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Reporting Sexual Revictimization: The Decision-Making Process for Victims With Prior Reporting Experience

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Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2018

BS, Colorado Tech University, 2015

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

It is widely known that sexual assault is a pervasive global health issue. Victims of sexual assault face a greater risk of later being sexually revictimized. Despite its prevalence, sexual assault is the most underreported of violent crimes. Existing research has explored rates of formal and informal sexual assault disclosure, barriers, and motivators to report as well as survivor experiences withing the criminal justice process. However, the deciding factors for sexual assault victims in reporting revictimization or how any prior experience making a report may impact their decision to report subsequent assaults have not been studied previously. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the decision-making process for reporting sexual revictimization through the lived experience of survivors with prior reporting history. Availability heuristic theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Data were collected via nine semistructured interviews and analyzed through open coding and the development of themes. The results showed that the decision process for reporting sexual revictimization with a history of a prior formal report is similar to that of making an initial report; however, the impact of initial reporting experiences was shown to be factored into the subsequent reporting decision processes. Background factors, risk/benefit analysis, motivational factors, reporting outcomes, and hindsight were the five main themes within the decision-making process for reporting sexual revictimization among participants in this study. Findings of this study provided insight for criminal justice professionals and various victim services to better serve sexual assault survivors and encourage future reports that will lead to positive social change through impacting the justice process and healing for survivors.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated survivors of sexual violence and those using their stories to help someone else find safety and healing. You matter. Thank you for your courage and perseverance. I am honored to have held space for some of those stories throughout this dissertation journey.

To my late father, Daran Frye, who always encouraged me to take my education as far as I could, "all the way to the top," but never got to witness the impact of his words. I have reflected on them many times when I wanted to give up.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Elijah and Jude. May the example of my persistence inspire you to follow your dreams. I love you more than you could ever know.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Sexual assault is a violent crime with ubiquitous impacts, leaving victims with a host of lasting negative physical and psychological consequences that can lead to collateral damage in many areas of their lives (Anderson & Overby, 2021). Each victim of rape experiences an estimated lifetime cost of $122,461, equaling around $3.1 trillion in population economic burden within the United States (Peterson et al., 2017). Despite its prevalence and impact, sexual assault is a vastly underreported crime (Farahi & McEachern, 2021). There are many reasons a victim/survivor may not formally report their victimization. Formal disclosure can often lead to continued trauma for the survivor (Lorenz et al., 2019). However, nondisclosure may prevent them from accessing vital resources (Ahrens, 2010). Additionally, victims of sexual assault are at an increased risk for being sexually revictimized (Relyea & Ullman, 2016). Previous researchers have examined the reporting behaviors, motivators and barriers, and rates of formally reporting sexual assault; however, there is little extant research focused on reporting sexual revictimization, particularly for individuals with a history of formally reporting. In this study, I explored the lived experiences of sexual revictimization survivors who had a prior history of reporting to investigate their decision-making process for reporting sexual revictimization. I placed emphasis on the impact of the initial reporting experience on the subsequent decision process. The potential social implications of this study include recommendations for criminal justice professionals, victim services, and prevention efforts based on the critical insights gained from the lived experience of survivors (see Dworkin et al., 2021). In this chapter, I provide the background, problem statement,

purpose, research questions, theoretical framework of this study, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions and limitations, and its significance.

Background

Sexual violence is a global public health crisis and human rights issue. While it affects people of all ages and genders, women and adolescents are victimized at disproportionate rates (Breiding, 2015; Smith et al., 2017). Sexual violence is perpetrated against an estimated 40% of women in the United States, though less than 40% of survivors will disclose their experience to law enforcement (Berkseth et al., 2017; Farahi & McEachern, 2021). Rape is the utmost underreported crime (Farahi & McEachern, 2021). According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 1 in 5 women have experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime, but only 16%–33% report the crime to law enforcement (Smith et al., 2017). Underreporting is a significant concern for many reasons. It allows perpetrators to evade prosecution and accountability and impacts the estimated prevalence of incidences (Farahi & McEachern, 2021; Mulder et al., 2021). Gaining more accurate information regarding the global prevalence of sexual assault allows for the provision of more resources, intervention, and prevention efforts (Dworkin et al., 2021). When survivors do report, the response they receive after sexual assault disclosure can have a substantial influence on whether they participate in the criminal justice system, their recovery process, and their choices around future disclosures (Demers et al., 2017; Hirai et al., 2020; Iles et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021).

Research shows that many women who are sexually assaulted subsequently experience sexual revictimization (Relyea & Ullman, 2016). The risk of being sexually

assaulted in adolescence or adulthood is doubled for victims of childhood sexual assault

(Ullman & Vasquez, 2015). Multiple studies have shown revictimization rates between

30%–40% in adult women who were victimized in childhood and adolescence (Conley et

al., 2017; Cusak et al., 2019; Das & Otis, 2016). Many distinct factors contribute to the

increased risk of sexual revictimization among survivors, such as relationship to the

perpetrator, adverse reactions to disclosure, and the psychological consequences endured

by the survivor (Anderson et al., 2020; Contreras et al., 2019; Decker & Littleton, 2017;

Ullman & Peter- Hagene, 2016).

Problem Statement

Researchers have identified predictors for whether a victim reports a rape, such as

rape myth acceptance, social support, and connection to survivor resources (Brooks-Hay,

2020; Hahn et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2012; Schuck, 2018). While publications on the

topic are limited, researchers have examined why victims do report sexual assault.

Brooks-Hay (2020) recognized individual and therapeutic reasons, perpetrator-oriented

reasons, feelings of social and moral responsibility, and third-party influence as factors

that motivate reporting. There are numerous studies investigating barriers to reporting

sexual assault as well as research that highlights risk factors for sexual revictimization.

However, the scholarly community has not studied the deciding factors for sexual assault

victims in reporting sexual revictimization or how any prior experience making a report

may impact their decision to report subsequent assaults. With research indicating

considerable risk for revictimization among victims of sexual assault and low rates of

reporting sexual assault, continued examination of the deciding factors for reporting

sexual revictimization would offer critical insight into victim experiences and benefit victim services and criminal justice practices.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impact a survivor's decision to formally report sexual assault revictimization. I focused on survivors' previous experience(s) of reporting sexual assault and how this may have impacted their decision to report. A qualitative approach was used to examine the experiences of survivors of repeat sexual assault in order to address the identified gap in research. I contacted a sexual assault resource network and used social media and the Walden Participant Pool to recruit participants for this study. Data were collected via nine semistructured interviews.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the decision-making process for survivors with a history of reporting sexual assault when considering formally reporting sexual revictimization?

RQ2: How do sexual assault survivors perceive the impact of any prior reporting experience on their decision to report revictimization to an authority?

Theoretical Framework

Prominent theories referenced in the existing research on reporting sexual assault and the risk for sexual revictimization are feminist theory, ecological systems theory, and routine activity theory. However, because my research focus was on the decision-making process for survivors reporting sexual revictimization, the availability heuristic theory

was an appropriate framework for this study. According to the availability heuristic, people make judgments regarding the likelihood of an occurrence based on the memories of their previous experience with a similar scenario (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). A prediction that could be made when examining the previously mentioned gap in research is that a survivor will base their decision to report a subsequent assault on their prior reporting experience. For example, if the survivor has an experience that made them feel safe and validated, they may use that memory to determine they will have a similar experience if they report again, positively influencing their decision to report. Conversely, a poor experience that left them feeling retraumatized may deter them from reporting a subsequent assault based on the memories of their experience. Because reporting sexual assault to law enforcement can often retraumatize survivors (Rich, 2019), survivors may decide not to report subsequent assaults based on their recollection of prior traumatic reports.

After reviewing literature from various perspectives on the social problem I wished to examine, I found the availability heuristic theory may be of particular interest when the initial reporting of sexual assault occurred when the victim was a child and how this may impact their decision to report a subsequent assault that happens in adolescence into adulthood. In seminal work, Fischoff (1975) argued that hindsight knowledge instinctively guides a person's expected outcomes, which consequently impacts the event schema; a process Agans and Shaffer (1994) referred to as the "knew-it-all-along effect" (p. 440). The core of what I wanted to investigate was whether the experience of reporting in the past has impacted an individual's decision to report again and how. With

the availability heuristic theory as a lens, I explored whether judgments were made based on memory recall of their previous experience in addition to weighing out various other factors relative to present circumstances.

Nature of the Study

In this study, the phenomenon of interest was the understanding of reporting experiences of sexual assault survivors when they formally report their victimization and the deciding factors to report subsequent assaults. To qualitatively explore this topic, I used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on the experience itself and how the experience then transforms into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My research questions focused on the experiences of sexual assault victims who made formal reports and how that experience, along with additional factors, impacted their decision to report any subsequent assaults. What I hoped to capture was the lived experiences and ideas from firsthand information, which is in line with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected by interviewing nine sexual revictimization survivors in a semistructured format. I analyzed the information-rich data using open coding to develop relevant themes.

