement officers' perception of victim characteristics and demeanor. This study provided several implications for positive social change. Law enforcement agencies can use these results to re-evaluate their procedures and policies surrounding sexual assault investigations. For victims, this study can be used as a tool when meeting with state and federal legislators to improve legislation for victims' rights in their quest for justice.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my support system. To my husband, W. Cedric Boone, thank you for being a constant source of support, encouragement, and motivation. Even when I felt like giving up, you would not allow me to. You would always remind me that no matter how challenging it gets, we are in this journey together and to never quit. You are my muse and guiding light. I thank you for making sure that I never felt lonely in life and seeing this adventure to the end. I love you with all of my heart.

To my parents, Larry and Beatrice Tinson, you all have made many sacrifices in order for me to be successful in life. You both have taught me to pray when things get rough and to trust that God has already worked it out for my good.

To my sister, Vontressia Bryant, thank you for always encouraging me when I felt discouraged. When I had doubts, you would shout, you got this. You have always reminded me that I am beauty and brains. Thanks for always sticking by me through thick and thin.

To my sunshine, Cameron, you are thus far my greatest accomplishment. You have made me stronger, wiser, a better person, and more fulfilled than I can ever imagine. I do not ever want you to doubt yourself. You are very powerful, capable, and deserving of every opportunity in this world. Always believe in yourself because I do. I do not every want you to give up on your dreams. Never forget whose son you are and that whatever you go through in life, I will be there. I will always love you.

To my closest friends who have supported me throughout this process and those who participated in this study. Words can never express how much I appreciate each and

every one of you. A special shout out to my brother from another mother, Dr. Robert Lee Ausby Jr. You are the best “acting chair” and editor that I can ever ask for. Thank you for all of the encouragement and for reminding me that this process is not a sprint but a marathon.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all of the men and women in blue. Thank you for your service.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Sexual assault is a sensitive and controversial topic that is very common in the United States. Historically, some sexual assault victims have been treated poorly by law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system (Caringella, 2009; Sleath & Bull, 2017). This impacts sexual assault victims and their willingness to report rapes because many investigations result in victim blaming that is unfounded, or the victim ends up being charged with false reporting of a crime (Hine & Murphy, 2019). According to Morgan and Truman (2020), 4.3% of violent crimes were reported to police in the U.S. as either rape or sexual assault. However, according to the National Crime Victim Survey (NCVS), 6.6% of people 12 or older reported they were either raped or sexually assaulted. Therefore, the true number of victims who do not report a sexual offense to law enforcement may be unquantifiable (McKee et al., 2020; Russell & Hand, 2017).

The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) get most of their reported data from the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). The UCR includes data from law enforcement agencies and does not account for unreported crimes. By contrast, NCVS measures include reported and non-reported offenses via data from victim surveys. (Morgan and Truman (2020) reported 6.6% of people 12 or older reported they were either raped or sexually assaulted. Therefore, about 2.3% of rapes and sexual assaults went unreported in 2018.

Given that law enforcement officers are the first contact that sexual assault victims have with the criminal justice system, they should be objective. Their personal biases towards victims and their assessment of victim credibility are possible contributing

factors. Perceptions and negative attitudes of law enforcement officers determine the nature of investigation in various cases. Sometimes officers have negative attitudes toward sexual assault victims, which prevents them from conducting proper investigations. In addition, many victims negatively describe their reporting experiences with the police.

According to Morabito et al. (2016), police officers are significant actors in sexual assault cases since they act as the gateway to victim justice. Officers have a role in deciding probable causes of rape and arresting suspected offenders. However, the entire process can be ruined by their reactions toward victims. Negative reactions might emerge due to police misinterpretation of victim statement, underestimation of the situation, or bias.

This chapter includes an introduction to the study and an explanation of why sexual assault victims are unwilling to report rape and how law enforcement officers' personal biases and their assessment of victim credibility impacts outcomes of investigations. I address the significance of the study, research questions, and theoretical framework.

Background

Police officers are more likely to accept myths about female rape compared to male rape. Further, Hine and Murphy (2019) explained that the rate of the police accepting rape myth can be predicted from their judgments and decisions they make towards rape survivors. According to Sleath and Bull (2017), police officers usually hold

subjective views and attitudes regarding victims of rape. Some rape cases do not get the justice they deserve due to discretion of officers.

According to Franklin et al. (2020), trauma victims can present themselves to the police with a restricted or flat affect, as well as disjointed recollections and emotionally numb behavior. Hansen et al. (2019) showed rape assaults that correspond to stereotypes concerning the ideal victim and actual sexual assault constitutes likelihood to proceed to prosecution. According to Shaw et al. (2017), over 50% of rape cases reported to the police never proceed to prosecution. Out of 248 sexual assault cases that were reported, the police denied most of these cases due to specified circumstances of assaults (Shaw et al., 2017).

Thomas (2016) found myths involving sexual assault exist across all societies due to varied processes of socialization. The prevalence of such myths within the criminal justice system endangers prevailing relations between investigators and victims. Additionally, Tidmarsh et al. (2019) investigated perceptions held by law enforcement officers on proffered training, qualities, and skills required for police officers to investigate sexual assault cases and indicated intensive training transformed perceptions of participants to be consistent with information they learned from the course.

There was a gap in knowledge involving issues related to police officer stigma, attitudes, and perceptions. Criteria used by law enforcement officers to determine credibility of sexual assault victims have not been comprehensively explored. This study was significant in terms of providing requisite guidelines that facilitate sound

investigations of sexual assault cases and ensure delivery of justice to sexual assault victims after relevant investigative processes.

Problem Statement

Sexual assault victims' character flaws, reputation, testimony, mental health, and motive to lie impact their credibility (O'Neal, 2019). In addition, this affects how officers determine their credibility (Hansen et al., 2019). Victim reputation, consistency of testimony, and mental health affect how investigating officers perceive credibility of alleged victims (Bitton & Jaeger, 2019). It was still unclear what criteria law enforcement officers use to ascertain relevant flaws in terms of victim character and credibility (Franklin et al., 2020; Jebin & Hasan, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore and understand how law enforcement officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. I addressed this topic based on identifying character flaws, job stress, case load volumes, and organizational structure. This study contributed to the body of knowledge needed to address how law enforcement officers determine the credibility of sexual assault victims and providing data to criminal justice professionals involving reforming best practices for sexual assault investigations.

Research Questions

RQ1: What personal beliefs or cognitive bases underlie views of investigators about sexual assault victims?

RQ2: How does training, police subculture, and other factors influence police perceptions of victims of sexual assault?

Theoretical Framework

Feminist legal and rape myth acceptance theories were used for the study. Based on the feminist legal theory, certain behaviors by women, whether positive or negative, allow patriarchal societies to create specific myths about whether criminal acts committed against women are regarded as positive, negative, or neither (Fineman, 2005). According to the rape myth acceptance theory, real rape involves a conservatively clad female victim who does not know her rapist and a male perpetrator, , and alcohol or drugs are not involved (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Those factors increase chances of victim-blaming among police officers investigating sexual assault cases.

While exploring how officers interpret sexual assault crimes, this study was also guided by the just world theory. According to Cherry (2020), the just world theory is rooted in social psychology with the foundation that the world is just and fair. Cherry also stated that people get what they deserve. According to Wenzel et al. (2017), some people get what they deserve based on their dishonest behavior. As discussed earlier in this chapter, some victims are afraid of being blamed by officers for their assault because of circumstances involving perpetrators. This study involves addressing theory's role in terms of officer decision making. This theory is discussed further in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

This generic qualitative study involved establishing how law enforcement officers evaluate the credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. My aim was also

to enhance relationships between police officers and sexual assault victims, thereby allowing delivery of justice for these victims. To understand how investigators interpret sexual assault crimes, a vignette-based design was deployed using scenarios depicting rape which were read to participants followed by interview questions. The target population of the study included law enforcement officers with a minimum work experience of one year in sexual assault investigations. I used the purposeful sampling technique to select participants. This study involved law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia.

Definitions

Credibility: The quality of witnesses or victims, which is used to determine whether their evidence is worthy of consideration (Borner et al., 2016).

Pre-existing views: Notions about a subject (Julich & Thorburn, 2017).

Rape: Illegitimate sexual intercourse that may cause injury that is done forcibly by one person on someone else (Allen et al., 2018).

Rape myth: False opinions that a person or faction of people have about rape (Johnson & Beech, 2017).

Sexual assault: Unwanted sexual advances and interactions that happen without the consent of the victim (Pihama et al., 2019).

Sexual violence: Cases where individuals manipulate someone else into performing sexual acts without their consent or will (Elizabeth et al., 2016).

Sexual assault investigator: Person mandated to look into incidences of sexual assault to find perpetrators (Campbell et al., 2019).

Assumptions

This section linked theories to the philosophical assumptions used to guide the study. Four philosophical assumptions drive qualitative inquiry. They are ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological (Creswell, 2013). As part of the social constructivism interpretive paradigm, these four philosophical assumptions help make sense of the qualitative research I propose.

RQ1 involved understanding how certain underlying factors influence decision making when investigators are investigating sexual assaults. In order to understand how they arrive to their investigative decisions relying the ontological assumption is important because this assumption links reality to research. As discussed later in this section, there may be multiple realities. Each participant's reality was subjective in terms of their training and experience in their roles as investigators. Burt (1980) found rape myths are adversarial sexual beliefs and a result of gender role stereotyping. According to Arinder (2013), those stereotypes are related to sex, gender and discrimination. Moreover, these beliefs could develop as a result of personal interactions with others. Thus, their reality could be related to some of their personal and not professional beliefs involving sexual assaults and type of women they believe report them.

In qualitative research, the epistemological assumption seeks to explore the link between the topic being studied and the researcher while seeking to answer questions about real knowledge and truth. Rolfe (2006) argued when considering the

epistemological assumption, responses are subjective to the researcher's interpretation of the participants answers. There were noticeable differences in responses because each participant's response was from the reality that they live and work in. The reality may differ from person to person for several factors. This assumption is aligned significantly with the feminist legal theory. The belief in the feminist legal theory is that some systems exists that oppress and work against individuals when considering its key concepts of sex, gender, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice (Arinder, 2013). These concepts should be considered by the researcher when developing interpretations of the interview answers.

Qualitative inquiry should rely on the responses of the participants (Creswell, 2013). How the research collected is important because it is one of the components to securing the validity of the research. The methodological assumption relates to the process used to conduct the inquiry. The goal of this inquiry is to gain better knowledge of the investigative decision making during sexual assault investigations. This can only be done with truthful and detailed responses from participants. Thus, I am taking certain steps, explained in chapter 3, to ensure that the research is credible and valid.

The final philosophical assumption, axiological, discusses the role of values in research. My role as a researcher is to gather and interpret data, and present findings. Before research inquiry is made, the researcher should state their values to the topic (Creswell, 2013). This acknowledges that there may be biases that exists. In chapter 3, I will discussion my role as the researcher, outline the appearances of certain biases, and the steps I will take to eliminate those biases. Still, readers can assume that the facts of

the research are only presented as I perceive them which removes the possibility of total objectivity in this qualitative inquiry.

Scope and Delimitations

This study involved officers who were identified as investigators and specifically investigated sexual assaults. Although other officers in the department may document initial complaints, charging decisions are determined after investigators conduct thorough searches of evidence and facts. I sought to gain knowledge about how they use their experience, beliefs, training, and other factors to determine how credible victims are when they report sexual assaults. I used the vignette-based scenario to ask open-ended questions about sexual assault investigations. I did not explore how these officers investigated other crimes that were not related to sexual assaults, or compare and contrast factors that influence their decision-making in terms of other crime categories such as robbery and aggravated assault.

The target population included law enforcement officers with a minimum work experience of 1 year. Gender, age, and race were not determining factors. However, they were documented for research purposes. This study involved law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia. Study findings can further be a basis for adequate training for law enforcement officers.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include difficulties involving data saturation and theoretical saturation thresholds for review. Although the term rape has been defined in this chapter, it was still possible that participants could misinterpret the definition. The

choice of the generic qualitative design could serve as a limitation in that it is subjective in terms of research and may not provide opportunities to explore in detail the issues of credibility of victims in sexual assault crimes. Interviews were subjective in nature and may be limited in terms of exploring the context of police credibility.

Significance

This research involved filling a literature gap regarding how law enforcement officers judge credibility of sexual assault victims. According to Spohn and Tellis (2012), police officers' perceptions determine efforts in terms of investigating relevant cases. The study was significant in terms of providing requisite guidelines that facilitate sound investigations of sexual assault cases and ensure delivery of justice for sexual assault victims after relevant authorities' investigative process.