Definition of Terms

Formal report: A report of victimization by the survivor to an authority figure, such as law enforcement, college administration, or a mandatory reporter, that will be documented, filed, and can lead to a formal investigation (Ahrens, 2010; Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2015).

Informal disclosure: Disclosing victimization to an informal support person, such as a friend, family member, support group, or anonymous help resource (Campbell et al., 2015; Dworkin & Allen, 2018).

Perpetrator: A person who inflicts sexual violence (Basile et al., 2014).

Rape: Any form of penetration of a body orifice with sexual organs, body parts, or objects without the consent of the victim (Farahi & McEachern, 2021).

Sexual assault: A criminal act involving nonconsensual sexual contact or behavior, including rape, attempted or completed; unwanted sexual touching; or sexual coercion (Farahi & McEachern, 2021).

Sexual revictimization: The second or more instance of sexual violence perpetrated against a survivor by the same or different perpetrator throughout the victim's lifespan (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015; Cusack et al., 2019).

Sexual violence: All sexual acts, committed or attempted, by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone incapable of consenting or refusal (Basile et al., 2014; Farahi & McEachern, 2021).

Victim/survivor: A person on whom sexual violence is perpetrated (Basile et al., 2014). These terms are used interchangeably throughout the review of literature and study. The terms were used according to the preference of participants when reporting findings in the study.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

In this study, the sample population was sensitive because they are survivors of sexual assault and have experienced significant trauma. To reduce the potential of

retraumatizing participants, I contacted a sexual assault advocacy center to recruit

participants from a pool of survivors who are motivated to share their experiences as part

of their healing process. Establishing the appropriate rapport and empathy is crucial to

obtaining in-depth information in situations where the participant has a personal stake in

the matter at hand (Lester, 1999). Building rapport at the beginning of the process was

essential to establishing open communication with the participants. More importantly, a

trauma-informed approach to collecting this data was a top priority. Part of the trauma-

informed approach was being completely transparent in my motives and providing ample

information that would ensure the participant could give full, informed consent to

participate. Additionally, the interviews were confidential and trauma-informed strategies

were employed over their duration.

Mortimer et al. (2021) discussed the need for researchers to reflect on the socio-

political frameworks that make discussions about sexual violence in any setting

potentially challenging or damaging to participants and to ask, "how am I, as a

researcher, working to ensure I do not dismiss or invalidate the survivor's experience?"

(p. 7). A central part of addressing this is informed consent, transparency, and debriefing

after interviews (Stangor, 2015). Additionally, I worked to reduce any power differential

and eliminate judgmental dynamics (Mortimer et al., 2021). By using semistructured

interviews as a method to collect data, I was able to adapt to each participant's level of

comfort and have a more fluid interview strategy. Open-ended interview questions were

formed after a comprehensive review of the research literature was conducted. I

developed each question to elicit information-rich data while allowing the participant to guide the content of the conversation and ameliorate participant agency.

Further barriers to collecting data included the social distancing measure put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical distancing procedures put a pause on many clinical studies and prompted research staff to weigh individual risk-benefit ratios to determine how to proceed with participants (Mourad et al., 2020; Padala et al., 2020). In-person data collection may generate more risk for both participants and researchers, thus creating an ethical dilemma (Salam et al., 2021). Therefore, I took alternative approaches to collecting data that remained in alignment with the study, consisting of conducting interviews via telephone, video, or email. Conducting virtual interviews can produce meaningful data while providing a safe and positive experience for both the participant and researcher (Guy & Arthur, 2021; Salam et al., 2021).

Existing research shows that sexual assault survivors are disproportionately identified as women (Breiding, 2015). Therefore, I focused on this population for the present study. This limited my ability to generalize findings to only this population and not victims across all gender identities.

Significance

While there have been many studies regarding the barriers to reporting sexual assault, research with a particular focus on deciding factors of reporting sexual revictimization is lacking. This study addressed the gap in research regarding the decision-making process for sexual assault survivors when considering reporting sexual revictimization. Additionally, I explored how survivors perceive their prior experience

reporting to formal entities and how this may have impacted their decision to report subsequent assaults. The findings are particularly significant to the field of victim services and criminal justice because they can contribute to evidence-based, victim-centered, and trauma-informed practices.

Expanding what the scholarly community knows about the sexual assault victim experience in the criminal justice system and the events that occur after making a formal report can help to alleviate some of the burdens experienced by survivors and offer guidance for response practices. The National Crime Victimization Survey reported that, in women within the age range of 18–24 years old, only 16% of college students and 18% of nonstudents seek assistance from victim services (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). Additionally, this report showed 33% of nonstudents and 20% of college students reported their assault to police. This study could offer a significant contribution to addressing the issue of underreported sexual assault crimes. More accurate crime reporting statistics, particularly around sexual assault, could contribute to change in various facets of society, including the criminal justice system, victim services, and other community agencies.

Summary

Sexual violence is a global issue that has been prevalent throughout history. There are many factors that increase the risk of sexual revictimization following sexual assault (Andersson et al., 2020; Decker & Littleton, 2017; Decou & Skews, 2021; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2016). Despite the common occurrence, less than half of survivors will report their experience (Berkseth et al., 2017; Farahi &

McEachern, 2021). This study sought to address the lack of information on the decision-making process of survivors with reporting history who experience sexual revictimization and decide whether to report again. In Chapter 2, I will review the existing literature on the topic, including rates of sexual violence among various populations, reporting sexual assault, responses to sexual assault disclosure, and sexual revictimization.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Sexual assault is a pervasive public health and safety issue. More than a quarter of women have experienced unwanted sexual contact, with 1 in 3 women experiencing some form of sexual violence, 1 in 8 have experienced sexual coercion, and 1 in 5 have experienced rape (Smith et al., 2017). Because the overwhelming majority of sexual assault victims are women, I focused on this population in this study. While an estimated 23.4% of men within the United States have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime, it is an epidemic that disproportionately impacts women and children (Breiding, 2015). Most victims encounter unwanted sexual experiences at an early age; based on reporting information, nearly 80% of completed rapes occur before the victim is 25 years old, and 40% occur prior to the age of 18 (Breiding, 2015). In a study of 795 college men, 238 reported perpetrating at least one instance of sexual coercion and assault, and 68% reportedly engaged in repeated sexual coercion and assault with increasing aggression (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015). An estimated 1.3 million adolescent females were victims of at least one rape between 1995–2003 (Ellwood et al., 2011). According to Basile et al. (2022), 16.4 million women reported being raped before 18 years of age. Moreover, women who have experienced sexual victimization face a substantial risk for recurrent victimization (Ullman & Vasquez, 2015; Walker et al., 2019).

Years of research have consistently shown that, despite its prevalence and the pervasiveness of its detrimental impacts, sexual assault is a vastly underreported crime (Hahn et al., 2018; James & Lee, 2015; Muniz et al., 2022; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011).

When reports do happen, the response to disclosure significantly impacts the ways in which a survivor moves forward. Survivors who receive positive feedback from disclosures report fewer symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while the opposite is true for survivors who encounter negative feedback (Ullman, 2011). Unfortunately, many victims are met with adverse reactions to their disclosures (Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens et al., 2007). This can lead to a decreased likelihood of help-seeking behaviors with future occurrences, which is problematic because research shows a majority of women who experience sexual violence are subsequently revictimized (Fisher et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2011; Relyea & Ullman, 2016). Numerous studies have investigated barriers to reporting sexual assault and the risk factors for sexual revictimization; however, the scholarly community has not researched the deciding factors for sexual assault victims in reporting revictimization or how any prior experience making a report may impact their decision to report subsequent assaults.

Literature Search Strategy

To compile an exhaustive literature review, I used multiple databases and a combination of search terms relevant to my topic. Through the Walden University Library, I began my search with the Thoreau search engine before searching the following databases and search engines: SAGE Journals, EBSCO, Psych INFO, and Google Scholar. Grouped with the Boolean operators *or* and *and*, the following search terms were used: *sexual revictimization, revictimization, prior victimization, reporting, sex crimes, rape, sexual abuse, sexual assault, report,* and *prior reporting.* The preliminary results were refined to show only articles published within the last 10 years.

Three searches in the Walden University Library produced 424 results. I reviewed the abstract of each article to determine its relevance to my topic. Once I began reading analyzing specific articles, I was able to find more closely related content via citation chaining. My searches produced a collection of 244 articles that were relevant to my topic. I used Zotero to store and categorize each article and analyzed them until I reached saturation in each category. I did not find any articles explicitly addressing the deciding factors for sexual assault victims reporting revictimization or how they interpreted their prior reporting experience and its impact on their decision to report subsequent assaults. The following literature review illustrates the need for further research in this specific area.