Summary

This study involved exploring how law enforcement officers determine credibility of sexual assault victims during their investigations. There was no current literature that specifically addresses this issue. Through use of a generic qualitative research approach, I explored how law enforcement officers determine how credible victims are and how that affects investigations into their findings. Chapter 2 includes a literature review covering the history of sexual investigators and sexual assault investigations, sexual assault investigators and how they view sexual assault victims, sexual assault victims and how they view sexual assault investigators, and factors that affect outcomes of sexual assault investigations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Sexual assault victim factors such as mental health issues, character flaws, reputation, and testimony inconsistencies significantly interfere with their credibility (O'Neal, 2019). These factors also influence officers' or assault investigators' perceptions in terms of determining credibility of assaults (O'Neal, 2019). Victims' mental health, character, and reliable testimonies significantly affect how sexual assault cases are handled and how officers perceive alleged victims' credibility (Greeson et al., 2016; O'Neal, 2019; Powell & Cauchi, 2013). I observed that victims' character flaws play a significant role in terms of determining their credibility, but it is unclear how these factors influence law enforcement officers' efforts in terms of investigating sexual assault cases. The study involved exploring and understanding how law enforcement officers determine or evaluate sexual assault victims' credibility before and during investigations. I addressed relevance of law enforcement officers' perceptions regarding sexual assault victims' credibility based on set criteria used to determine character flaws.

This study involved reviewing previous studies regarding the criminal justice system and the general public in terms of pervasive misconceptions regarding sexual assault victims and how they are viewed by law enforcement officers and investigators. I did not address sexual assault victim behaviors before, during, and post-rape. Instead, I focused on factors that influence law enforcement officers' and investigators' decisions regarding sexual assault victims' credibility. I focused on qualitative studies involving victims and investigators during the investigation process.

This chapter includes an overview of sexual assault investigations, sexual assault investigators, views of sexual assault investigators and their perceptions regarding alleged victims, alleged victims and their perceptions regarding sexual assault investigators, law enforcement officers' decision-making processes, and impacts of police subcultures and how they influence sexual assault investigations. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of literature findings.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden University Library resources. Moreover, I used Criminal Justice Database, ProQuest, and SAGE Journals in order to locate relevant articles associated with the subject. All sources were published between 1999 and 2020. The following terms were used: *sexual assault*, *sexual violence*, *rape*, *credibility*, *preexisting views*, *sexual assault investigator*, *rape myth*, and *rape myth acceptance*. Sources involve perceptions of law enforcement officers regarding credibility of female rape victims.

Theoretical Framework

Just World Theory

According to Lerner (1980), negative perceptions regarding sexual assault victims are considered a form of overcompensation for seemingly underserved acts towards victims. Essentially, the world is perceived to be just and fair, where behavioral consequences are deserved and people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Landström et al., 2015). In other words, blaming and negative perceptions regarding sexual assault victims are founded on the belief that these actions occur by attempting to justify an unjustifiable act or behavior. According to Landström et al. (2016), assault

victims are deserving of their misfortunes and such unfair acts cannot befall good people. The just world theory is used to explain and predict sexual assault blame attributions. Strömwall et al. (2013) explained victims perceived to be respectable (such as virgins or married victims) were subjected to more victimization compared to those who are perceived to be less respectable (such as those who were divorced).

Feminist Legal Theory and Rape Myth Acceptance Theory

Police officers' perceptions of victims of sexual assault play a critical role in terms of delivering justice. However, victims are often stigmatized while reporting sexual assault crimes, particularly when asked to retell events repeatedly. Feminist legal and rape myth acceptance theories were the theoretical frameworks for this study. Factors influencing police officers' attitudes towards sexual assault victims should be established since they are essential to reform law enforcement practices. According to the feminist legal theory, certain behaviors by women, whether positive or negative, allow patriarchal societies to create specific myths about whether a criminal act committed upon a woman will be regarded as positive, negative, or neither (Fineman, 2005). Also, those in authoritative roles can significantly impact how others learn and model behavior. Thus, police officers can influence societal behaviors, given their role in the criminal justice system. However, when they exhibit some form of bias toward victims of sexual assault, they fail victims and the entire system. According to the rape myth acceptance theory, real rape involves a conservatively clad female victim and male perpetrator, and the victim does not know her rapist, and alcohol or drugs are not involved (Lonsway &

Fitzgerald, 1995). This the victims, demeanor and behavior increase chances of victim-blaming among police officers investigating sexual assault cases.

The two theories were used to provide essential insights regarding police officers' views of sexual assault victims' credibility. They were used as a framework for exploring this topic. Essentially, police officers should not be biased while investigating sexual assault cases (Jameson, 2020). However, their conduct has been questioned, given their perceptions of victims. This can be attributed to inadequate training and police subculture. The gender of investigating police officers is more likely to influence their view of victim credibility, particularly in a patriarchal society. Next, I review previous research involving these theories.

Research Literature

Campbell et al. (2015) suggested police officers tend to make decisions based on their perceptual shorthand of victims' characteristics. Nonetheless, these factors are significant in terms of judicial decisions regarding sexual assault cases. Essentially, perceptions of credibility are significantly shaped by legal and extralegal characteristics such as quality of evidence, victims' moral character, and victim behavior (Campbell et al., 2015, p. 32). Golding et al. (2015) conceptualized police culture is a significant indicator in terms of determining sexual assault complaints. Determining credibility mainly depends on officers' perception about victims, whether they can provide credible information, and how it affects credibility assessment (Golding et al., 2015). Authoritative roles played by police officers or investigators significantly affect credibility decisions of sexual assault victims. Police subculture alongside legal and

extralegal factors significantly increased chances of victim-blaming among police officers investigating sexual assault cases.

The selected theoretical frameworks were chosen not only because they align with other studies on the subject matter but also because they are relevant to examining the effect of policy decisions regarding victims' credibility. The theories also conceptualize how police subculture, attitude, and perception towards rape cases influences the investigators' decision-making process. O'Neal (2019) established that most research examining the impact of policy decisions making on victim credibility are vignette-based; as there, is a need to focus on the effects of police officers and investigators perception on victim credibility. Overall, the frameworks adopted in this study are appropriate in determining the influence of police perceptions and police subculture in determining victim credibility in sexual assault and violent cases.

Previous studies are in consensus that cases of rape and sexual violence are at an alarming rate in the society; a social issue that demands increased focus and coordinated response from the criminal justice systems, health and social service providers, and researchers (Mennicke et al., 2014; O' Neal, 2019). The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network have indicated that sexual assault is rampant within the U.S.; rape and sexual assault occur every two minutes (Carter II, 2014). Victims of sexual assault often suffer a wide range of experiences; emotional and physical effects, with long-lasting negative consequences (Mennicke et al., 2014; Powell & Cauchi, 2013). Regardless, to prosecute sexual assault perpetrators, victims must work hand in hand with law enforcement officers—law enforcement officers play a vital role in the successful

prosecution of perpetrators. O'Neal (2019) stated that law enforcement officers are a key determinant in whether the reported cases would lead to prosecution of the perpetrator or not—they decide whether or not the alleged assault victims are credible or if the claims are founded.

Powell and Cauchi (2013) further highlighted that officers' beliefs and perceptions surround victims' character flaws or negative attitudes, such as victim-blaming, only causes secondary traumatization to the victims. Recent studies are also suggestive that the attitudes, beliefs, or negative perceptions have somewhat decreased (Greeson et al., 2016). Current studies still recommend a better understanding of the complexities of law enforcement attitudes and beliefs towards sexual assault and how victims' character flaws, mental health, and inconsistent testimonies impact victims' creditability and determine whether or not the case will lead to prosecution.

Sexual Assault Investigations

In an investigation, when a perpetrator is accused of sexual assault, they are mainly accused of sexual groping, unwanted sexual touching, unwanted penetration, attempted rape, or forceful performance of sexual acts (Campbell et al., 2015). These acts can only be considered assault if they have occurred without the consent; or if the victim cannot give consent because of temporary incapacitation, age, or mental illness (Spohn & Tellis, 2014). Greeson et al. (2016) suggested that, in all sexual assault investigations, law enforcement officers should not presume the alleged victim is not credible, neither should they presume the accused is innocent—that is not their role. These studies discuss that in sexual assault investigations, law enforcement officers' responsibility is to find the

culpable individual alongside the necessary evidence to prove guilt. After receiving information about a potential sexual assault case, law enforcement officers often speak to the alleged victims, witnesses, or any other available acquaintances before proceeding to the accused. In most sexual assault cases, law enforcement officers, investigators tend to wait until they feel that they have gathered enough information before contacting the accused (Darwinkel et al., 2013).

Campbell et al. (2015) postulated that sexual assault investigations are normally faced by many challenges, even in instances where the alleged victims have already come forward to pursue the perpetrators in court. The authors noted that sexual assault investigations are generally difficult, the collection of evidence and inconsistent testimonies often pose unique challenges. Spohn and Tellis (2014) stated that, in most cases, the investigators and prosecutors tend to bare certain beliefs, attitudes, such as rape myths or gender bias, which negatively impact the credibility of the victims. Lack of coordination between investigators and law enforcement officers further creates an additional challenge influencing the credibility of the victims and evidence collections. Campbell et al. (2015) said, regardless of the location or myths surround the sexual assault, law enforcement officers and investigators are required to engage in a wide range of fact-finding efforts to collect sufficient evidence to support the cases. In sexual assault investigations, fact-finding is essential and involves collecting all legally relevant evidence or information surrounding the crime to be used in court.

If an alleged victim seeks to pursue legal actions against an offender, the victim must report the attacker to law enforcement. The reporting process is potentially harmful,

considering the investigators mostly cause secondary traumatization due to victim-blaming behaviors, attitudes, and conventional practices (Powell & Cauchi, 2013). Tasca et al. (2013) pointed out that, when attempting to report cases of sexual assault, victims often experience harsh treatment; accompanied by feeling of self-doubt, shame, and self-blame.

Unlike other crimes, sexual assaults often cause long-lasting consequences and emotional scars. As such, sexual assault investigators must be well trained, empathetic, and well-informed to the needs of the victims they serve. Gaines and Wells (2017) found that the sensitivity and skills of the investigators handling the investigation are crucial and may ease the alleged victims' trauma while giving some sense of support and security. The authors discussed that, because of the very personal nature of the crime, the investigator must attempt to establish a rapport with the alleged victims to obtain accurate and complete information about the offense. In most instances, there is little or no physical evidence at the scene to corroborate the alleged victims' statements; hence the criminal justice system relies on the investigators' skills to provide relevant and sufficient evidence for the successful prosecution of the perpetrator (Gaines & Wells, 2017). In other words, the investigator must conceptualize the alleged victims' statements versus the perpetrators' denial and come up with sufficient evidence to support the case. Law enforcement officers have a moral and legal obligation to thoroughly investigate cases of sexual assault with the main aim of determining whether the alleged crime was committed or not.

Investigators are responsible for carrying out sexual assault investigations professionally and sensitively while respecting and protecting both the offender's and alleged victims' rights. It is noteworthy to mention that investigators should comprehend that the interaction with the alleged victim during the initial phase of the investigations is crucial and often has negative or positive impact on the alleged victims. Kelty et al. (2018) also noted that sexual assault investigators tend to be complex and labor intensives. As such, investigators should be highly specialized and trained in modern investigative processes and procedures-including proper interviewing and interrogation process of victims, suspects, and witnesses. Reasonably, throughout the investigations, and whether or not the perpetrators are apprehended, the main responsibility of the investigator is the role of resource provider, without prejudice and prejudgment.

Investigators' Views of Sexual Assault Victims

According to sexual assault investigators, many sexual assaults in the United States are never reported to the police-surveys indicated that over 80% of rape and sexual assault cases go unreported to the authorities (Venema, 2016). Studies have also revealed a social expectation among investigators; that only real, credible, and ideal victims should report their alleged sexual assault experiences (Gaines & Wells, 2017). Although most investigators hold the view it is as unreasonable and unrealistic expectation for several reasons; the alleged victims' sense of shame, deepened by a victim—blaming society and stigma, along with the associated distress. Venema (2016) indicated that investigators relate to the extremely low reporting of sexual assault cases—rape and sexual assault victims often lack confidence in the law enforcement officers and their entire criminal

justice system. Because low reporting is founded on a lack of confidence in investigators, these studies are suggesting that there is a need to take a trauma-informed approach to investigate and prosecute sexual assault cases, reducing the myriad of associated challenges.

Concerning victim disclosure, investigators should not assume that disclosure is a one-time event; instead, it should be understood that it is a process. Gaines and Wells (2017) warned that, in most instances, law enforcement officers tend to doubt victims' credibility. Essentially, the study suggested that doubting victims also entails a failure to recognize that disclosure of sexual assault incidents is often associated with the feeling of disempowerment and humiliation. The authors further discussed that the case is particularly true considering that most investigators are still riddled with challenges of rape myths and victim-blaming. For example, one of the most common myths held by investigators is that women are less worthy of belief or that women and children are prone to lying about their sexual abuse experiences (Menaker et al., 2017). It can be understood that investigators tend to view sexual assaults with doubt or suspicion, an aspect that largely makes it difficult for victims to report sexual assault incidents. In support, Johnson (2017) also cited that, among victims, the fear of not being believed creates a significant barrier to disclosure. Studies are informing that investigators' beliefs and personal judgment significantly influence their decision to determine victims' credibility, making it difficult for them to view victims or receive their disclosures with patients and respect. Menaker et al. (2017) postulated that investigators often do not make it easier for victims to disclose their past traumatic experiences; instead, their

interrogation approaches are biased towards doubting victims' credibility. Because of the doubt, investigators often employ conventional approaches when interacting with victims. It is for the same reasons that investigators tend to focus on peripheral details which may not even be relevant.

Sexual Assault Victims' View of Sexual Assault Investigators

Farrell et al. (2014) said, amid reforms focused on changing the way investigators view and investigate sexual assault cases. These reforms are mainly founded on the new insights and knowledge surrounding how best traumatic experiences can be handled. The conventional approaches and interrogation practices used on criminal offenses should not be employed for sexual assault cases. Sleath and Bull (2017) also discussed that sexual assault victims tend to feel that the standard interrogation practices are focused on establishing key facts and the timelines in which they occur. These studies are suggestive that standard interrogation practices are less effective and interfere with sufficient evidence collection necessary to investigate sexual assault and the probability of leading to a successful prosecution. These studies are also agreeing with other studies, that sexual assault investigators often doubt alleged victims' credibility. Current research work is categorical that sexual assault investigators are always skeptical and only determined to establish credibility. Essentially, previous studies are indicative that sexual assault victims are convinced that investigators are skeptical and thus do not interact with them from a position neutrality; instead, they are full of suspicion and doubt.

According to Sleath and Bull (2017), victims are convinced that investigators' attitude towards them (sexual assault victims) is a significant factor that determines

whether or not the case would lead to a successful prosecution. In most instances, victims tend to feel ashamed, afraid, and intimidated by investigators, especially when they respond with some sense of dismissal, disbelief, harshness, and detachment. The study fundamentally delved on the challenges faced by victims because they tend to omit important information or evidence during investigations, especially with investigators they perceive to be aggressive, impatient, brusque, and unfriendly. Insufficient police training largely contributes to secondary victimization; sexual assault victims commonly feel unsafe whenever their credibility is questioned (Holland et al, 2018). This also presents additional challenges in retrieving certain memories.

Law Enforcement Officers' Decision-Making Involving Sexual Assault Victims'

Credibility

Venema (2019) noted that sexual assault victims, especially rape victims, tend to receive negative perceptions from investigators. In most instances, investigators approach alleged victims with an attitude founded on rape myths or misconceptions. Studies further explained that some investigators tend to presume alleged victims not to meet the criteria of an ideal victim because they might have played a role in arousing or provoking the offenders. Some sexual assault victims wear revealing clothing or might have been intoxicated when the sexual assault occurred (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020). The reviewed studies fundamentally enlighten that, for investigators, extra-legal characteristics, such as alleged victims' behaviors are the time of victimization or the perceived moral character, significantly influenced investigators' perceptions towards evaluating and deciding on the victims' credibility. However, Alderden and Ullman (2012) contended that investigators

tend to view intoxicated complaints or reports negatively compared to non-intoxicated cases. In other words, the existing literature is suggestive that, in most instances, investigators tend to be skeptical towards alleged victims, mainly because they do not meet their ideal victim criteria. In support, Venema (2019) also supported the finding by stating that investigators are biased towards alleged victims, mainly because of the victims' behaviors or history. Factors that often lead to additional prodding and interrogation of the victims by investigators.

Women lobby groups have also indicated that reforms are needed surrounding the prevalence of secondary victimization of alleged victims by investigators. They argue that officers often decide on victim credibility based on their judgments (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020). However, O'Conner et al. (2018) noted, from a different view, the decision on victim credibility could be influenced by the set of rules and norms law enforcement officers learn from government agency protocols. Such aspects are parts and paradigms of policing culture and significantly influence how investigators determine credibility. They may unintentionally engender secondary traumatization of alleged victims. Character, behavior, and lack of sufficient corroborating evidence to support victims' credibility significantly influence an investigators decision to arrest the offender and present the case in court. These decisions to determine victims' credibility is largely guided by their perceptions of the alleged victims' characteristics and personal judgment of the situations. For investigators, moral behavior and character of the alleged victims, the extra-legal characteristics are essentially the most important predictor of victims' credibility.

Alderden and Ullman (2012) used qualitative methods to examine case processing decisions on 465 criminal assault cases involving female victims. Compared to prior studies, Alderden and Ullman (2012) also pointed out that less than 10% of assault cases result in charges. In the same regard, the study also found that victims' statements were vital in predicting credibility or whether the whole assault case was founded. Principally, the study suggests prosecutors decision-making process is influenced by factors credibility of assault cases were extra-legal.

Goodman-Delahunty and Graham (2011) employed a quantitative technique with a questionnaire survey of 125 police officers to investigate the influence of victim attire and intoxication on law enforcement officers' response to sexual assault. Contrary to findings in earlier studies, the study found that "provocative" dressing and victim intoxication had no significant influence on the officers' decision to arrest or charge offenders (Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011). The study also noted that rape myths were influential in the law enforcement officers' decision-making. Regardless, the study is also suggestive that guilt judgment and credibility are significant factors considering they have substantial effects on the level of myth acceptance among law enforcement officers.

Growette Bostaph et al. (2021) explored how victim credibility and case outcomes are influenced by investigative decision-making. Using a qualitative approach, the study conducted a content analysis and multivariate regression modes on 370 police reports to examine the correlation between investigative activities and victim credibility. The study

established that victim credibility is a crucial factor determining the ordering of investigative activities and officers' stability during the investigations.

Victim credibility is a significant predictive factor influencing investigators and prosecutors decision-making processes (Alderdeen & Ullman, 2012; Growette et al., 2021). Goodman-Delahunty and Graham (2011) highlighted victims' credibility is not an essential factor; instead, the culpability of offenders is. Accordingly, with the differing finds, if victim credibility is a significant valid indicator of myth acceptance among law enforcement officers or prosecutors, then the issue is still under-researched, given the strong referral effect on the sexual assault decision-making process.

Impacts of Police Subculture on Sexual Assault Investigations

According to Venema (2016), a large majority of sexual assault victims do not report the crimes to the police, mainly because of the mixed responses by the investigators. According to sexual assault victims, the majority of alleged and suspected perpetrators are seldom prosecuted, while most of them get re-victimized (Alderden & Ullman, 2012). The victim-blaming attitude, practice and behavior by law enforcement officers significantly influences the outcome of the investigation process. Such police cultures have been cited to result in additional trauma for several sexual assault survivors. Police subculture significantly impacts how law enforcement officers interact with victims. Ross (2015) argued that it is essential for police officers to understand the importance of a victim-centered approach when conducting sexual assault investigations. As such, previous studies have found, in most instances, law enforcement officers, the professional "gatekeepers", often allow their own beliefs and personal judgments to impact

their professional decision-making process when dealing with sexual assault offenses (Woodhams et al., 2012).

Police subculture commonly creates a potentially hostile climate for sexual assault victims within the criminal justice systems; the prejudicial myths have been established to fuel false beliefs and personal judgments (Sleath & Bull, 2015). Rape misconceptions and myths present belief systems in the policing subculture and influence professionals' interactions with sexual assault victims. Mennicke et al. (2014) also noted that in most sexual assault cases, police officers are usually skeptical about sexual offense victims' credibility where commonly held misconceptions and myths are endorsed. Whenever police officers handling sexual assault crimes investigations endorse sexual violence myths, it may result in many challenges. Rape myth acceptance significantly influences sexual assault investigations compared to the general public (Parratt & Pina, 2017). Female police officers are highly likely to believe sexual assault victims, support their credibility, while attributing less to victim-blaming. Edwards et al. (2011) noted that female police officers tend to be less accepting of rape myth, even though it is a widely accepted myth within the police subculture.

Police subcultures are largely founded on the victims' moral and legal character, the circumstances of the offense, and the broader gender-based characteristics of the alleged victims. Such factors have been noted to influence police officers' decision-making, the strength of evidence collected, and the victims' willingness to cooperate in the investigation. According to Alderden and Ullman (2012), corroborating evidence, such as victims' resistance or used weapons, increased the chances of a successful

prosecution instead of when instances where only the alleged victims' statements were available. Likewise, officers were likely to make arrests or proceed to a successful prosecution whenever witnesses were available, as opposed to instances when only alleged victims' statements were presented (Spohn & Tellis, 2014). Police officer subcultures, adhering to stereotypical protocols and characteristics play a significant role in influencing the successful investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases. Otherwise, the subculture plays a bigger role in disregarding victims' credibility.

Summary

In most instances, there is little or no physical evidence to corroborate alleged victim statements; hence, the criminal justice system relies on investigator skills to provide relevant and sufficient evidence for successful prosecution of perpetrators. Sexual assault investigation training in Georgia involves unified and consistent responses from law enforcement officers, with increased offender accountability through training, increased knowledge and awareness among victims, offenders, the criminal justice system, and stakeholders. Although literature addresses sources of investigator skepticism toward victim credibility, there is a lack of information about how officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims. Police officer subcultures and adhering to stereotypical protocols and characteristics, play a significant role in terms of influencing successful investigations and prosecution of sexual assault cases. I addressed why police officers are usually skeptical about sexual assault victims' credibility due to commonly held misconceptions and myths.

In sexual assault investigations, law enforcement officers play a crucial role. They are key in terms of determining whether reported cases lead to prosecution of perpetrators via determination of whether alleged assault victims are credible and claims are founded. Alleged victim behaviors during the time of victimization or perceived moral character significantly influence investigators' perceptions regarding evaluating and deciding about issues related to victim credibility. In order to eliminate these barriers, sexual assault investigators must be well-trained, empathetic, and well-informed in terms of needs of the victims they serve. Chapter 3 includes an outline of research methods that were used in this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore and understand how law enforcement officers determine or evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. My primary focus was decisions of law enforcement officers during sexual assault investigations, how sexual assault investigators viewed alleged victims, how alleged victims viewed sexual assault investigators, law enforcement officers' decision-making processes, and victim credibility. Additionally, I addressed training initiatives in the state of Georgia, and impacts of police subcultures and how they influence sexual assault investigations. This study involved law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia.

In Chapter 3, I explain the research design and rationale. Next, I outline my role as the researcher. After, I explain the methodology, data collection, and research instruments. Lastly, I discuss the data analysis plan and issues of trustworthiness followed by ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

These two research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What personal beliefs or cognitive bases underlie the views of investigators about sexual assault victims?

RQ2: How does training, police subculture, and other factors influence police perceptions of victims of sexual assault?

Phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory are the three major methodologies that are used frequently in qualitative research. However, since those

methodologies have emerged, newer methodologies have become widely accepted within qualitative research (Kahlke, 2014). For this study, the generic qualitative research design was used. This is research that is not guided by an explicit set of philosophic assumptions (Calli et al., 2003; Kahlke, 2014). According to Merriam (2002), generic studies involve gaining understanding of how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and experiences.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, there was little research on this topic. Wolotzky-Taylor et al. (2011) postulated sexual assault cases pose particular challenges for law enforcement. I was interested in this topic because study findings can contribute best practices when conducting sexual assault investigations. This involved providing empirical research for policymakers to modify and develop policies on sexual assault training for law enforcement officers.

Role of the Researcher

The role of a researcher in qualitative research is to access thoughts, opinions, and feelings of study participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Although I am a former sexual assault investigator, I remain aware of challenges sexual assault victims encounter on a daily basis because of negative reactions that may emerge from police misinterpretations. I understand some individuals may be untruthful and make false reports. However, there are credible victims that need justice for wrongdoing that was done to them. Therefore, more research is needed to address the problem and ensure criminal justice professionals are provided with empirical data when reforming best practices and training.

As a sexual assault investigator, I conducted interviews and interrogations on a daily basis. I also completed numerous hours of training for interviews and interrogations through the Georgia Public Safety Training Counsel, which are designed to teach investigators how to obtain information effectively through various techniques and theories. These trainings specifically involve addressing how to ask open-ended and followup questions, as well as how to allow interviewees to supply evidence or information requested by interviewers. In addition, training includes addressing different advantages of effective verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as how to detect deception.

Investigators often approach interviews and interrogations with information about cases and evidence that supports arrests of offenders. Additionally, they use information with the goal of getting confessions during interviews. The researcher's responsibility is to explore a phenomenon and reach conclusions based on responses from participants.

As a researcher, my role in this study was limited when concerning overt and covert observations of participants because vignette and qualitative questionnaires were administered via an online format. Data were collected from police agencies in Dougherty County, Georgia. Although I have served as a law enforcement officer in this county, I have not worked in a capacity as officer since 2017. I did not anticipate any potential bias or conflicts of interest to arise. Through the use of a reflective journal, I documented steps taken during the data collection process to ensure that my personal feelings or biases regarding the topic were not reflected in research. Preliminary approval from law enforcement agencies was gained along with letters of cooperation. Once

approval was obtained, participants were solicited via email. Potential participants were provided research invitations and consent forms. The invitation letter included information about who I am, explained that I was a doctoral student at Walden University, addressed the purpose of the study and how data would be used before the questionnaires were disseminated to participants.