Review of the Literature

Reporting Sexual Assault

Although sexual assault is a tragically common occurrence, only a minor portion of survivors report their experience. This has been consistently demonstrated across numerous studies that found the rates of formal reporting to be minimal (Brenner & Ben-Amitay, 2015; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Hahn et al., 2018; James & Lee, 2015; Lonsway & Archambault, 2012; Muniz et al., 2022; Sprague, 2021; Swingle et al., 2016; Ullman, 2011; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). When survivors do share, it is much more likely they will informally disclose their experience to a support person, such as a close friend or family member (Ahrens et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2015; Dworkin & Allen, 2018; Edwards et al., 2012; Fischer et al., 2000; Hunter et al., 2012; Iles et al., 2021; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015). Evidence of this has been recorded in the research literature for

decades. Ruback and Ivie (1988) found that 67% of survivors who visited a crisis center had conferred with a friend or family member first. Hanson et al. (2003) interviewed 4,023 adolescents about their history of childhood sexual assault and found that 81% of first disclosures were to family or friends. Ahrens et al. (2007) interviewed 102 rape survivors regarding their first disclosure post assault and found that 75% were to informal supports. Orchowski and Gidycz (2012) found that 86% of their sample who discussed their sexual victimization with at least one person did so with a female peer, while only 8% made a formal report. However, there can be some ambiguity in the disclosure process. According to Browne (1991), sexual assault revelations are nearly always an open-ended process initiated by hesitant disclosures, insinuations, and a testing-of-waters that sets into motion interactions with various sources that may extend over months to years.

There is a multitude of reasons that low formal reporting rates are problematic on a societal level. One main reason is public safety because offenders cannot be prosecuted unless they are reported. Zinzow and Thompson (2015) found that 63%–68% of college-aged men who perpetrate sexual assault do so more than once when they are not held accountable for their actions. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the parallels of ways in which women are disproportionately impacted by sexual and intimate partner violence and their unequal access to societal power with the low disclosure rates as a materialization of this power disparity (Edwards et al., 2011; Ullman, 2010). Nondisclosure can hinder the survivors' ability to access vital resources and support (Decker & Littleton, 2018). While not all disclosures are motivated by help seeking,

discussing their experience with formal or informal support may expose the survivor to help to which they may not otherwise have access, such as tangible aid (Dworkin & Allen, 2018). Survivors are typically encouraged to disclose their experience because many advocacy centers and some research has recognized that disclosure will lead to catharsis and foster recovery (Swingle et al., 2016; Ullman 2011).

The decision to report sexual victimization is influenced by various internal and external factors, many of which are societal. The decision process can be overwhelmingly complicated for a survivor. Feelings of guilt, shame, or culpability are common for survivors and can impede their decision to discuss their experience with others (Hahn et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2011). Patterson and Campbell (2010) found that half of the victims who made a formal disclosure to police and participated in the criminal justice process reported they were encouraged to do so by other people to whom they disclosed their experience. Informal disclosure to a trusted person can become the beginning of a process that may last from weeks to years involving multiple contacts with a variety of responders (Ahrens et al., 2010; Dworkin & Allen, 2018). Additionally, survivors cited safety for themselves and others, feelings of social and moral responsibility, perpetrator-oriented reasons, and personal and therapeutic reasons for making a formal report (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Hahn et al., 2018; Patterson & Campbell, 2010). A commonly identified factor in the decision process for survivors has been the desire to protect others from future victimization (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Demers et al., 2017; Patterson & Campbell, 2010; Taylor & Norma, 2012). Other predictors of reporting sexual assault have been identified in the existing research literature, such as social support, female

representation within law enforcement agencies, ability to recall events of the assault, and connection to resources and advocacy (Brooks-Hay, 2020; Hunter et al., 2012; Schuck, 2018). While seeking justice has been found to be a motivator, survivors have also reported feeling coerced into making a formal report before they are ready (Brooks-Hay, 2020).

Many researchers have previously examined the motivating factors for reporting sexual assault. Demers et al. (2017) conducted a study consisting of 13 semistructured interviews with survivors of sexual and intimate partner abuse and found four significant themes reported as motivators for disclosure: fulfilling perceived social obligations or responsibilities, improving emotional or psychological well-being, seeking action in the form of advocacy, and seeking information or assessment. Subgoals were then identified within each theme. Survivors expressed wanting to feel validated, be heard, gain closure, be supported, maintain relationships, and be encouraged, along with wanting to gain information and appraisal of the seriousness of the event or were seeking to minimize the event (Demers et al., 2017). Additionally, formal reports are more likely to occur when the victim has a positive view of police, experienced physical injuries that are outwardly visible and need to seek medical attention, the perpetrator is a stranger or lesser known to the victim, or the assault more closely fits stereotypes of a believable victim (Demers et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2018; James & Lee, 2015; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Sabina & Ho, 2014; Ullman, 2010). Similarly, Henry et al. (2021) conducted a study among college students and found that participants were more likely to recommend filing a police report

following a sexual assault disclosure if they held positive perceptions of procedural justice.

One of the most significant barriers to sexual assault disclosure is the stigma that is associated with victims of sexual violence (Caron & Mitchell, 2022; Garcia-Moreno et al., 2013; Hahn et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2011). Moreover, the desensitization to sexual violence via the normalization of rape culture can make it difficult for survivors to name their experiences and acknowledge them as something they would consider reporting to formal authorities (Hlavka, 2014). Wilson and Miller (2015) discussed the prevalence of unacknowledged rape among college-aged survivors, likely stemming from ambiguity around whether to label an experience as victimization rather than miscommunication or "bad sex." Even when survivors recognize and experience it as unwelcomed, they may feel unsure if it qualifies as sexual assault or rape, particularly when it is not consistent with the stereotypes perpetuated by rape myths (Ahrens, 2006; Hahn et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2011; James & Lee, 2015; Lemaire et al., 2016; Newins et al., 2018; Patterson & Campbell, 2010; Sprague, 2021; Weiss, 2011). Minimizing or downplaying the event, victim alcohol consumption, feelings of self-blame or responsibility, worries about how they will be perceived, fearing consequences for themselves or the perpetrator, and belief that the perpetrator did not mean to cause harm have been identified as main reasons behind survivor nondisclosure (Caron & Mitchell, 2022; Carson et al., 2020; Fischer et al., 2000; Hlavka, 2014; Miller et al., 2011; Ruback et al., 1999; Sprague, 2021; Wood & Stichman, 2018). Hahn et al. (2018) found that the majority of survivors in their sample were reportedly incapacitated during the assault, which was associated with self-blame

and a lower likelihood of formal reporting. Additionally, there is not always the perception of potential safety gains for survivors with structural stressors, limited means, less problem-solving options, or who are dependent on their abuser, which contributes to reduced likelihood of formal disclosure (Anderson & Overby, 2021; Browne, 1991; Burton & Guidry, 2021; Liang et al., 2005).

Sexual assault survivors experience a profoundly personal violation of bodily autonomy. Decades of research literature consistently demonstrate that in order to consider reporting their experience to law enforcement, the victim-survivor must believe that what happened to them was a crime (Ahrens et al., 2007; Browne, 1991; Muniz et al., 2022; Oberweis et al., 2021; Ruback et al., 1984). The decision to label an incident as a criminal act is guided by a person's knowledge and interpretation of the law as well as the definitions and reactions of others (Browne, 1991; Muniz et al., 2022; Oberweis et al., 2021). Unlike victims of other violent crimes or property crimes, survivors of sexual violence can struggle to make definitive decisions about whether their experience would be recognized as a crime. Survivors must decide whether an action was beyond acceptable personal and societal boundaries (Browne, 1991). Consequently, survivors with more resources and more available options have more freedom in defining what is intolerable (Liang et al., 2005).

Without a clear, foundational understanding of what consensual sex is and is not, individuals may not recognize when consent has been violated, constituting sexual assault (Smith & Cook, 2008). A national survey of 4,446 college women showed the most common reason for not reporting sexual victimization was feeling uncertain about

whether what happened to them was a crime or if it were significant enough to be brought

to the attention of law enforcement (Fischer et al., 2000). Survivors may weigh their lived

experience and the social contexts in which they exist with rape myths surrounding who

can be a victim, who can be a perpetrator, and what experience constitutes a violation of

the law (Oberweis et al., 2021). Ruback et al. (1984) argued that other people could

impact the survivor's decision to label their experience as a crime; determine the criminal

severity; and then decide what to do about it by providing advice or arguments, engaging

the victim in a particular social script, denoting the normative values of any groups to

which the victim may belong, and the measure of socioemotional support offered.

Browne (1991) discussed that nonfamilial crime victims are likely to confer with other

people for their thoughts on whether a crime has occurred and its severity, while victims

of a family member have a more difficult time doing so. In addition to the attitudes

expressed by people within a survivor's social circle, the ways in which society discusses

high-profile cases of sexual assault have a tremendous impact on labeling lived

experience and subsequent disclosure.

Public debates and discussions within social groups are often reignited when

high-profile sexual assault cases are circulating in the media (Anderson & Overby, 2021).