Methodology

The research strategy for this study involved using a generic qualitative design and included two vignette-based scenarios involving depictions of rape which were shown to law enforcement officers as well as an online survey to explore and understand how these officers judge credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. Vignette-based methodologies involve presenting the participants with short stories, narratives, or descriptions of hypothetical situations (Ludwick & Zeller, 2001; Mays, 2016). According to Wilks (2014), vignettes are used as a reliable measure to study attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and norms. Although there are several variations of the vignette-based design, I employed two full factorial vignettes (FFVs) to investigate law enforcement perceptions and reactions to sexual assault cases as well as feedback on criteria, strategies, and techniques that law enforcement officers may use. Vignettes can be used both by qualitative and quantitative researchers (Wilks, 2014; Prince, 2017). For this study, participants were given two vignettes and answered open-ended questions after each case. Use of two vignettes was intended to ensure responses were credible and valid.

Participant Selection Logic

Dougherty County is located in southwest Georgia. The reported population is 85,468 (Unknown, 2021). There are four major law enforcement agencies in the county: Albany Police Department, Dougherty County School System Police Department, Dougherty County Police Department, and Dougherty County Sheriff's Department. Currently, all agencies employ sworn and unsworn personnel.

According to Kallio et al. (2016), to gain access to credible interviews, participants should be contacted on time. Researchers cannot go straight into a law enforcement agency and start questioning without preceding approval. Therefore, a recruitment letter (see Appendix D) was sent to the head of all law enforcement agencies located in Dougherty County, Georgia. They were asked to return letters of cooperation granting permission from their agency to participate.

Once letters of cooperation were received from law enforcement agencies, I sent an introduction letter via mail and email to potential participants to request their participation in the study. I informed each participant of the purpose of the study and their role as participants. Participants were informed that the survey was voluntary and their responses were confidential.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method until saturation was reached. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research for identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). This technique ensured that selected participants were knowledgeable in the subject area. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggested the

purposeful sampling technique involve identifying and selecting individuals that are knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest. To gain access to participants, I used the digital directory supplied to the public. Directories includes telephone numbers, email addresses, and job titles for personnel.

Finally, I asked the potential participants to complete a prescreening questionnaire in Appendix B to determine their eligibility for participation. Instructions on how to complete the questionnaire were provided. The participants were sent the scenarios in advance of the interview. During the interview, I read each vignette to the participant and allowed them to answer the questions that follow. The survey took approximately two hours to complete. The target population within the study includes law enforcement officers with a minimum work experience of one year as a sexual assault investigator. While some officers were assigned to investigations specifically, other officers may have worked as an investigator as a previous role. For example, an officer promoted to the rank of sergeant assigned to patrol may have worked as a sexual assault investigator previously. The officer was be eligible to participate in this study. This study involved law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia.

Instrumentation: Vignettes and Questions

Qualitative data was collected by asking participants to respond to a number of open-ended questions after listing to a vignette. In data collection, vignettes are helpful in qualitative research when discussing morally charged or sensitive topics. They have been used to extract opinions, views, perceptions, beliefs, and stimulate cultural norms which result from attitudes and beliefs of participants on a particular topic (Erfanian et al.,

2020). Therefore, the participants feel more comfortable when responding to questions about the difficult topics. In addition, vignettes have been used as a way for rapport development (Erfanian et al., 2020).

There are factors that contribute to the construction of vignettes. Like other research tools, vignettes must be designed properly to produce valid results. Erfanian et al. (2020) suggests that data sources, vignette format, capture reality, and vignette/participant congruence are issues that need to be considered for the development of a vignette. Silva et al. (2019) suggests ideal vignettes are fictional stories that resemble real cases to collect data on the factors being studied and acknowledged that challenges exist when attempting to balance the rigor of the method against the reality they describe. Therefore, I constructed vignettes that resemble real cases to collect data to answer the qualitative survey based on my training experiences to extract opinions, views, perceptions, beliefs, and how they interpret credibility of sexual assault victims during investigation. The questions were developed using concepts of the just world theory, feminist legal theory, and rape myth acceptance theory, which are critical to understanding why officers arrive to the conclusions they reach when investigation these crimes. The questions were edited and refined by an expert panel. This process is further explained in this chapter.

There were two vignettes used for this study (see Appendix A for details in the vignette). The first vignette involved a 21-year-old English teacher named Lisa. Lisa was called into the principal's office to address her inappropriate attire. While inside of the principal's office, Lisa was sexually assaulted by the principal then she returned back to

work and informed one of her co-workers about the incident. The co-worker told her to report the incident to law enforcement. Lisa waited two months before making a police report. Once she reported the incident, it was up to the law enforcement officer to ascertain who was credible. Based on the scenario, participants were asked to respond to five questions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Questions Based on Vignette 1

1. Given the contents of this scenario, what factors would you use to determine Lisa's credibility?
2. How will your experience with sexual assault investigations help you with investigating this incident?
3. Based on the scenario given, what steps would you take next to determine if this victim's story is credible?
4. In this scenario, Lisa was advised that she was raped after being called into the office about her inappropriate dress attire. However, the principal alleged that the meeting was about a leadership role. How would the officer view the difference in stories in terms of believability?
5. How does the delay of reporting and not having a sexual assault examination influence your decision making throughout the investigation?

The second scenario involved Stacy who has been living with Nick for 3 days because she got kicked out of her apartment. One night, Stacy and Nick (along with

other friends) went to the club. While at the club, Stacy and Nick began dancing with one another and Nick starts to flirt with Stacy. Once the club closes, Stacy and Nick went home. While at the residence, Nick started flirting with Stacy and began to touch her inappropriately. Nick then leaned in and kissed Stacy. This made Stacy feel uncomfortable, in which she told him. Nick disregarded what Stacy told him and pulled Stacy's dress up and penetrates her with his penis while Stacy begged for him to stop. After the incident was over, Nick kissed her before going to bed. On the following day, Stacy filed a police report. Once she reported the incident, it was up to the law enforcement officers to ascertain credibility. Based on the scenario, participants were asked to respond to five questions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Questions Based on Scenario 2

1. Given the contents of this scenario, what factors would you use to determine Stacy's credibility?
2. How will your training and experience with sexual assault investigations help you with investigating this incident?
3. Based on the scenario given, what steps would you take next to determine if this victim's story is credible?
4. In this scenario, Stacy advised that she wore a short dress while at the club with Nick. She then advised that while at the club she flirted with Nick and laughed it off when he touched her inappropriately. Once they arrived back home, Stacy advised that she sat on the couch willingly with Nick before she was sexually assaulted. Nick advised that he and Stacy had consensual sex. How would the officer view the difference in stories in terms of believability?
5. How does the delay of reporting and having a sexual assault examination influence your decision making throughout the investigation?

Question One in the survey instrument asked factors that the participant would use to determine credibility which may result in answering research question one.

Question two was formed to address research question two. The purpose of the question allowed me to gather more data on how the participants training, police subculture, and other factors shape/influence their perceptions or experience when investigating sexual assault incidents. Question three was formed to address both research questions. This question allowed me to gather data on what judgment of decisions guided the participant

by looking at whether it was training, police subculture, or their own perceptions or attitudes from previous cases that they may have worked.

Questions Four and five were formed because of the theoretical frameworks used. The question looked at if the result was a simple opposite reaction to the action. In the just world theory, the question applies because it looks as if the victim was blamed because of her actions attempting to justify an unjustifiable act or behavior or behavioral consequence. For example, does the participant view that the victim got what she deserved because she was dressed provocatively, drinking, dancing, flirting, and allowing the suspect to touch on her inappropriately. The questions apply to the feminist legal theory because the theory suggests that certain behaviors by women, whether positive or negative allow a patriarchal society to create a specific myth about whether a criminal act committed upon a woman will be regarded as positive, negative, or indifferent. According to the rape myth acceptance theory, real rape only occurs if a conservatively clad female victim and a male perpetrator, where she does not know her rapist, and alcohol or drugs are not affected (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). The three theories provide essential insights regarding police officers' view of sexual assault victims' credibility. These questions can provide a framework for exploring police officers' perception of victim.

These two vignettes were validated by a subject matter expert panel. The panel assembled consisted of four subject matter experts and myself as the facilitator. Members of the panel had a total of 24 years of education in the areas of criminal justice and psychology. They also had a combined total of over 60 years of experience in law

enforcement, criminal investigations, and criminal justice policy. The panel members were advised of the other members involvement. However, their identities were not revealed to each other.

The panel was provided with multiple vignettes, the research purpose, problem statement, and qualitative survey questions. They were asked to review each scenario and the qualitative questions that followed. It was the consensus of the panel to select two of the vignettes because they specifically targeted the study's objective and direct attention of the participants to specific aspects of the research questions. Evans et al. (2015) suggested that this is the proper method for selecting vignettes for research studies.

Next, the case scenarios and questions were sent to each panel member for several rounds of editing. During each round, members were asked to edit the scenarios and questions until a general consensus was formed. This was done to ensure that the questions were valid giving the scenarios and that they were clear and understandable by future participants. Silva et al. (2019) suggests that a large number of vignettes can lead to an overload of information and may possibly make the participant fatigue.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Saturation enhances the adequacy and credibility of data during a research project. Fusch and Ness (2015) cited that failure to apply data saturation will impact the quality of research conducted. Creswell (2013) suggests that a sample size of at least 10-20 is desired to reach saturation. For this study, the desired sample size was at least 10 participants or until there was significant evidence that continuing data collection was no longer feasible. To ensure that the participants are eligible to participate in the research

study, the participants were required to answer the prescreening questions located in Appendix B. The participant could have been male or female. The participant's participation was voluntary. The participants were solicited through emails. Participants were able to keep their responses confidential from their supervisors along with their identities because I was the only person conducting the interview. The answers were only known to the participant and myself.

Data Collection

I emailed the potential participants identified as investigators by the agency's personnel directory requesting their participation in the study (see Appendix E). The email informed each participant of the purpose of the study and their role as a participant. Participants were informed that the survey was voluntary and their responses will be confidential. Prior to the survey being administered, I asked them to complete the prescreening questionnaire to determine their eligibility for participation.

Each participant must be at least 21 years old at the time of participation, must be a sworn law enforcement officer with a minimum of one-year work experience in sexual assault investigation, must not be under investigation by Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.), and be employed with an agency located in Dougherty County, Georgia.

I scheduled the interview with the participant at their convenience. All interviews were conducted using audio recordings only. A prescreening questionnaire was conducted and I reviewed their answers for eligibility. If the participant was eligible, they were placed in the next phase which was the collecting their responses from the vignette scenario questions.

Data Analysis Plan

After data collection, a two-step data analysis process was employed using hand coding and computer software. The qualitative data collected through the interview of law enforcement officers provided their perception and explanation of how law enforcement officers view victim's credibility while investigating sexual assault crimes. Themes were categorically coded using the following steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. In addition, the responses from the questionnaire were entered into NVivo software to analyze the data for themes and cross check the thematic analysis.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility involves the ability of the researcher to demonstrate a true reflection of what is happening in the actual environment. To maintain credibility in this research study, the participants were asked to provide honest responses to the variety of questions that follow the hypothetical scenarios. The participant was reminded that this not an attempt to embarrass them or accuse them of job performance inefficiency. Instead, the participants were advised that data that they provide will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by providing data to the public policy decision-makers when reforming training and best practices for sexual assault investigations. Participants were informed that the survey was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and their individual responses were confidential.

Transferability

There was little known research about how law enforcement officers evaluate the credibility of sexual assault victims. Thus, thick description was important. Thick descriptions provide future researchers with detailed information about the phenomenon to determine if the study is useful and transferable (Mills et al., 2010). There were complexed layers and a lot have to be considered when describing the investigative process during sexual assault investigations. Thus, people may find it difficult to understand certain terminology, concepts, or processes that it takes to complete sexual assault investigations. The use of thick description allowed the researcher to ensure that even those without first-hand knowledge can understand the study without having to research several variables.

Dependability

Triangulation was employed by me to advance the credibility of the collected information. Triangulation is a method of collecting data or using multiple approaches to analyze data to enhance the credibility of a research study (Salkind, 2010). In addition, triangulation will provide some support if the participants are being dishonest. A research journal and audit trail were kept noting any additional dependability or general occurrences throughout this research study. The audit trail was provided as a guide to allow the study to be replicated.

Confirmability

A reflective journal was used to document feelings, sentiments, and general occurrences during the research process. The journal helped to assist with understanding

the views of the researcher throughout the study. In addition, the reflective journal highlighted any potential biasness and preconceptions.

Ethical Measures

To satisfy ethical concerns related to recruitment, data collection, and confidentiality, the participation was voluntary and the response to the interview questions was done without any external pressure on the participant. For those participants that chose to withdraw from the study, their responses were destroyed. Participants were able to keep their responses confidential along with their identities by completing the questionnaire online. No data collected regarding an officer's identity or consent was accessible to anyone. A copy of the study's findings was provided to the law enforcement agency upon completion. The data collected is stored within the survey platform and exported to an external hard drive for approximately five (5) years from the date of the final publication will be locked in a storage area at my residence. Law enforcement officers were not provided an incentive for completing the questionnaire.

Summary

This chapter includes the purpose of the research design, methodology, and procedural steps used to collect data from participants in this study. Upon research approval, letter of recruitments was sent out to heads of all law enforcement agencies located in Dougherty County, Georgia. Participants were provided scenarios involving rape and completed an online questionnaire to explore and understand how they investigated sexual assault crimes. Questionnaires were voluntary and confidential. Data were gathered and analyzed for themes and code words and phrases. Computer software

was used to further analyze and cross check results. Chapter 4 includes study findings and results.

Chapter 4: Results

The aim of this study was to explore and understand how law enforcement officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during the investigation process. This was accomplished by using vignettes that resemble real cases to collect data and answer qualitative open-ended questions. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, there was little research on this topic. The primary focus was implications that guide decisions of law enforcement officers during sexual assault investigations, how sexual assault investigators view alleged victims, how alleged victims view sexual assault investigators, and how they address victim credibility. This study involved contributing to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by providing data to criminal justice professionals when reforming best practices for sexual assault investigations.

The following RQs were used to guide this study:

RQ1: What personal beliefs or cognitive bases underlie views of investigators about sexual assault victims?

RQ2: How does training, police subculture, and other factors influence police perceptions of victims of sexual assault?

This chapter includes results of this study. In addition, I address the setting, demographics, data collection and analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

To gain access to participants, I used the digital directory supplied to the public by the Albany Police Department. Directories list telephone numbers, email addresses, and job titles for personnel. Emails were sent to potential participants identified as

investigators via the agency's personnel directory, requesting their participation in the study. Once potential participants responded to emails and agreed to participate in this study, they were emailed invitations and letters of consent. Participants were asked to respond to original emails by typing the words "I consent." Interviews were conducted via telephone using audio only. Participants were asked to find a quiet area before interviews started. After interviews concluded, participants were informed that within 7 days, they would be sent emails which contained verbatim transcriptions of interviews. The purpose was to give them the opportunity to review transcripts in order to clarify answers or confirm that answers were stated as intended.

Demographics

Participants were certified peace officers and involved law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia. The county has four major law enforcement agencies: Albany Police Department, Dougherty County School System Police Department, Dougherty County Police Department, and Dougherty County Sheriff's Department. All agencies employ sworn and unsworn personnel. Demographics (sex, race, gender, age, education, and rank) were collected via the prescreening questionnaire. In addition, I gathered demographic data regarding length of time employed with their respective agencies and if officers ever had over 40 hours of sexual assault training. These questions were pertinent in terms of addressing depth of experiences, training, and development of officers.

The Albany Police Department employs a total of 124 officers, of which 37 are female and 87 are male. The Criminal Investigations Bureau has 25 investigators; 10

Black females, 10 Black males, and five White males. Some participants are no longer in investigations. Table 1 includes race and gender of officers who participated and met criteria. Officers were allowed to participate regardless of race and gender. As stated in Chapter 3, while some officers were assigned to investigations specifically, other officers may have worked as investigators in previous roles. Although invitations to participate and consent forms were sent to numerous officers, only six officers met criteria. After completing prescreening questions to determine eligibility, five participants were eliminated, and one rescinded consent. As a result, seven participants were eligible to participate, but saturation was reached with six participants.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants (N = 6)

| Participant | Sex | Race | Experience | 40 Hours of Sexual Assault Training |
|--------------------|------------|-------------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | F | Black | 15 – 20 | Yes |
| 2 | F | Black | 10-15 | Yes |
| 3 | M | Black | 25-30 | Yes |
| 4 | M | Black | 25-30 | Yes |
| 5 | F | Black | 5-10 | Yes |
| 6 | F | Black | 5-10 | No |

Participant Narratives Involving Experiences with Sexual Assault Investigation

The following are brief narrative descriptions of participants which provides background information about the participant and their role as a sexual assault

investigator. This section contains direct quotes and/or paraphrases and was obtained from the research instrument (see Appendix C).

P1 is a female police investigator. She has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 15 to 20 years. P1 stated she has attended more than 40 hours of sexual assault training while working as a sexual assault investigator. She further indicated she only attended these trainings to enhance her skills as being a sexual assault investigator. Moreover, trainings have taught her what to look for and what questions to ask during investigation.

P2 is a female police investigator. She has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 10 to 15 years. P2 stated she attended at least 40 hours of sexual assault training while working as a sexual assault investigator. She further stated training teaches investigators how to use tact when dealing with sensitive situations and how not to ask leading questions so that victims do not feel revictimized.

P3 is a male police investigator. He has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 25 to 30 years. P3 stated that he has attended more than 40 hours of sexual assault training while working as a sexual assault investigator. He further stated that the sexual assault training taught him not to be overly opinionated and assertive kind of helps the victim open up. This gives the investigator a chance to build a rapport with the victim so that they feel comfortable with discussing personal and invasive things.

P4 is a male police investigator. He has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 25 to 30 years. P4 stated has attended at least 40 hours of sexual assault

training while working as a sexual assault investigator. Knowledge, training, and experience taught him what type of evidence to look for and collect.

P5 is a female police investigator. She has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 5 to 10 years. P5 stated she has attended at least 40 hours of sexual assault training while working as a sexual assault investigator. She said training involving sexual assault investigation taught her what cues and body language to look for to tell if a person is not truthful.

P6 is a female police investigator. She has been employed with the Albany Police Department for 5 to 10 years. P6 stated she has not attended any sexual assault training. However, P6 stated she has attended training involving other aspects of the specialized unit. P6 said she was unable to attend training at the time because of manpower shortage.

Data Collection

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research study on August 30, 2022 (approval #08-30-22-0975273). There were no data collected prior to approval from the IRB. The data collection period was from August 31 to September 11, 2022.

Creswell (2013) suggested a sample size of at least 10 to 20 is desired to reach saturation. For this study, I desired 10 to 15 participants. There were 18 officers identified as investigators. However, only 13 responded to invitations to participate. After completing the prescreening questions to determine eligibility, five of the participants were eliminated and one rescinded consent. As a result, seven participants were eligible to participate, but saturation was reached with six participants.

All interviews were conducted by myself and scheduled at the convenience of the participants. The participants completed the interview containing open-ended questions which were scheduled to last 90 minutes or less. Telephone recordings were the only method of data recording used for this study.

Once the interviews concluded, recordings were transcribed to a written verbatim format. For the member checking process, the transcript was sent back to the participants for review to clarify or correct any errors. If the participant did find any errors, they participants were asked to put the corrections in the email response body. None of the participants indicated that changes needed to be made to the transcript. This process was not expected to exceed 30 minutes for each participant.

All files were saved on a password protected media storage device. The media storage device along with written and printed materials were stored in a locked filing area in the storage room of my residence and will be kept for five (5) years after the final publication of the results.

Procedures of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis process was deployed to process data in this study. According to Patton (2014), this process finds common recurring themes and experiences. As explained previously in Chapter 3, the thematic process is familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, and the result's write up. Data analyzation will be explained in this chapter.

Familiarization

This step began during the transcription of the interviews. I took time to read the responses and reviewed notes I made in my reflective journal during and after each interview. Special attention was given to answers in relation to the notes I took about the tone of participants and how open I felt they were during the interview. I took notes about portions of the interview and reviewed them later in data coding.

Coding

After becoming familiar with the data, I began the coding process. Coding was completed without using a codebook as a guide. This was done to allow the use of raw data to create themes based on my interpretation of the responses from participants. Chandra and Shang (2019) describes this as inductive coding.

To organize the data, I created a chart in Microsoft Word to code the data sentence-by-sentence. The first column the questions and responses from the interview. The second column contained only the phrase that I used to code the response. The final column contained the code that resulted from the sentence. This process was completed for each interview after the member checking step was completed by each participant, and continued until no new codes were discovered and saturation was evident.

Generating, Reviewing, and Themes

Through the use of inductive coding, 45 themes emerged (see Appendixes E and F). Each vignette was coded separately. Coding the vignettes separately allowed for an examination of the results for consistency. For each vignette, the codes were first listed to

eliminate the duplicates. For example, the code “evidence” appeared several times throughout both vignettes and were merged to reflect the total number of occurrences.

Next, codes were grouped based on their relevance to the research questions and vignette questions. To illustrate the relationship between the research questions, vignette questions and codes the participants’ responses were grouped. For examples, RQ2 asks about factors that influence police perception. Several of the participants indicated that they consider evidence, testimony, and prior incident history based on their experience when working sexual assaults cases. Those codes were grouped as one factor that influence police perception.

Codes were grouped in meanings and patterns based on their relationship. Those groups were given names and then developed into themes as the coding process was being completed. Five primary themes emerged from the analysis: inaction or reluctance of reporting, victim stories about offenders, sources investigator rely on to evaluate victim credibility, professional development, and timing of reporting. Some codes derived from being grouped into more than one theme based on the data elements found within the code. For example, the code victim’s history was grouped into the themes investigator’s view of parties involved and role of evidence.

NVivo was used to cross-check my coding against the auto code feature that is imbedded in the software. The questions and responses from the vignettes were placed in the program. Codes were entered that I found during hand coding and the software processed the data against my codes. A comparison of hand coding and auto coding were

conducted. I found that some phrases in the responses were coded, but given different names similar to the name I assigned.

Figure 3

Similarities and Differences Between Responses

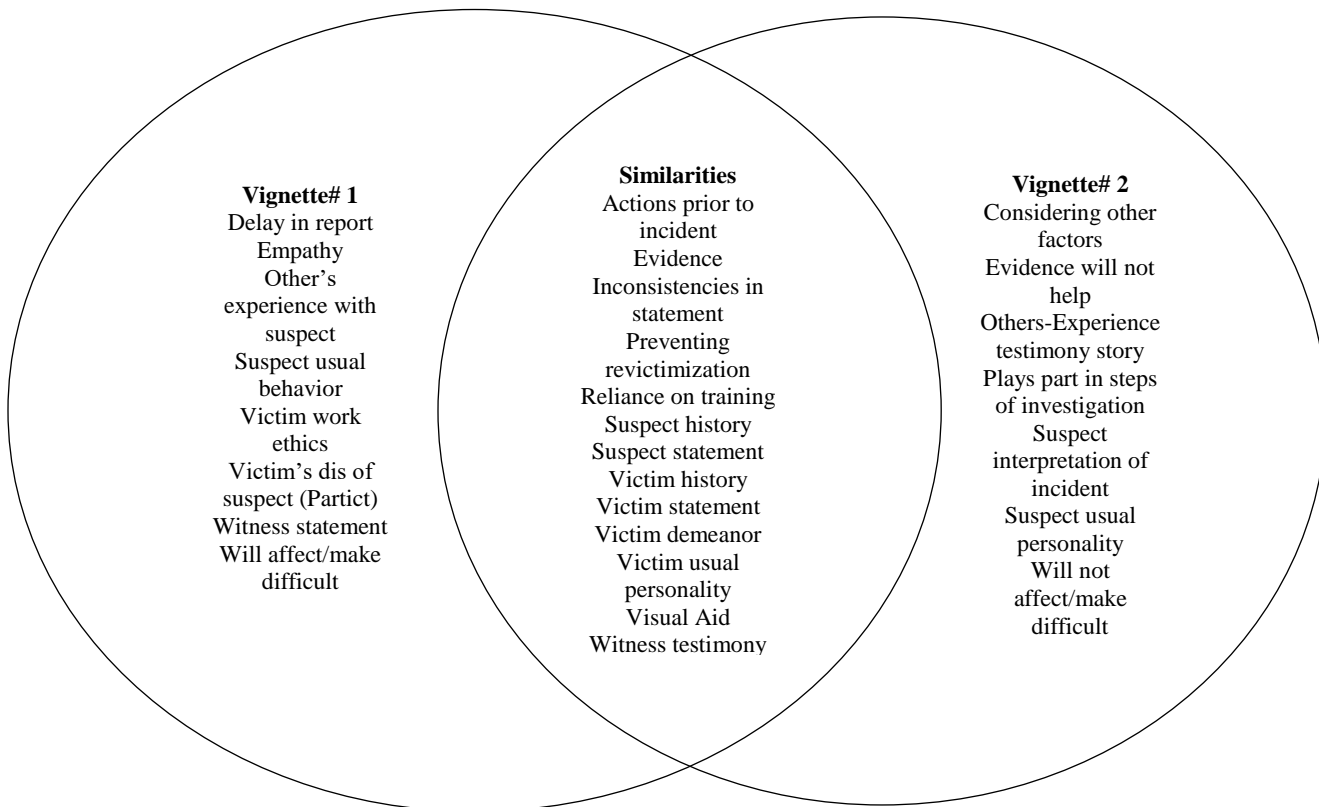


Figure 3 illustrates the differences and similarities between the responses to the two vignettes in terms of how the participants perceived accusers' credibility and how they arrived at their conclusion/decision about the accuser's credibility.

Results of Thematic Analysis

Five themes emerged from the interview responses to how they evaluate the credibility of the sexual assault victims. These themes can be grouped by two underlying factors as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Five Themes

| | Themes | Respondent | Research Q Relevance |
|---|--|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Inaction or Reluctance of Reporting | P1, P2, P5, P6 | Q1 |
| 2 | Victim Story About Offender | P1, P2, P6 | Q1 |
| 3 | Sources Investigators Rely on to Evaluate Victim Credibility | All Participants | Q1 |
| 4 | Professional Development | All Participants | Q2 |
| 5 | Timing of Reporting | P1, P2, P4, P6 | Q2 |

The final step of the thematic analysis process was a write-up of the study's results. The emerging themes and codes located in Appendix E and F were used to answer the research questions for this study. The responses from the participants in this research study answered each research question in this section.