Such discussion can place survivors in situations that are retraumatizing, bringing back

feelings of invalidation, anger, fear, and shame. They are often subjected to comments

that a colleague, acquaintance, friend, or family member may not otherwise make. Rape

myths that are commonly perpetrated during highly publicized sexual assault cases are

victim-blaming, inaccurate depictions of who can be a victim, and overemphasis on false

reports (Anderson & Overby, 2021). Not only does this impact victim-survivors in the moment, but it will impact people who are seeking support following sexual assault in the future as well (Anderson & Overby, 2021). Anderson and Overby (2021) discussed the strong influence that rape myths and false beliefs have on societal views of and responses to sexual violence. They examined the perspectives of survivors during the 2018 Supreme Court nominations hearings of Brett Kavanaugh and found that the public discussions regarding testimony directly impacted the well-being of participants with renewed intensity.

The language used in the media when reporting on sexual assault cases can have an impact as well. For example, survivors who speak out publicly in high-profile cases are often referred to as "accuser" rather than "victim" or "reporter" (Oberweis et al., 2021, p. 2404). Franiuk et al. (2008) conducted an archival study of 156 sources of print media covering the Kobe Bryant case, and 65 of them were coded for containing rape myths. A second study they conducted exposed participants to articles that either endorsed or challenged rape myths and found that participants who viewed the endorsing articles were more likely to believe the victim was lying (Franiuk et al., 2008). Despite enough evidence to file felony criminal charges and proceed to trial, the victim decided not to testify because she believed there would not be a fair and just trial due to the way the case had been discussed in the media, and the charges were ultimately dropped (Franiuk et al., 2008). Such impactful media coverage may exacerbate the anticipation of victim-blaming reactions from support when survivors consider whether to disclose their experiences of sexual assault (Anderson & Overby, 2021).

A survivor's choice to disclose or engage in help-seeking behaviors is a complex process that develops over time and changes according to their needs and reactions they receive (Dworkin & Allen, 2018; Liang et al., 2005; Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Ullman, 2010). Ahrens et al. (2007) discussed the decision-making process that precedes sexual assault disclosure referencing the following timeline: evaluating and defining the experience as victimization, weighing the pros and cons of perceived options, and deciding on a response. Similar findings were produced by a study of help-seeking processes among intimate partner violence (Liang et al., 2005). Survivors may contemplate doing nothing. Once their experience is revealed, they are forced to deal with their own feelings about the assault and with the response of others (Browne, 1991). Other responses a survivor may contemplate are seeking a private solution; reevaluating the incident so their experience is no longer defined as victimization; or reporting the event as victimization, either formally or informally (Ruback, 1984). Considering the barriers survivors face when deciding if and how to respond to their victimization paired with the risks and costs that must be weighed, it is critical that there be pathways in place that relieve some of the burdens of disclosure and make the decision to report worthwhile (Browne, 1991).

Ahrens (2010) conducted a study to determine disclosure patterns, how the patterns evolve, and how the patterns relate to mental and physical health outcomes. This study identified four patterns: nondisclosure, slow starters, crisis disclosers, and ongoing disclosers, with participants in the nondisclosure group experiencing increased negative mental health impacts (Ahrens, 2010). Similarly, a study of adolescent sexual assault by

Campbell et al. (2015) revealed pathways to disclosure and help-seeking processes and categorized them within voluntary disclosure, involuntary disclosure, and situational disclosure groups. Survivors within the voluntary disclosure groups initially told friends what happened and were then encouraged to tell an adult (Campbell et al., 2015). Once they told an adult, they were encouraged and assisted in making a formal report, maintaining agency, and exercising choice throughout this pathway (Campbell et al., 2015). Within the involuntary disclosure group, the survivor first told a friend, but the friend then informed an adult without the consent of the survivor, then forced to formally report (Campbell et al., 2015). Within the situational discloser group, survivors were incapacitated or unconscious when the assault was discovered by a friend or bystander, and help was sought on their behalf (Campbell et al., 2015). Similarly, in studies of adult disclosure, the decision to report may or may not have been the choice of the survivor (Ahrens et al., 2007; Ahrens et al., 2010). Walsh and Bruce (2011) found that survivors who perceived control over their recovery process experienced less psychological distress. Sexual violence profoundly violates the victim's sense of choice and agency, and it can be significantly retraumatizing to have their choice removed in the reporting process.

Responses to Sexual Assault Disclosure

Despite the potential benefits of disclosure, survivors can often experience negative repercussions after reporting their victimization. Taylor and Norma (2012) argued that the abrasive responses from criminal justice agencies to sexual assault statements could make women's decisions to report feel irrational. In many

circumstances, the survivor's credibility and character are immediately under scrutiny, and they are often not believed (Sommer et al., 2016). This can be retraumatizing for survivors, and the reality of the criminal justice process likely differs drastically from the expectations at the onset of reporting (Brookes-Hay, 2020). Herman (2005) referred to the legal process as "a theater of shame" for victims (p. 573), and Kelly (2010) argued that the skepticism around the validity of a victim's experience is sedimented into the cultures of the legal system. Psychological consequences can be exacerbated by disclosure when the victim is not protected or is met with a harmful response (Swingle et al., 2016; Ullman, 2011). Eisenberg et al. (2019) found that survivors who formally reported their victimization had higher rates of anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and symptoms of PTSD than survivors who disclosed to informal supports. However, Dworkin and Allen (2018) argued that survivors who were met with responses consistent with rape myths and whose victimization was more recent were more likely to continue disclosing with determination to meet their needs.

The response to sexual assault disclosure can have a significant impact on the manner in which a survivor participates in the criminal justice system, their choices around future disclosures, and the recovery process (Demers et al., 2017; Dworkin & Allen, 2018; Hirai et al., 2020; Iles et al., 2021; Muniz et al., 2022). For example, Paul et al. (2014) categorized survivors into groups who were either encouraged to report to police after consulting with informal support, not encouraged after consultation, or never sought consultation. Within the group who were encouraged to disclose to the police, 56% went on to do so (Paul et al., 2014). Many survivors report they would not have

chosen to take part in the criminal justice process had they known what the experience

would entail (Logan et al., 2005). Conversely, other survivors have reported they wished

they had pursued police involvement in their case, and their informal supports would

have encouraged them to do so (Lorenz et al., 2019). Lorenz et al. (2019) examined the

postassault experiences with the legal system of both survivors and their support person.

Their findings showed the pair consider the strengths and weaknesses of the survivor's

case, their perception of police, and the potential for institutional bias when deliberating

whether to report the assault to the police (Lorenz et al., 2019).

Many survivors find positive responses when disclosing to informal support, such

as a close friend and in online social spaces (Ahrens et al., 2007; Bogen et al., 2018;

Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Zajac et al., 2015). Positive reactions, including validation,

emotional support, and tangible aid, have been associated with less psychological distress

and higher levels of adaptive coping and self-worth (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Peter-

Hagene & Ullman, 2014). Such reactions are associated with fewer negative

psychological health symptoms (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). Disclosure between peers

may also encourage reciprocal disclosure, which can help to foster a sense of community

among survivors (Hunter et al., 2012). Campbell et al. (2015) referred to survivors' peers

as "the true first responders" (p. 843). Because first disclosures are most often made to

friends and family, it is crucial to continue to work toward community education for

potential support providers to combat rape myths and false beliefs and prevent harmful

reactions (Ahrens et al., 2007). For example, Grandgenett et al. (2022) posited that lower

rape myth acceptance among disclosure recipients predicted increased supportive

responses. A study on clergy attitudes about survivors of marital, date, and acquaintance rape demonstrated that most clergies endorsed rape myths and considered a woman's resistance, provocative behavior, decision making, perceived marital roles before assigning responsibility for the rape to the perpetrator (Sheldon & Parent, 2002). Rape myth endorsement among disclosure recipients has been associated with decreased positive and increased negative responses and should be addressed in educational and prevention efforts (Grandgenett et al., 2022). Additionally, rape myths may influence informal support to advise a survivor against pressing charges (Franiuk et al., 2008).

Formally reporting sexual violence opens the door to ongoing trauma and revictimization for many survivors (Ahrens et al., 2007; Lorenz et al., 2019; Ullman, 2010). Moreover, ineffective resources contribute to further stigmatization of sexual assault victims (Kaukinen & DeMaris, 2009). Rape myth endorsement among law enforcement may lead to doubting the validity of a survivor's report, lower levels of preparedness in responding to sexual assault calls, and impacts a survivor's willingness to cooperate in formal case processing (Franiuk et al., 2008; Garza & Franklin, 2021). Although specialized training did show an increase in preparedness to respond to sexual assault calls, there were mixed results on the effect of rape myth endorsement (Garza & Franklin, 2021). Even with the intention to treat victims with sensitivity, police often subject survivors to aggressive and degrading questioning, as they are required to establish probable cause to make an arrest and build a case for the prosecution (Campbell, 2006; Maier, 2008). Survivors also reported being retraumatized when seeking medical assistance postassault (Maier, 2008). This can occur during long wait

periods, contact with staff who are not properly trained, invasive and lengthy examinations, and victim-blaming questions (Maier, 2008). The opportunity to work with a specially trained nurse when undergoing a forensic exam can help to prevent further exacerbating survivor trauma (Shaw & Coates, 2021). Sexual assault nurse examiners are expertly trained to provide comprehensive, trauma-informed services to survivors. When a survivor is treated by a sexual assault nurse examiner, they are more significantly more likely to be provided with emergency contraceptives, less likely to have a toxicology kit collected, less likely to have to file a police report at the time of the exam, and more likely to have a mandatory child abuse report filed if the victim is a minor (Shaw & Coates, 2021). Henninger et al. (2020) found that when response personnel provided respectful treatment, demonstrated cultural sensitivity, clearly explained the procedures, and believed survivors' stories, survivors were more likely to be satisfied with their experience.

Sexual assault victim advocates are also among the first to provide support to survivors. Victims may contact a rape crisis hotline before they inform anyone else about what they have experienced (Maier, 2008). The services an advocate can provide may mitigate the exposure to retraumatization a survivor can face when they engage in the criminal justice process, as well as supplement the lack of services offered to survivors from other formal supports (Maier, 2008; Ullman & Townsend, 2007; Wegrzyn et al., 2022). A study by Campbell (2006) revealed that survivors with advocates were significantly more likely to file police reports, less likely to receive negative treatment by police, and reported less stress after contact with the legal system. Additionally, survivors

with advocates received more medical services with less reported stress afterward (Campbell, 2006). However, advocacy centers face their own barriers to providing services to survivors, such as budget and resource restraints, secondary victimization, and burnout among staff (Ullman & Townsend, 2007; Wegrzyn et al., 2022).

Among college students, sexual assault is rarely reported to campus authorities (Fischer et al., 2003). Resident assistants (RAs) can be a middle ground for reporters because they have a peer dynamic but also have a slight position of power and formal support (Holland & Bedera, 2020). For this reason, RAs can serve as pivotal support providers. Holland and Bedera (2020) examined the responses of 305 RAs when presented with sexual assault scenarios and categorized them into four discourses: controlling, gatekeeping, minimizing, and empowering. Within the category of controlling discourses, RAs expressed a high degree of certainty of survivor needs with a high degree of control over how resources are accessed by acting without survivor input or permission or by insisting the survivor respond in a specific way (Holland & Bedera, 2020). Within the gatekeeping category, RAs expressed a low degree of certainty that the survivor needed resources and a high degree of control over access to resources, most commonly demanding more information from a survivor before offering a resource (Holland & Bedera, 2020). RAs within the minimizing category articulated a low degree of certainty that survivors needed resources while communicating resources were available if the survivor chooses to access them, typically expressing the scenario was not serious enough to warrant an institutional response or questioning the legitimacy of the report (Holland & Bedera, 2020). Conversely, within the category of empowering

discourses, RAs expressed a high degree of certainty that survivors needed resources and conveyed that the survivor had control over if and which resources to utilize.

Many researchers have demonstrated that sexual assault survivors often encounter negative social responses following a disclosure (Decou et al., 2017; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Edwards et al., 2012; Iles et al., 2021; Orchowski et al., 2013; Peter-Hagne & Ullman, 2014). Adverse reactions can encourage feelings of being silenced, dismissed, not believed, or blamed for their victimization. Adverse responses can be blatant or unintentional. Some unsupportive reactions are apparent, such as denial of help or victim-blaming; however, subtle, indirect, or even unintentional negative reactions can be just as harmful (Bogen et al., 2018; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Edwards et al., 2012; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015). This is consistent with reactions to disclosure of intimate partner violence, as well (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). Desir and Karatekin (2019) found that 75% of participants in their study experienced at least one negative reaction to their disclosure, and revictimized participants received more overall negative responses than participants reporting single victimization. Sexually revictimized individuals also perceived less social and familial support than single-assault survivors (Kockturk & Bilge, 2017).

Sexual Revictimization

Sexual revictimization has been defined in various ways throughout the literature. Some scholars have used the term to describe multiple victimizations across developmental stages; for example, a survivor victimized in childhood and then again in adolescence or adulthood (Andersson et al., 2020; Bockers et al., 2014; Brenner & Ben-Amitay, 2015; Chan, 2011; Charak et al., 2018; Hannan et al., 2015; Kockturk & Bilge,

2017; Pittenger et al., 2016). Other researchers have used a broader umbrella to consider a wide range of situations, such as more than one sexual assault throughout the victim's lifespan, the prostitution of past victims, or subjective explanations of survivor experiences (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015; Cusack et al., 2019). In a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on sexual revictimization, Classen et al. (2005) described sexual revictimization as either sexual victimization across two developmental stages or sexual victimization in adolescence or adulthood by more than one perpetrator. Despite the differences in parameters used to describe the phenomenon, there is a consensus among scholars that sexual assault victims are at an increased risk for sexual revictimization (Andersson et al., 2020; Bockers et al., 2014; Brenner & Ben-Amitay, 2015; Briere et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2013; Conley et al., 2017; Contreras et al., 2019; Cusak et al., 2019; Das & Otis, 2016; Decou & Skewes, 2021; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Littleton & Decker, 2016; Papalia et al., 2017; Pittenger et al., 2018; Ullman & Vasquez, 2015; Walker et al., 2019). Conley et al. (2017) found within their sample that 39.2% of survivors who disclosed sexual victimization prior to entering college subsequently reported revictimization in college. A similar study of college students produced consistent findings of an overall revictimization rate of 39.5% (Cusak et al., 2019). Similarly, Das and Otis (2016) identified a lifetime revictimization rate of 30% among women in their sample with a history of childhood sexual assault. Factors that contribute to the heightened risk of sexual revictimization have been examined in numerous studies.

One of the most commonly studied risk factors for sexual revictimization is the link between sexual abuse occurring in childhood or adolescence and revictimization in

adulthood with consistent findings across methods and samples (Brenner & Ben-Amitay, 2015; Das & Otis, 2016; Decou & Skews, 2021; Desir & Karatekin, 2019; Grundmann et al., 2018; Papalia et al., 2017; Ports et al., 2016; Pittenger et al., 2016; Pittenger et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2019). Additionally, Andersson et al. (2020) found that victims of childhood sexual assault who had emotional or social connections with the perpetrator are 3 to 6 times more likely to be revictimized by someone with whom they have close ties in adulthood. Contreras et al. (2019) also found that revictimization by the same perpetrator happened sooner than revictimization by a new perpetrator.

Perhaps a lesser examined factor is the relationship between disclosure of past victimization and the risk of revictimization. Desir and Karatekin (2019) found that disclosure did not moderate the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and adult revictimization. However, Decker and Littleton (2017) posited that negative responses to disclosure, as well as the survivor's expectation of such, prospectively increase the survivor's distress following the assault and therefore increase the risk of revictimization. Their study found that unacknowledged survivors were at double the risk of experiencing an attempted rape within six months compared to acknowledged survivors (Decker & Littleton, 2017). Ullman and Peter-Hagene (2016) discussed similar findings in community samples which suggested that survivors who experience negative reactions to their disclosure are more likely to be revictimized, especially paired with heightened PTSD symptoms.

The psychological distress survivors experience after single sexual victimization, including PTSD symptoms, attachment anxiety, higher states of dissociation, and lower

self-efficacy, have been identified as predictors of revictimization (Bockers et al., 2014; Contreras et al., 2019; Decou & Skewes, 2021; Elwood et al., 2011; Pittenger et al., 2016). Ben-Amitay et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study to examine the revictimization of survivors through metaphors used when describing their experiences which produced great insight into lived experience. One survivor described feeling "homeless inside her body" (p. 919), which embodied the overall themes that emerged in the study, such as feeling invisible, absent of worth, isolated, weak, and constantly unsafe (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015). It is well documented that sexual assault and subsequent revictimization is associated with a wide range of lasting psychological consequences, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, substance-abuse disorders, and PTSD (Andersson et al., 2020; Briere et al., 2020; Classen et al, 2005; Cusak et al., 2019; Ellwood et al., 2011; Hannan et al., 2017; Herzog et al., 2018; Kockturk & Blige, 2018; Silver et al., 2020; Tirone et al., 2020; Littleton & Ullman, 2013; Walsh et al., 2012).

Theoretical Framework

A heuristic is essentially a mental shortcut used to inform decision-making processes. Mental shortcuts can be particularly useful in some situations but can also create barriers to logical decision making when they replace more methodical processing that is needed for others (Colwell, 2005). The availability heuristic suggests that people make assumptions about the likelihood of an occurrence based on the memories of their previous experience with a similar scenario and the ease with which it comes to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). It should be noted that "coming to mind easily" does not necessarily rely on the frequency a historical event occurred; furthermore, emotionally

vivid events and those relevant to social identity may be more accessible via cognitive

shortcuts (Yamashiro & Roediger III, 2021). Echterhoff and Hirst (2006) found that

memories were rated as more vivid when the event felt highly shocking, as opposed to

events that were less shocking. Caroll (1978) expanded on the availability heuristic

finding that subjective probability of an event occurrence is increased when the event is

easier to imagine. Agans and Shaffer (1994) explored the phenomenon of hindsight and

produced similar findings, which showed that hindsight is guided by the availability

heuristic and that preconceptions are likely formed by remarkable events or experiences.