RQ1: What personal beliefs or cognitive bases underlie views of investigators about sexual assault victims?

To address this question, participants were asked how they determine if a sexual assault victim is credible during investigations. They were also asked what additional

steps they would take during a sexual assault investigation to determine if the victim's story is credible.

Themes Answering RQ1

Theme 1: Inaction or Reluctance of Reporting

As a sexual assault investigator, four of the six participants stated that a factor that they would consider during a sexual investigation is that they would look at the victim's usual personality. For example, in Lisa's case, her coworker notices that Lisa is not as bubbly as usual and decides to ask her what was troubling her. According to Vignette#1, a coworker advises Lisa, the victim, to report the incident that transpired between her and the principal. However, despite the colleague's efforts to convince her to report the issue, Lisa did not take immediate action. It takes her two months to gather the courage and confidence to report the problem. P6 said, "A victim's demeanor in a case is very important because several rape victim's demeanor changed after such a traumatic experience. Most of them become sad and depressed. Some of them even become suicidal." Moreover, as indicated in the Appendix A, the main reasons that Lisa provides to justify her reluctance to report are that she felt ashamed, dirty, and embarrassed. According to P1, all these descriptions are an indication that Lisa was not driven by her personal motives to report the incident but by external forces. As a result, this might make her credibility look questionable.

Theme 2: Victim Stories About Offenders

Three of the six participants advised that they would listen to the victim's statement in terms of if they can provide any personal identifying marks on the suspect.

P1, P2, and P6 stated that they would use the fact that the victim was able to identify the principal's tattoo near his genital area in Vignette# 1. P2 stated, "If the victim had never seen the suspect with his pants down, she would not know that the suspect has a tattoo." After getting the victim's statement, P6 advised, "I would get a statement from the suspect and ask if he had any tattoos. I would also ask for the location of the tattoos. If his responses align with her story, I would be inclined to believe her." P6 further advised that in Vignette#2, the victim's actions the night before such as being under the influence of alcohol and allowing the suspect to touch her inappropriately might suggest that she was comfortable with his Nick's behavior and wanted a sexual relationship with him.

Theme 3: Sources Investigators Rely on to Evaluate Victim Credibility

Three of the six participants stated that they would retrieve and review the surveillance footage from the school to ascertain if Lisa is credible. P2 stated, "she would obtain the video footage to see when the victim entered the office and how her demeanor was when she entered in comparison to how her demeanor was when she exited the office." P1 stated, "I would review the surveillance video footage to see if the victim was pulling down or tugging down the tail of her dress and reaching to wipe her face."

Responses to Vignette #2 provided participants an opportunity to view a different scenario as they gave responses to the victim Stacy. Stacy is driven by her own interests to report her rape incident. Although she is still in disbelief and does not approve of Nick's actions, she does not seek advice from anyone on whether she should report the incident or not. As P1 explained, "Although this does not necessarily demonstrate the truthfulness or credibility of the information that she provides, it does indicate her

disapproval of Nick's actions." Unlike Lisa, Stacy does not wait to be pushed by a third party. The advisable thing to do in this case according all six of the participants in this study is for the officer to look for other sources to back up the information provided by the victim. P4 said:

Determining how long they have been friends, has she had any other incidents or reports that would fall in line with the same thing, or any other allegations made against someone else that may have been not found to be true or just using her history just doing a history on her. As a matter of fact, doing a history on both, checking their criminal records and backgrounds.

According to P3, the steps that she would take next to determine credibility of the victims' stories are as follows. In the case of Lisa, "I first compare the allegations of the principal and those of Lisa and note the contradictory messages between them." In Stacy's case, the steps to ascertain credibility according to the P3 is that he would first peruse through the records to search for any information that would make her story questionable. For example, her behavior of washing her clothes before reporting the incident would make her story seems a little questionable whether the sexual act was consensual or not. However, several participants advised that there are several victims that do not know the time frame that a law enforcement can collect DNA evidence from clothing or from their body. Specifically, P3 stated, "The clothing was not a big issue. Unfortunately, without a third-party individual witness it would be the difficult thing to prove." Next, the participant along with other advised that they would note down any supporting information from the DNA test that would support the victim's claim.

However, P1 and P6 advised that just because the sexual assault examination may reveal that the victims may have scars or some tearing, that does not mean that the victim was sexual assault. “This could indicate that the victim may have had rough sexual intercourse,” said P6.

Several of the participants advised that they would combine all of the information such as background, criminal history, statements from all parties involved and witnesses involved, and sexual assault examination results to check for any contradictory information that would compromise the truth. P6 stated that by looking into how many times a person has called the police and what type of incidences they called for may tell officers if the person is credible. She further advised that the call history will show if the victim has reported other rape allegations or if there are any other cases that the suspect was involved in. In addition, P6 advised it would provide a background information on the victim or suspect so that she could have a better insight on all parties involved.

P1 explains that she would use the victim’s emotions to detect the truthfulness of the information they provide and view the differences in their stories. For example, in Vignette# 1, Lisa’s description is noted that she seemed bubbly and vibrant. Normally, non-verbal cues can be used to notice the impact of an incident on a victim (Van Doorn & Koster, 2019). On the other hand, conducting a follow-up to ascertain whether a leadership position was awarded to a different teacher would help clarify the validity of the principal’s information. According to P1, doing so would help the officer’s collect data to support the allegations of each of the members, which would in turn enhance the believability of the person giving the correct data. P3 stated, “he would re-interview the

victim and the suspect to see if they gave the same set of circumstances that they initially gave when he first interviewed them, if either one of their stories changed, has there been any new details added or taken away from what he or she initially stated to the officer.” P3 further stated that he would contact others such as human resources to see if there were any other allegations made against the victim or suspect to help corroborate either of their stories when it comes to Vignette# 1. P4 stated that he would re-interview the victim or the suspect if he needed something clarified after speaking to them. P4 further stated, “he would interview other employees in Vignette#1 to determine if there has been anybody else that has dealt with the principal in the sense of him making passes or sexual advances towards them.”

According to P2, when it comes to Vignette #2, she would view the differences in Stacy’s and Nick’s stories as a point of reference to determine who is lying and enhance the believability of the real victim. In this case, the behavior of the two parties sitting on the couch willingly might actually insinuate that both of them were ready for some form of sexual interaction. Moreover, P2 and P6 explain that the absence of any information to corroborate Stacy’s story might actually enhance the believability of Nick’s statement. P3 advised that if there were any witnesses to either of Lisa or Stacy’s incident, he would get a statement from them to help establish credibility. For example, P6 advised that if she contacted any Nick’s neighbors and if one of them stated that they heard Stacy yelling for help and saying “no” loudly, this would make her more inclined to be that Stacy in Vignette #2 was credible.

RQ2: How does training, police subculture, and other factors influence police perceptions of victims of sexual assault?

Participants were asked two questions in order to address the question. The participants were asked about how their training, police subculture, and other factors what influence their perceptions or experience when investigating sexual assault cases. Second, the participants were asked about what decisions or judgment guided them during a sexual assault investigation.

Themes Answering RQ2

Theme 4: Professional Development

The theme professional development consisted of many ways that law enforcement officers gain new skills or knowledge that they can apply through continued education that can help assist them in their job. Five out of six of the participants advised that they have attended sexual assault training. Three of the participants indicated that through their training and experience when dealing with sensitive cases, an investigator must show empathy, compassion, and not make the victim feels as if they were at fault for being sexually assaulted. P3 stated, “It is hard being a male investigator investigating sex crimes with a female victim who has been violated by a man.” So, by being compassionate and not being overly opinionated or assertive kind of helps the victim to open up. In turn, this will allow the investigator to build a rapport with the victim to where they are comfortable to discuss something that is so personal and invasive with the investigator.”

According to P3, he has attended more than 40 hours of sexual assault training while working as a sexual assault investigator. He stated that one of the sexual assault courses covered how to respond to victims of sexual assault offenses from the victim-centered perspective. In addition, he stated that the course provided him with the basic and advanced skills to help him improve his response to sexually assault cases. Another one of the sexual assault courses that he took he stated that it provided him with skills to assist with initially responding to a sexual assault case, incorporated a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach along with providing him with techniques of an offender-based response and cultural competency while investigating sexual assault cases.

Three of the six participants advised that through interviews and interrogation training, they learned how not to use leading questions. P2 stated, “Her training pretty much taught her how to talk to a victim and get as much information without revictimizing the victim.” In addition, P2 advised that taking interviews and interrogation course helped with understanding how to use tact when dealing with sensitive cases so that you do not ask leading questions. P2 further stated that she has 10-15 years of police experience and has taken over 40 hours of sexual assault training. One of the courses that she took was Sexual Assault Investigation: Understanding Trauma and its Impact on Victims of Sexual Assault. In that course, P2 stated that she learned various skills and techniques about how to respond to sexual assault calls for service and how to recognize psychological trauma and techniques to effectively interact with victims without revictimizing them during a sexual assault investigation.

According to P4, courses like interviews and interrogation helps an officer with knowing the line of questioning to use. P4 advised that he has over 40 hours of sexual assault training. In addition, he advised that he has taken and interviews and interrogation course. In the interview and interrogation course, he stated that the course taught him the fundamentals of interviews and interrogation along with teaching topics such as methodology, behavior symptom analysis, elements of an interrogation, and elements of an interview. Moreover, P4 advised that he has between 25-30 years of experience as a police officer and has been in several roles within the department that he is employed in.

P1 explained that in Vignette #1, her training and experience with sexual assault investigations would enable her to decipher if any party involved was not so truthful because of his interviews and interrogations skills. For example, she stated that “the principal confirming that he has a tattoo on his pelvic area with the word power on it automatically makes him guilty.” To justify her conclusion, she explains that guilty people often contradict the information they provide. In addition, in this case, she states that if the principal was telling the truth about him stopping Lisa when she was trying to pull his pants down, then she would not have seen the tattoo on his genital area.

In contrast in Vignette #2, two of the participants stated that their training and experience taught them to look at the physical evidence to ascertain if the sexual encounter between a victim and suspect was consensual or not. P3 stated that there was a sexual assault examination done in this scenario which depicted that male DNA was found unlike in the first vignette. Both the victim and suspect advised that there was a sexual encounter whether consensual or not. P3 stated, “Usually in his experience, sexual

assault exams will also indicate if there are any injuries consistent with a sexual assault such as tearing or things of that nature.” P3 further advised that she took a sexual assault evidence course which provided him with the skills and techniques for identifying, collecting, and preserving evidence while explaining rapist typologies during a sexual assault investigation. P6 stated that she had not attended over more than 40 hours of sexual assault training. P6 advised that she learned a lot about how to investigate sexual assault cases from her peers. She further advised that she had on the job training and that her training officer made it seem as if physical evidence dictates whether or not the victim was credible.

Theme 5: Timing of Reporting

P2 stated when a victim waits to report a sexually assault it makes a case hard to prove because depending on the delay, you will not be able to obtain physical evidence such as DNA. Especially, since in Vignette #1, the suspect is denying any type of penetration. P2 said, “Due to her waiting months, the sexual assault examination is no longer available and when the victim washed her clothing, she destroyed evidence which hinders the investigation.” P2 further stated that law enforcement officers make some of their decisions about sexual assault victims credibility based on physical evidence. According to the just world theory, an investigator might blame the victim for her actions because of a delayed report and for lack of evidence.

As P1 stated, “Nowadays, courts want to see physical evidence.” Normally, people might be tempted to conclude that individuals who report rape incidences as soon as possible are telling the truth, but unless there is supporting evidence, this claim

remains to be a myth. For instance, P3 explains that although Lisa in Vignette# 1 took time before he could report the issue, the information that she provides supports the claim that she was raped. This includes about the tattoo on the principal's pelvic area and the data captured by the surveillance footage. In Vignette# 2, however, although Stacy reported her sexual assault allegations as soon as possible, P6 stated that it still might be hard for an officer to ascertain the credibility of her case due to a lack of adequate support. Moreover, the manner in which the victim behaved and the fact that she was drinking while she was with Nick might suggest that she was comfortable with his behavior. P2 stated that she has worked a case where the victim has told the suspect "no" during their sexual encounter and did not mean it. In that particular case, P2 advised that the victim was just upset that the suspect did not want to be her boyfriend after their sexual encounter and filed a police report. P2 stated that when she and some of her peers here cases as the one that she described and Vignette# 2, they sometimes automatically believe that the victim is not truthful and began to sometimes blame the victim for their actions. P2 further stated that this makes it challenging to believe a victim if they are under the influence of alcohol or any other illegal substance. P6 stated that sometimes she was biased towards the victim if they are under the influence of drugs and alcohol and knows her rapist like in Vignette#2. She further stated that her attitude or beliefs were sometimes the product of other her peers because when she arrived on the scene, the initial officer has already deemed the victim as not being credible because the report was delayed and there was no tangible evidence.