Interestingly, Bentz et al. (2009) posited that the availability heuristic could also explain

the debiasing of pessimistic judgments associated with anxiety based on the consideration

of alternative yet realistic outcomes.

Considering the existing research on decision making and the availability

heuristic theory that suggests judgments are influenced by memory recall of past

experiences or similar events, it would seem likely that survivors of sexual assault who

have previous experience disclosing or formally reporting their victimization would draw

upon this experience when deciding whether to report sexual revictimization. In addition

to their own reporting experience, exposure to similar instances in the media could also

influence their decision (see Anderson & Overby, 2021; Ost et al., 2008; Wiener et al.,

2005). The availability heuristic has been used as a framework for exploring decision-

making in various areas of study; however, I found no existing literature where it is used

in investigating the decision-making process for survivors of sexual assault or

revictimization when choosing whether to formally report or disclose their experience. I

explored this decision-making process using the availability heuristic as a framework to inform my study, which provided insight into the thought process of the survivor and how they incorporated their previous experiences or other exposure to similar events into their decision to report or not.

Summary and Conclusions

The decision-making process for a survivor following the impacts of experiencing sexual violence can be extraordinarily complex (Brooks-Hay, 2020). The gravity of this issue highlights the continued need for individualized, victim-centered, trauma-informed care and advocacy services for survivors. Research also indicates the need for such services to extend to not just survivors that choose to report but also to those who need assistance in their decision-making process without the stipulation of mandatory reporting and individuals who ultimately decide not to report (Brooks-Hay, 2020). Many studies, as demonstrated in this literature review, have showcased the high percentages of sexual assault survivors who do not formally report. However, research focused on choosing nondisclosure is limited (Carson et al., 2020). Muniz et al. (2022) suggested future qualitative research exploring the decision-making process of survivors focused on internal rationale for non-reporting, self-labeling, and the impacts or third-party advice on this process. Because the gateway to services often requires disclosure, continued research in the process of decision-making, to include the choice of nondisclosure, could be beneficial to the process of helping professionals in creating and implementing policies that accurately meet the needs of survivors in various stages of trauma recovery (Demers et al., 2017). Furthermore, Brooks-Hay (2020) suggested that future research

place emphasis on the manner in which sexual assault is brought to the attention of the criminal justice system, as third-party reports, and reports that survivors have freely chosen to make, are not the same and have different implications for the survivor's continued engagement in the criminal justice process. The focus placed on improved experiences for survivors who participate in the criminal justice system should be complemented by a greater understanding of and regard for those who choose not to engage in the criminal justice process (Brooks-Hay, 2020).

Victim-centered policies should originate from the survivor's own perception of their needs and goals related to disclosure (Demers et al., 2017). Ahrens (2006) studied the impact of adverse social reactions to disclosure to rape and suggested that future research focus on the impact of both positive and negative reactions to disclosure and investigate how each response may weigh in on evaluating subsequent disclosure opportunities. While there is information in the literature that highlights statistics on the prevalence of sexual assault and the elevated risk of sexual revictimization, reporting rates for sexual assault, barriers, and benefits to disclosure, information on reporting revictimization was limited. Dworkin and Allen (2018) discussed interactions survivors have with responders after sexual assault disclosures are likely to impact later disclosure decisions but highlighted the lack of research in this area. I found no existing research focused on the decision-making process for reporting sexual revictimization. The scholarly community has not studied the deciding factors for sexual assault victims in reporting revictimization or how any prior experience making a report may impact their decision to report subsequent assaults. A comprehensive review of the literature

supported the need for examination of the deciding factors for reporting sexual

revictimization to produce critical insight into victim experience and provide implications

for victim services and criminal justice practices.

In Chapter 3, I will present the methodology used to conduct this study. I will

elaborate on the rationale for the research design and research questions, as well as

sample selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Furthermore, I will

address my role as the researcher and discuss the trustworthiness, dependability,

confirmability, credibility, transferability, and ethical considerations of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impact survivors' decisions to report sexual assault revictimization to law enforcement with a focus on survivors' previous experience(s) of reporting sexual assault. I used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of survivors of repeat sexual assault to address the identified gap in research. I contacted a sexual assault resource center and utilized social media platforms to recruit volunteer participants for this study. Data were collected via nine semistructured interviews that took place over the phone or the Zoom communication platform.

Throughout this chapter, I present the research design, rationale, and research questions. I also discuss my role as the researcher and the methodology used to conduct the study. The methodology section includes information on participant selection, data collection, and a data analysis plan. Additionally, I address trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability, credibility, transferability, and ethical considerations and procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the decision-making process for survivors with a history of reporting sexual assault when considering reporting sexual revictimization to law enforcement?

RQ2: How do sexual assault survivors perceive the impact of any prior reporting experience on their decision to report revictimization to an authority?

Rationale for Research Design

The primary phenomenon of interest was the decision-making process for sexual revictimization survivors who have previously made a formal report of sexual assault and then choose whether to report the subsequent assault to law enforcement. I used a phenomenological approach to explore the survivor experience of reporting sexual assault and the phenomenon of deciding whether to report subsequent revictimization. Phenomenology focuses on the experience itself and how the experience then transforms into consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the research questions centered on the experience of sexual assault survivors formally reporting their victimization and how that process and collateral impacts may have influenced their decision to report any subsequent assaults. I aimed to capture the lived experiences and reflections of survivors through firsthand information, which is consistent with a phenomenological approach to qualitative research.

Qualitative research is conducted to analyze how people construct their worldview and understand and attribute meaning to their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach primarily focuses on process and typically employs the same consistent principles: examining the understanding and given meaning, researcher as a primary data collection tool, richly descriptive data, and inductive analysis (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike quantitative research methods, qualitative approaches are not used to quantify, measure, or predict but instead explore meaning and understanding of a particular experience, situation, or context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) described qualitative research as making the world visible. In this study, I aimed to provide space for survivor experience and not translate that to statistics but amplify a shared narrative of a historically silenced and marginalized population. A qualitative approach is ideal for highlighting the importance of such a worldview (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2011). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach to qualitative research is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In such a study, it is imperative to operate from a trauma-informed space where the participant's needs are prioritized and the potential to cause harm is heavily weighed. Phenomenology places a deliberate focus on the individual perception of experience to identify common experiences or essences within the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Burkholder et al., 2016). The ability to be flexible in the data collection process creates space for a more comprehensive, holistic view of the problem at hand while showcasing firsthand experiences that feel true to the participant, better suiting the sensitive nature of this study (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Phenomenology is both a school of philosophy and a type of qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on the philosophy of phenomenology, phenomenological studies examine lived experience and how it is then transformed into consciousness (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Burkholder et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From an interpretive research standpoint, multiple perceptions of a single event can exist simultaneously (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenological researchers

suppose the actuality of an "essence" or commonality within the shared experiences, also referred to as the essential, invariant structure of a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). As data are collected, participant experiences are bracketed, analyzed, and juxtaposed with other accounts within the study to identify the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). For this reason, the sample population is typically small and purposefully selected, interviewing is the primary data collection strategy, and the researcher is the primary data collection tool (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher takes an insider approach and is heavily involved in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Unlike quantitative researchers, the qualitative researcher acknowledges that their own experiences, principles, and perspectives can shape the collection and interpretation of data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher, as the primary data collection tool, must work interactively with each research participant.

The primary goal is to capture a thorough understanding of the phenomenon and provide an accurate description of findings from the participant's perspective; therefore, the role of the qualitative researcher requires criticality, reflexivity, rigor, and collaboration (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A goal of this study was to give voice to a population that has been historically silenced. To this point, the researcher must be able to confirm with participants the accuracy of the interpretation of the participant's lived experience (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher must be

committed to ongoing reflexivity, practicing awareness, and monitoring of how the role of the researcher can impact the study, especially the interpretation and representation of the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Methodology

Participants of the Study

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, I used a nonprobabilistic, purposeful sampling strategy in this study. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study because the aim was to explore the firsthand experience with a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, criterion-based sampling is effective in selecting participants that represent individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Although each participant needed to meet specific criteria formed to source information-rich data, I aimed to recruit a demographically diverse population because the choices made in sample selection underscore who and what matters as data and will contribute to what stories are amplified (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The criteria for sample selection were as follows: (a) all participants were over the age of 18 years old; (b) all participants have experienced more than one sexual assault in their lifetime; (c) all participants have experienced formally reporting sexual assault prior to sexual revictimization; (d) each participant had access to a form of survivor support, such as victim services, advocacy support, mental health counseling, or other forms of holistic healing services, to help minimize potential adverse emotional or psychological effects that may arise from discussing sensitive topics; (e) all participants had formal or informal support in place for any distress that may result in participation; and (f) each participant

confirmed verbally or by email that they met criteria for participation during the
recruitment process.

Sexual assault survivor advocacy and support centers, such as National Sexual
Violence Resource Center, Sexual Assault Resource Center of Oregon, Oregon Coalition
Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault
Taskforce, and Rape Abuse & Incest National Network, were identified as preliminary
sources for potential recruitment. I identified a primary center of interest because it has a
network of survivors who volunteer to speak and share at events. I was granted
permission to access this network for recruitment for this study, so I sought volunteers
solely from this agency because it helped to ensure that volunteers were comfortable
sharing their experiences. The goal was to recruit participants who were not in an
immediate help-seeking position and could exercise choice and control (see Campbell et
al., 2019). Additionally, I used social media and the Walden University Participant Pool
to recruit volunteers. Based on the number of participants in comparable qualitative
studies, I anticipated needing a sample size of 10 or less to reach saturation. In data
collection, saturation is reached when no new information or insight into the phenomenon
of interest is collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

Once potential participants were identified, I offered an initial interview to discuss
the research procedures and collect informed consent. I employed secure electronic
communications to maintain participant privacy and scheduled an interview with each
participant to collect data. I formed specific interview questions after an exhaustive

review of the literature to elicit information-rich data relative to the research questions. The data collection interview took place via phone, video, or email/message exchange, per the participant's preference. I used a semistructured format for this process and practiced reflective interviewing techniques to obtain the most information-rich data and accurate representations of participant experience based on their first-person account (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of the interviews was to gain insight into the participants' prior experience(s) formally reporting their victimization and their description of the decision-making process for reporting subsequent assault(s). I asked open-ended questions related to the research questions while remaining flexible with the direction of the interview. I did not ask assault-specific questions or seek information directly related to the assault. The foundational questions addressed only the reporting experience and deciding factors when considering whether to report again. I also held space for the participant to share what they felt was relevant to this process.

None of the interviews exceeded 1 hour in length, and any of the interviews could have been terminated at any point at the participant's request. To close, I debriefed with the participant and provided space for questions or concerns. At the end of the interviews, I informed each participant about the following data analysis process. Participants were also informed of follow-up contact for member checking where they would be asked to review the transcript and provide any feedback. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely.

Data Analysis

Consistent with a qualitative approach, data in this study were analyzed as they were collected (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I reviewed the transcribed interviews and noted ideas, additional questions, and emerging themes. Organizing and refining data as they were collected helped guide subsequent discussions. I used a qualitative data analysis software application called MAXQDA to organize data, code, analyze, and report data. During this process, I practiced horizontalization, examining all data with equal weight to develop clusters or themes (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Keeping the research questions in mind as data were analyzed helped to highlight significant statements in each interview (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Continuously returning to the data as new information was collected assisted in identifying the inner structure, or essence, of the phenomenon of interest (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Open coding was used to create themes within the data. Developing themes assisted in forming an overall structure or "essence" of the participants' lived experience of formally reporting sexual assault, being subsequently revictimized, and then considering whether to report again. There were no discrepant cases identified during this process.

<p align="center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</p>

Dependability

Dependability references consistency throughout the data collection and analysis process and is the qualitative counterpart to reliability in quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). It requires the researcher's clear documentation of each step in the research process in a manner that the reader can track (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

To ensure dependability in this study, I used an audit trail and peer examination. An audit trail is the detailed account of data collection processes, field notes, transcripts, and data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Preserving all interview transcripts with my notes to be reviewed in a peer examination helped establish interrater reliability (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Confirmability

Confirmability shows the reader that the researcher's findings and interpretations are based on the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). When confirmability is achieved, the researcher has demonstrated how they reached their conclusions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The reader can follow the research process used in the current study because the decisions made in each section are explained and justified. Additionally, confirmability shows the researcher has acknowledged their biases and offered information on how the interpretation of data may have been impacted as a result (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To achieve confirmability in this study, I practiced journaling and reflexivity as well as documented the research process.

Credibility

The credibility of a qualitative study is determined by the congruence between the participants' accounts and the researcher's representation of findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). It is the parallel of internal validity in quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher can employ many strategies during qualitative research to ensure credibility. In this study, I utilized the following tactics: journaling and reflexivity, using a thick description of the data, presenting negative instances, employing member

checks, and peer debriefing. Journaling and reflexivity assist the researcher in identifying and continuously monitoring their own biases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Using thick descriptions provides the reader with a more detailed understanding of the research process and participant experience (Bloomberg& Volpe, 2019). Presenting any negative instances shows alternative perspectives or information the researcher did not expect to identify and increases credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I completed member checks via email with each participant. Although it is a complex step, it is essential to assure credibility and honor participant involvement in a study exploring sensitive topics. Member checking serves as a space for clarification and ensures the findings are being portrayed as an accurate interpretation of the participants' experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I exercised peer debriefing throughout the research process by seeking feedback from committee members and fellow doctoral candidates.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to take the findings of one study and relate them to another context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). It is similar to external validity in quantitative research. The transferability of results is a distinct benefit of phenomenological research (Burkholder et al., 2016). To ensure transferability in this study, I used purposeful sampling, provided detailed descriptions of the research process, and presented the findings in a richly descriptive manner.

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

</div>

An ethical research design is vital to minimize the potential harm of examining a sensitive topic. To best explore the research questions in this study, I needed to recruit

participants who had all experienced the phenomenon of having formally reported sexual

assault and have been subsequently sexually revictimized. Therefore, the sample

population consisted of individuals who had experienced a traumatic event on more than

one occasion. When working with victims of sexual assault, there is potential to cause

harm if the appropriate ethical considerations are not addressed. To avoid causing harm

or potentially retraumatizing participants, I applied a trauma-informed approach to each

step of the data collection process and when analyzing and reporting findings.

To recruit participants, I posted a recruitment flyer on social media site,

distributed a recruitment flyer to an approved victim advocacy center, and posted a

recruitment advertisement in the Walden Participant Pool. I informed each participant of

the nature of the study and the content that would be discussed in data collection.

Participation was voluntary and required informed consent from each participant. All

recruitment and consent materials were formally approved by the Walden University

Institutional Review Board (IRB; IRB Approval No. 02-21-22-0748352). Once each

participant provided informed consent to take part in the study, I informed them of their

ability to stop the interview process at any time, review findings and make any clarifying

changes, or withdraw any information. Each participant's identifying information was

kept confidential. Data collected were stored securely in a password-protected electronic

file to ensure the confidentiality of protected information. Data will be stored on an

encrypted drive and kept for 5 years after the study completion date. After the 5-year

retention requirement, the drive will be physically destroyed. I used pseudonyms in

coding and reporting results. A list of support and advocacy services were made available

to each participant. Each participant had identified a support person or service prior to interviews should they have experienced distress.

Summary

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of sexual assault survivors who have formally reported their victimization. I examined participants' decision-making process, particularly in the context of reporting sexual revictimization, and how their historical experiences impacted their decisions to formally report again. The research was qualitative in nature. Because I examined lived experiences of participants, a phenomenological approach was most suitable. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants to provide the most relevant, rich data. Participation was voluntary and ethical considerations were accounted for throughout the study.

In chapter 4, I will offer detailed information regarding the research setting, sample population, and recruitment procedures used in this study. Additionally, I will describe the methods I used to collect and analyze data. I will provide evidence of trustworthiness by discussing the dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability of this study. Finally, I will provide an in-depth presentation of the study results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of survivors of sexual revictimization when deciding whether to make a formal report. Each participant had a prior history of formally reporting sexual assault. I also examined if and how the participant felt their prior reporting experience impacted their decision to report the subsequent assault. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the decision-making process for survivors with a history of reporting sexual assault when considering reporting sexual revictimization to law enforcement?

RQ2: How do sexual assault survivors perceive the impact of any prior reporting experience on their decision to report revictimization to an authority?

Throughout Chapter 4, I provide details of the setting of this study and the sample population, including participant demographics and contextually relevant information, along with participant recruitment procedures. This chapter also includes a discussion of the methods used for data collection and analysis. Evidence of trustworthiness is also detailed prior to the presentation of results.

Setting

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted this study in a virtual setting. As discussed by Newman et al. (2021), various types of studies needed to be redesigned during the pandemic, including doctoral research, to accommodate mandated lockdowns and the prohibition of face-to-face contact. Virtual interviews have proven to be a safe

alternative to in-person interviews, minimizing risk of exposure for both the participant and researcher (Guy & Arthur, 2021; Newman et al., 2021; Salam et al., 2021). Participant recruitment was conducted virtually as well. Data were collected via semistructured interviews that took place over the telephone or via Zoom. I gave participants the option to choose which format they preferred. Six participants chose to conduct the interview via Zoom, and three participants chose a telephone call. All data collection interviews were audio recorded using the Zoom platform. If the participant chose the telephone option, the call was placed on speaker phone and recorded through Zoom. I conducted the data collection interviews in a private room with a locked door to ensure privacy and protect participant confidentiality. Zoom was selected as the virtual platform for recording audio interviews because of the end-to-end encryption and accessibility. I created a private meeting room equipped with a passcode and lobby so only the participant would be admitted to the virtual space. In most Zoom interviews, I introduced myself with the video on, as to provide face-to-face contact for rapport building; however, I disabled video prior to recording the interviews, and there was no video option for interviews conducted via telephone.