Results Summary

The comparison of the two vignettes helps demonstrate how interviews can be used to collect information concerning different issues. A comparison of the participants' responses shows the difference in stories provided by the two victims, Stacy and Lisa. Essentially, the vignettes provided the research with an effective platform for discussion on the research topic, particularly because the participants tended to be reluctant to share sensitive about their real-life experiences. Additionally, the comparison of the two vignettes increased credibility because the approach stimulates real-world situations, hence providing the researcher with additional evidence to support the participants' response. Overall, by comparing two vignettes, the research access valuable insights into the factors influencing participants' lived experiences across different scenarios. This, in turn, influences of believability, credibility, and reliability of the information they provide. Concerning theme 4, exploring the materials used by investigators to reinforce their cognitive process, the theme helped inform the decisions made by the officer concerning the truthfulness of the two victims. The theme demonstrated how sexual assault training is essential to avoid re-traumatizing the victim during sexual assault investigations. Theme 4 focused on professional development to improve professionalism in investigations, consequently, the theme was instrumental in revealing training as the key to an effective investigation. The trainings taught the investigators what type of questions to ask, provided knowledge and awareness about how to treat victims, what to look for, who to look for, how to obtain consistent information from a victim, and what type of evidence was relevant to a sexual assault investigation to determine if the victim

was credible and believable. Theme 5 was also useful in reinforcing findings established in theme 4, where the timing of reporting guided the process, decisions, and perception of investigations. Generally, from the results, it can be observed that themes 3, 4, 5 complemented the findings in themes 1 and 2, in revealing the materials used by investigators, as well as how professionalism and timing of reporting influence the decision-making process. For example, the officers also noted that training keeps them alert to their personal biases that could influence their judgment and behavior during investigations.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

An expert panel was assembled along with the Delphi method were used to make sure the validity of the instrument. The participants in this study were asked to provide answers to the open-ended questions based on their perceptions and their lived experiences relative. The credibility was established by the six participants who confirmed that they met the criteria to participate in this research study. No deviations from the strategy outlined in Chapter 3 were recorded.

Transferability

According to Ponterotto (2015), thick description refers to the researcher's describing and interpreting the observed behavior or social action within a particular context. The use of thick description enhances the value of the research. In addition, it allows future research the opportunity to evaluate the usefulness and transferability of the research in future research studies. In this study, thick description was evident based on

the participants' answers. All answers were coded, placed into categories, and several different themes emerged. The thematic process was demonstrated in this chapter that was explained in chapter three. No deviations from the strategy outlined in chapter three were recorded.

Dependability

A reflective journal and audit trail were used to document feelings, sentiments, and general occurrences during the research process. The entries detailed steps taken before and after the interviews and coding procedures that were used during analyzation during the process. The participants provided information in their responses that only sexual assault investigators would know that investigate sexual assault cases. There was no way to verify their responses because of confidentiality. The participants were reminded of their role in this study and the importance of responding truthfully. The prescreening questions along with specific questions asked during the interviews also supported dependability by allowing the participants to display their willingness to be honest when answering questions. There were no deviations or adjustments made to the dependability strategies outlined in Chapter 3.

Confirmability

To eliminate the occurrence of bias research methods, a reflective journal was kept as indicated in Chapter 3. Entries made during the research process were used to ensure that the research was free from opinions and reflected only the information given by participants. Also, the journal detailed the research process that I used during data

collection, processing the data, and completing the results write-up. There were no changes made from those outlined in Chapter 3.

Summary

The chapter includes results for the study. After approval from the IRB, emails were sent to potential participants. Thirteen officers responded to invitations to participate. Six participants satisfied criteria for participation. Participants were asked open-ended questions to explore how law enforcement officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. Data were collected until there was sufficient evidence for data saturation to occur.

Data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis process. Results were used to answer two research questions. Findings suggest participants expressed that character flaws are determined by considering all evidence, whether real or circumstantial. Participants mostly shared that training involving sexual assault provided them with knowledge and skills to ascertain if victims were reliable, believable, and credible during investigations. Chapter 5 includes interpretations of findings, limitation of the study, recommendations, implications for positive social change, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how law enforcement officers evaluate credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. I provided insights regarding how law enforcement officers perceive credibility of sexual assault victims based on identifying character flaws, job stress, case load volumes, and organizational structure. I addressed how law enforcement officers investigating sexual assaults evaluate victim credibility as well as their views of alleged victims, as well as views of alleged victims about investigators. Participants in this study were certified peace officers who worked as law enforcement officers in Dougherty County, Georgia.

Interpretation of the Findings

According to current literature, when completing sexual assault investigations, victim credibility is a critical component in criminal justice outcomes. Law enforcement officers should not presume that alleged victims are not credible, or presume the accused is innocent during sexual assault investigations (Greeson et al., 2016). Instead, law enforcement officers should find culpable individuals alongside evidence to prove guilt. However, victim credibility is a crucial factor that determines the order of investigative activities and officer stability during investigations (Growette et al., 2021). In the same context, literature suggests that consistency of victim testimonies, victim reputations, and mental health are significant factors in terms of assessing victim credibility when investigating a purported sexual assault case. Consequently, based on results from additional steps investigators take during investigations to determine victim credibility, they usually evaluate victim stories along with other circumstantial and physical

evidence. Usual personality, personal motives, and corroborating evidence such as personal identifying markers or information on suspects helps determine credibility of victims and cases (Leverick, 2020).

Personal demeanor in terms of victims' behaviors and conduct were also considered to ascertain credibility; investigators are convinced that how victims behaved before, during, and after the alleged assault significantly influenced the credibility and criminal justice outcome. Alderden and Ullman (2012) contended if victims are intoxicated during the time of the incident, investigators tend to view them or reports negatively compared to non-intoxicated cases. According to Venema (2019), investigators are biased toward alleged victims, mainly in terms of their behaviors or history. Besides personal beliefs, the study adds evidence that investigators' cognitive basis is significantly influenced by additional information from past criminal records and background information of victims. Essentially, victims with criminal records tend to lack credibility in sexual assault cases.

Findings further suggest that without a third-party witness, it is challenging to determine victims' credibility because biases are significantly influenced by past criminal records and background information of victims. Also, without a third-party witness, it is challenging to determine victims' credibility because of cognitive and personal belief factors underlying investigators' biases. The study confirms that these two factors are influential in terms of determining sexual assault victims, inconsistencies in victim statements, background information, demeanor, and motives. Investigators' decisions are

mainly guided by their perceptions of victims' characteristics and demeanor (Alderden & Ullman, 2012).

Theoretical Interpretation of Findings

Victim demeanor plays a crucial role in terms of deciding whether criminal acts committed against woman are regarded as harmful, positive, or neither. Investigators' assessment and credibility decisions might be influenced by personal beliefs due to gender stereotyping. Findings suggest that consistent and individualized behaviors and demeanor are significant factors influencing the criterion to assess credibility. For example, personal motives to report cases significantly influence investigators' personal beliefs, assumptions, and cognitive basis when assessing credibility.

In the case of a conservatively clad victim who does not demonstrate suspicious behavior involving drugs and alcoholism, it is not difficult to prove credibility (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Based on the theory and study findings, victims' demeanor increased chances of investigators who blame victims. If investigators are adequately guided by prosecutorial guidelines when conducting assessments, this ensures sound decision-making. Even investigators are prone to making wrong decisions influenced by their personal beliefs and cognitive biases. From this perspective, different inferences drawn from circumstantial evidence are crucial in terms of influencing investigators' credibility decisions. Victims' demeanor plays a crucial role in terms of justifying rape and assault in U.S. society and among prosecutors.

Limitations of the Study

The results from this study revealed several indicators of how police investigators view the credibility of victim's involved in sexual assault investigations. One of the limits this study had was the number of participants included in the study. The participants used during this study were from a small unit within a large investigations' bureau. Thus, there was a small population to gather participants.

Other limitations of the study were described in Chapter 1. First, there was a concern that there would be difficulties in terms of achieving data saturation. However, saturation was quickly achieved. Second, there was uncertainty if participants would accept to join the study because they might face difficulties in terms of divulging information on the issue under investigation. There were considerable efforts made to ensure there was no breach of confidentiality and participants were comfortable sharing information on the subject. Vignettes involving rape were used with law enforcement officers who completed an online survey, which may have inadvertently influenced responses of participants. Because majority of the participants were female investigators, there may be an unrecognized biasness towards sexual assault victims by those female investigators. This, in turn, may affect sexual assault investigations because some female practitioners may not be more sensitive towards victims of sexual assault than male investigators. Although the term rape was defined in Chapter 1, it is still possible participants misinterpreted this definition.

Recommendations

Victim character flaws, inconsistencies in stories, and demeanor significantly increase likelihood of investigators questioning their credibility. Likewise, considering that study findings predominately depend on oral procedures in which victims report their incidents to investigators or prosecutors, I recommend future research consider investigators' discretion and how extralegal factors influence their question credibility when making decisions to arrest suspects. More research is needed to understand how investigators' social and cultural backgrounds influence victims' credibility. Little is known about how police characteristics, attributes, and behaviors impact their credibility and decision-making abilities.

Additionally, the current literature does not delve into how investigators' characteristics and legal factors particularly challenge victims' credibility. The current study targeted police officers with minimum work experience, gender, race, and age were not considered as determining factors for eligibility. Future studies should include the effects of investigators' behaviors and social and cultural background to influence the credibility outcomes. Future studies should also be completed to understand the role of police characteristics and behaviors in the underreporting of sexual assault cases. Investigators' credibility decisions are crucial in determining whether complaints will or will not lead to arrest or prosecution. Completing such studies may also aid policy makers and agency chiefs when considering policy development, policy implementation, and training.

Finally, as stated in the limitations, the sample size for this study was from a small investigations bureau within the agencies selected. Thus, there were not many participants included in the sample size. Future studies should replicate this study to gather a greater sample size to determine if the results will change or new empirical data will be developed.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Social change has been the primary factor that influences social researchers (Buschlen & Reusch, 2016). It is the investigators' sole aim to explore viable mechanisms that are hidden to members of society, hence providing a solution meant to create changes within the community. Therefore, social change becomes the driving force for social researchers to commit their valuable efforts, resources, and time to investigate the subject matter (Buschlen & Reusch, 2016). The victims of the heinous acts are subjected to massive injustices by the authorities that are supposed to be the custodians of laws. The development has encouraged the perpetrators of the acts due to the police's strict measures and the threshold by the existing criminal justice system to prove that a rape case actually transpired (Rankin et al., 2017).

Social change in criminal justice is reflective of how all people of society is treated. Recently, society has been focusing in mental health, criminal justice reform in sentencing disparities, and other issue. There is not argument that these are important issues. However, for decades justice for the victim is often overlooked.

While this study's aim was to investigate factors law enforcement use when determining the credibility of sexual assault victims, there are social change implication

that reaches far beyond the results of this study. For law enforcement agencies, the results of this study could influence reform in the changing mechanisms deployed when teaching investigators how to properly interview and assess the victim's credibility. Additionally, some law enforcement agencies should want to re-evaluate their procedures and policies surrounding sexual assault investigations. State and federal legislators should also note the results of this study when considering legislation that impacts victims in their quest for justice in the criminal justice system. Finally, for victims, studies like these reassure victims that they do have a "voice at the table" fighting for their rights and treatment under the law.

Conclusion

This purpose of this study was to explore and understand how law enforcement officers evaluate the credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. Previous to this study, a noticeable gap in the body of literature was recognized because no one had explored how law enforcement officers determine how credible a victim is and how that affects the investigation into their findings

This generic qualitative study included six participants who were read two vignettes depicting rape to see how they interpret sexual assault crimes followed by interview questions. Specific questions were asked to see how the officers perceived the credibility of sexual assault victims based on their criteria of identifying the character flaws, job stress, case load volumes, and organizational structure. A thematic analysis process was deployed using inductive coding to analyze the results.

All codes were grouped into categories meanings and patterns based on their relationship. Those groups were given names which developed into themes as the coding process was being completed. The renaming of the themes continued until their name in relation to the research questions was understandable.

Through the use of inductive coding, there were 45 that emerged. Each vignette was coded separated. There were three themes that emerged from the data: the investigator's view of the parties involved, the role evidence, the knowledge of sexual assault investigations. Some codes derived from being grouped into more than one theme based on the data elements found within the code.

The findings suggest that in sexual assault cases, victim credibility is a critical component in criminal justice outcomes. In the same context, the literature suggests that victims' consistency of testimony, reputation, and mental health are significant factors to be considered when determining victims' credibility in a purported sexual assault case. Generally, the findings affirm that without a third-party witness, it challenging to determine victims' credibility because of biases from cognitive basis is significantly influenced by additional information from past criminal records and background information of the victims. The findings further indicate that without a third-party witness, it is challenging to determine victims' credibility because of biases from cognitive and personal belief factors underlying the investigators' view. The study found that these two factors are influential in determining sexual assault victims, where inconsistencies in victims' statements, background information, demeanors, and motives

play a crucial role in determining credibility. Based on the theory and study findings, the victims' demeanor increased the chances of victim-blaming investigators.

This study was chosen because as a former sexual assault investigator, I witnessed officers and victims' interactions for nearly seven years. Sometimes it is lost upon the officers of the critical role that victims play in our legal system. I am reminded that no one asks to be a victim, so officers should embrace their role as sexual assault investigators to ensure the delivery of justice. This is achieved by following the evidence without bias opinions of the victims. Studies like these are meant to influence change in the way sexual assault investigations are handled with support of policy and agency standards. My subject of study intends to harmonize the relations between law enforcement officers, in so doing, deliver justice to the victims, and arresting the perpetrators.

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Appendix A: Sexual Assault Vignettes

Prompt:

Hello participant #_____. Can you confirm that we have gone over the information sheet? Can you also confirm that you have given consent to participate in this study? I want to ensure your privacy during this interview as best I can. Are you in a location that is quiet and to your knowledge not be overheard by others? At this time, I want to reiterate that you can stop this interview at any time. If you need a break, please let me know.

I will ask you a series of questions about your experience as a sexual assault investigator. I will also be taking notes during the questioning. At times it may seem as if I am not paying attention, however, I am listening at everything you are saying, but I have to notate as much as possible. I may ask you to repeat a response. This does not mean that your answer is wrong or unacceptable. I just want to make certain that I have recorded your response correctly. There may also be a time when I read a response back to you. I am doing this for clarity. If what I read is not what you said, please correct me. I will also be recording. It is important that you speak as clear as possible. Do you have any questions?

Vignette 1

Lisa is a 21-year-old English teacher at a local high school. She has been employed with the school for a year. One day Lisa was called into the male principal's office to address her inappropriate attire. While inside of the office, the principal proceeds to walk up to Lisa and places his hand on her thigh while he talks to her. Lisa advises the principal that he is making her feel uncomfortable. The principal proceeds to advise Lisa that she wants the type of sexual attention that he is giving her based on the way that she comes dressed to work. The principal then proceeds to tell Lisa to get up and leave his office. Before Lisa could leave, the principal grabs Lisa by her waist and pull up her dress, pull her underwear down, and penetrates her with his penis. Lisa asks the principal to stop and begins to scream. The principal places his hand over her mouth and continues having sex with her. Once the principal is done, he recommends Lisa not to dress provocatively anymore or she will receive the same sexual treatment again. Lisa leaves out of the office crying. She does not return to work for four days.

Once Lisa returns to work, one of her co-worker's notices that she is not her bubbly self. Lisa tells her co-worker about the incident between her and the principal. Lisa's coworker tells her that she needs to leave work and report the incident to law enforcement. Lisa decides to wait to report the incident because she feels ashamed, embarrassed, and dirty. About two-months later, Lisa gets up enough courage and decides to make a complaint about the incident.

When reading the report, you note that the original responding officer did not collect the clothing that Lisa was wearing on the date of the incident because Lisa had

thrown them in the trash. The officer also indicates that Lisa, while describing the incident, seemed vibrant and bubbly. When asked why did she wait so long to report the incident, Lisa indicated that she did not want any retaliation from the principal. When asked did she want to provide more information to the officer about the incident, Lisa stated that the principal had a problem with her tight clothing, but she cannot help that her body is fit and curvy. When she told that to the principal, he seemed aroused and got really aggressive with her. Lisa indicated that she saw a tattoo marking near the genitalia of the principal. Lisa stated that she only told the co-worker in hopes that the co-worker would have notified human resources. Lisa indicated that she did not want to get the principal fired, but she wants him to leave her alone.

You were assigned to the case to investigate this as a sex crime. First, you spoke to the principal. He indicated that he asked to meet with Lisa to discuss her request to become department chair in the English department. He stated that he wanted to inform Lisa that he had chosen another teacher who had more experience and tenure in the school system. He wanted to assure Lisa that her time would come to be a leader. When explained the situation to Lisa, she asked him was there anything else she could do to change her mind. He stated that Lisa then stood up from the chair and sat on his desk. He described Lisa having on a red skirt with a split up to the thigh. She also had on a black fitted shirt with a lot of her breast showing. The principal stated that he stood up and he was aroused by Lisa. The principal then stated that he and Lisa started to kiss, but he then realized that this was not proper for a work setting and stopped. Lisa then ripped off the principal shirt and unbuttoned his pants. He indicated that when Lisa was trying to pull down his underwear, he stopped her. He stated that he asked Lisa to leave. You asked the principal does he have tattoos on his body. He indicated that he had the word "POWER" tattooed on his pelvic area. The principal denied that he ever penetrated Lisa.

There are no cameras in the principal's office, but there are cameras in the hallway just outside the office. When viewing the hall's camera, you see Lisa entering the office at 4:15pm. The camera rolls for about 20 minutes. You then see Lisa exit the office while tugging at the tail of her dress. She then reaches into her purse and retrieve some tissue and wipe her face.

Your next step is to interview Lisa.

Interviewer: Now, I am about to ask you a few interview questions based on the Vignette we have read. First are there any questions about the scenario?

Vignette 1: Lisa's Experience

1. Given the contents of this scenario, what factors would you use to determine Lisa's credibility?

2. How will your experience with sexual assault investigations help you with investigating this incident?
3. Based on the scenario given, what steps would you take next to determine if this victim's story is credible?
4. In this scenario, Lisa advised that she was raped after being called into the office about her inappropriate dress attire. However, the principal alleged that the meeting was about a leadership role. How would the officer view the difference in stories in terms of believability?
5. How does the delay of reporting and not having a sexual assault examination influence your decision making throughout the investigation?

Vignette 2

Stacy has been living with her friend, Nick, for 3 days because she got kicked out of her apartment. One night, Stacy, Nick, and two of their friends decide to go to the club. Stacy decides to wear a short dress to the club. While at the club, Stacy and Nick began to drink and start dancing with each other. Stacy notices that Nick starts to flirt with her and began grinding up on her butt as they dance. Stacy and Nick danced the night away until the club closed.

Once the club has closed, Stacy and Nick go home. While inside of the residence, Nick begins to flirt with Stacy and began to touch her inappropriately. Stacy laughs it off and tells Nick to stop. Both Stacy and Nick both sit down on the couch together. Stacy and Nick start to talk about how much fun they had at the club. Shortly after, Nick leans in and kisses Stacy. Stacy tells Nick to stop because she is uncomfortable. However, Nick continues while pulling up her dress. Nick forces himself on Stacy and she begs for him to stop. Nick ignores her pleas and penetrates Stacy with his penis.

After Nick gets done, he gets off Stacy, kisses her, and tells her good night. Stacy stays on the couch in disbelief. After an hour pass, Stacy gets up off the couch to go take a shower before going to bed. On the following day, Stacy is still in disbelief and decide to go file a police report.

When reading the report, you note that the original responding officer did not collect the clothing that Stacy was wearing on the date that the incident occurred because Stacy had washed them. The officer also indicated that he did not contact any of the neighbors to see if they could hear Stacy saying no to corroborate her story.

You were assigned to this case to investigate this as a sex crime. First, you spoke with Stacy. Stacy provided all of the aforementioned details. A sexual assault

examination was conducted on Stacy and male DNA was found. After speaking with Stacy, you contact Nick. Nick advises that he and Stacy had consensual sex.

Interviewer: Now, I am about to ask you a few interview questions based on the Vignette we have read. First are there any questions about the scenario?

Vignette 2: Stacy's Experience

1. Given the contents of this scenario, what factors would you use to determine Stacy's credibility?
2. How will your training and experience with sexual assault investigations help you with investigating this incident?
3. Based on the scenario given, what steps would you take next to determine if this victim's story is credible?
4. In this scenario, Stacy advised that she wore a short dress while at the club with Nick. She then advised that while at the club she flirted with Nick and laughed it off when he touched her inappropriately. Once they arrived back home, Stacy advised that she sat on the couch willingly with Nick before she was sexually assaulted. Nick advised that he and Stacy had consensual sex. How would the officer view the difference in stories in terms of believability?
5. How does the delay of reporting and having a sexual assault examination influence your decision making throughout the investigation?

Closing Prompt:

We have finished the question answer portion of the interview. At this time, do you have anything else you would like to add about your experience as a sexual assault investigator? Do you have any questions for me?

Once again, thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix B: Prescreening Questionnaire

Participant #: _____

Date: ____/____/____

1. Which of the following best describes your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Prefer not to disclose

2. Which of the following best describes your race?
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or American Indian
 - e. Asian
 - f. Other
 - g. Prefer not to disclose

3. Which of the following best describes your age?
 - a. 18 – 23
 - b. 24 – 29
 - c. 30 – 34
 - d. 35 – 39
 - e. 40 - 44
 - f. 45 – 49
 - g. 50 and above
 - h. Prefer not to disclose

4. Which of the following best describes your education level?
 - a. Some high school
 - b. High school diploma
 - c. General Education Diploma (GED)
 - d. Some College
 - e. Bachelor's Degree
 - f. Graduate Degree
 - g. Professional Degree
 - h. Prefer not to disclose

5. What is your rank?
 - a. Patrolman
 - b. Corporal
 - c. Sergeant
 - d. Lieutenant

6. How long have you been employed with your agency?
 - a. 1-5 years
 - b. 5-10 years
 - c. 10-15 years
 - d. 15-20 years

- e. 20-25 years
 - f. 25-30 years
7. Are you affiliated with a Law Enforcement Agency in Dougherty County, GA?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
8. Are you currently under investigation with Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T)?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
9. Have you had over 40 hours of sexual assault training?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
10. What agency are you employed with?
- a. Albany Police Department
 - b. Dougherty County Police Department
 - c. Dougherty County School System Police Department
 - d. Dougherty County Sheriff's Office.

Appendix C: Sample Participant Recruitment Email

Hello my name is LaKesha Boone. I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting a study for my Walden dissertation. Your Chief has given me permission to conduct a study that involves officers who are or were sexual assault investigators. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how law enforcement officers evaluate the credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. With your assistance over a 90-minute interview, I hope to gain empirical data that will aid in policy formation and implementation, social change, and to improve best practices for sexual assault investigations. Additionally, you are asked to do a transcript review to ensure that your responses are accurate. This should take about 30 minutes. If you would like to participate in this study, please reply to this email expressing your desire to be a participant within the next 7 days. My contact information is at the bottom of this email. I look forward to hearing from you!

LaKesha Boone

Walden University

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

LaKesha Boone
Student, Walden University

September 20, 2021

Chief Michael Persley
[REDACTED]

RE: Request for Permission to Carry Out Research

Dear Chief Persley,

I am LaKesha Boone, a doctoral student at Walden University. It is a requirement of the university that all students in a doctoral program carry out a research project in partial fulfillment of the degree's requirements. I am seeking permission to carry out a research study with police investigators, focusing on investigators' thought process in determining the credibility of female victims of sexual assault. The study will recruit participants from law enforcement who are 21 years old at the time of participation and are sworn law enforcement officer with a minimum of one-year work experience in sexual assault investigation. The participating officer must not be under investigation by Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T) and be employed with an agency located in Dougherty County, Georgia. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how law enforcement officers determine or evaluate the credibility of sexual assault victims during investigations. The results from this study may help your agency, and others, in the areas of training and policy.

I will reach potential officers by email which will explain the data collection process. It will take approximately two hours to complete this study. Participation is voluntary and there is no compensation or incentive for participation. If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study, their responses will be destroyed.

If you have any questions you can ask them at any time using the information below Phone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX; E-mail: [REDACTED]. If you would like to contact my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Oliva Yu, you may email her at [REDACTED]. The Walden University's Research Participant Advocate can be contacted at XXX-XXX-XXX or E-mail [REDACTED].

Please send me a letter of cooperation if you will allow your agency's officers to participate in this study.

With kind regards,

LaKesha Boone
Walden University

Appendix E: Vignette #1 Codes

| | Participant Answer Info |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Actions prior to incident | 3 |
| Delay in report | 3 |
| Empathy | 2 |
| Evidence | 5 |
| Inconsistencies in statement | 5 |
| Other's experience with suspect | 2 |
| Preventing revictimization | 1 |
| Prior incident history | 4 |
| Reliance on training | 2 |
| Suspect history | 1 |
| Suspect Statement | 5 |
| Suspect usual behavior | 1 |
| Victim history | 1 |
| Victim Statement | 6 |
| Victim work ethics | 3 |
| Victim's demeanor | 2 |
| Victim's dis. Of suspect (partict) | 1 |
| Victim's statement | 1 |
| Victim's usual personality | 3 |
| Visual aid | 5 |
| Will affect/make difficult | 5 |
| Witness Statement | 3 |
| Witness testimony | 2 |

Appendix F: Vignette #2 Codes

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Action prior to incident | 7 |
| Considering other factors | 6 |
| Evidence | 11 |
| Evidence will not help | 1 |
| Inconsistencies in statement | 1 |
| Others-Experience testimony story | 3 |
| Plays part in steps of investigation | 1 |
| Preventing revictimization | 1 |
| Prior incident history | 3 |
| Reliance on training | 3 |
| Suspect history | 4 |
| Suspect interpretation of incident | 1 |
| Suspect statement | 5 |
| Suspect usual personality | 2 |
| Victim history | 4 |
| Victim statement | 9 |
| Victim's demeanor | 1 |
| Victim's statement | 2 |
| Victim's usual personality | 2 |
| Visual aid | 2 |
| Will not affect/make difficult | 4 |
| Witness testimony | 8 |