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants for this study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy, which is consistent with a phenomenological approach (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I gained IRB approval on February 21, 2022, to conduct the study (IRB Approval No. 02-21-22-0748352). Participant recruitment began on February 22, 2022. I created a flyer that advertised aspects of the study, including the title and

purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, participation expectations, and sample interview questions. The flyer listed my contact information for inquires in regard to voluntary participation. With IRB approval, I emailed a victim advocacy center requesting the flyer be distributed within a voluntary speaker group. The name of the agency is not being used in order to maintain confidentiality. The agency staff confirmed that the flyer was emailed out to all voluntary speaker group members and noted that any interested volunteers represented only themselves and their personal views/opinions. Additionally, they informed me that any volunteers were not to be quoted as, speak on behalf of, or referred to as a representative of their agency. I also posted the recruitment flyer to social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, and within the Walden Research Participant Pool. The final participant interview took place on March 28, 2022. The recruitment flyer was removed from the Walden Participant Pool on April 29, 2022.

Volunteers who were interested in the study reached out to me via email requesting the next steps in participation. I then exchanged emails with potential participants and offered to have a phone call or Zoom meeting to answer any questions about the study or the consent process. Thirteen individuals reached out with interest in participating. Three of the volunteers did not meet eligibility criteria. One did not respond after initial contact and follow-up attempts at contact. Nine participants met eligibility criteria and provided consent to participate. Four of the nine participants who volunteered for the study opted to have a phone call or Zoom meeting to discuss the study prior to providing consent. Three of those participants chose a phone call and one elected to meet via Zoom. During the phone or Zoom meeting, I explained the purpose of the study, the

criteria for participation, and the details of confidentiality before answering any questions the participant had regarding participation.

I emailed each participant a consent form to review prior to their participation in this study. The consent form contained a review of the purpose of the study, procedures, sample interview questions, voluntary nature of the study, risk and benefit of being in the study, payment for participation, privacy, IRB approval number, and contact information for me as the researcher and the Walden University research participant advocate. Participants had the option to review the consent form and respond via email with the words, "I consent," to give their voluntary consent to take part in the study. In one instance, I read the consent form verbatim to a participant and obtained recorded verbal consent prior to the data collection interview taking place. The participant was still provided with the consent document for their records. The other eight participants provided written consent via email after reviewing the document. I also emailed a copy of the interview questions to the participants beforehand for their review.

Demographics

To protect the identity of participants, I collected minimal demographic information in this study and did not collect geographical information. Each participant was given an alternate identifier to keep their involvement with the study confidential. Part of the inclusion criteria stated that participants must be women over the age of 18 years old. Each participant confirmed this criterion prior to participation; therefore, all participants were women. Additionally, participants self-identified their age and race/ethnicity during the data collection process (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Identifier	Age	Race/Ethnicity
Participant 1	30	Black
Participant 2	54	White
Participant 3	67	White/Native/Hispanic
Participant 4	31	White
Participant 5	28	Black
Participant 6	51	Black
Participant 7	55	White
Participant 8	52	White
Participant 9	47	White

Data Collection

I collected primary data from nine voluntary participants via semistructured interview. Interviews took place after informed consent was given by each participant. Each participant had the option to participate in the data collection interview over the phone, through a Zoom meeting, or by email. No participants opted to proceed with data collection via email, though email communication was the basis for discussion about interest in participation, scheduling contacts, and the consent process. Three participants chose to complete the data collection interview by phone, and six participants chose to meet on Zoom.

I conducted each data collection interview from a private, locked room. The participant and I were the only individuals present for each interview. To begin the interview, I thanked each participant for the time and energy donated to the project and provided space for any questions before data collection began. This was fundamental in building rapport and providing transparency, which is consistent with a phenomenological approach, as described by Lester (1999). The introduction period was

not included in the data collection recordings and lasted an average of 3 to 5 minutes in duration. When each participant indicated they were ready to proceed, the recording of data collection began. Each recorded interview lasted between 17–57 minutes with an average of 33 minutes.

There were no unusual circumstances encountered or deviations from the proposed plan for data collection. I emailed the participants the interview questions ahead of the interviews and informed them that the questions would serve as a guide. Participants were also informed that they could add any information they felt was relevant to the context of the questions. The interview format was flexible, and participants were informed that they could pause, ask for clarification, or stop at any point. I ended the interview with follow-up questions and space for the participant to add any additional information or ask questions. Following the conclusion of each interview, participants were emailed a $5 gift card to Starbucks with a message that stated, "Thank you for your time and energy!"

Each participant was informed that the audio portion of their interview would be recorded. Participants who chose to participate in the interview via Zoom had video disabled once the recording of the interview began. Only audio recordings were used to protect the identity of participants in data storage. I used the recording feature on the Zoom platform to capture the audio of each interview and save it to a protected, electronic file. The audio recordings were not saved or stored on the Zoom platform. Participants who chose to take part in the interview via phone were placed on

speakerphone and recorded via the Zoom platform as well. The same storage method was used for both phone and Zoom interviews.

Each interview was transcribed using a transcription application called Otter.ai. This application used artificial intelligence for speech transcription and produced an editable document. I reviewed each transcript while listening along with the audio recording of each interview to make necessary changes for accuracy. I saved copies of the final transcripts to protected files. Each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript to review and make any clarifications or edits of their own. After member checking was complete, I uploaded the transcripts and my corresponding notes into MAXQDA for data analysis.

Data Analysis

For this qualitative study, I used a phenomenological approach to data analysis. This approach is based on the assumption that there is an essence to the lived experiences shared by individuals who encounter similar phenomena (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I examined the lived experience of survivors of sexual revictimization and their decision-making processes around making formal reports. Interviews with nine voluntary participants produced 295 minutes of audio data, which was converted into 90 pages of typed transcript.

The primary steps of data analysis began during the data collection process. During each interview, I made notes of information of key relevance to the questions asked. I reviewed notes prior to ending the interviews to ask any follow-up questions and again to prepare for the following interviews. This helped to develop preliminary areas of

interest within the data and explore any developing commonalities between sources. Once saturation was evident, data collection interviews ceased, and I moved into more in-depth analysis. To become submerged in the data, I read and re-read the interview transcripts and notes made during the interview.

Interview transcripts were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA. Once the transcripts were in MAXQDA, I began the process of open coding. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) referred to coding as the development of a classification system based on the significance of distinct data segments to the research problem. With this in mind, I assigned codes to data points derived from participant statements, words, and answers to interview questions. The first round produced 161 individual codes that I used to flag data I wanted to revisit for deeper analysis. I then organized these codes based on similarity and emerging themes and condensed the amount to 65 codes and 87 subcodes. Next, I reviewed the codes and developed categories and subcategories to identify opportunities for consolidation and refining of themes based on relevancy to the research questions. There were no discrepant cases to be factored into the analysis. During the analysis process, I continuously referred to the research questions and used the availability heuristic framework as an additional point of reference. Through comprehensive, repeated examination of the data, I developed the following main themes: background factors, motivational factors, risk/benefit analysis, reporting outcomes, and hindsight. The categories and subcategories withing these five themes provide answers to the two research questions posed in this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is vital to any academic research. To be of use within the field, research must be conducted ethically from beginning to end (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The design and procedures for this study were approved by the Walden University IRB prior to participant recruitment or data collection and analysis. All participants provided informed consent and were advised that they could cease participation or revoke consent at any time. I designed the procedures for all participant communication, including data collection and the communication of study results, to be trauma informed. My efforts to ensure trustworthiness in this study followed the approved plan previously detailed in Chapter 3. In the following subsections, I discuss dependability, conformability, credibility, and transferability.

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability is likened to the reliability of quantitative research and requires the researcher to be consistent in their data collection and analysis procedures (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To illustrate the consistency, I itemized my data collection process, took notes during interviews, recorded transcripts, and detailed the data analysis process. All notes and transcripts were stored for an audit trail and shared with my committee members. Moreover, the findings presented demonstrate that the data are dependable in answering the research questions (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the reader is able to follow the research process from beginning to end and understand how the researcher has arrived at the presented

conclusions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To achieve confirmability, I explained each section of the research process and provided rationale for decisions made and steps taken. Additionally, I kept a research journal for practicing reflexivity. I bracketed any preexisting assumptions or biases and approached data collection and analysis with open curiosity. This helped to ensure that findings and interpretations were based on the data collected (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is similar to internal validity in quantitative research and is demonstrated when the representation of findings is consistent with the reports of participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To achieve credibility in this study, I employed member checks with each participant. Member checking served as an opportunity to ensure that the transcripts reflected what the participant wanted to convey when communicating their lived experience and offered space to make any changes, clarifications, additions, or retractions. Peer-debriefing, reflective journaling, reporting negative instances, and using thick descriptions of data were additional tactics used in this study to accomplish credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is beneficial to qualitative research because it offers the ability to relate the interpretation of findings from one study to similar contexts for a broader relevance (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As outlined in Chapter 3, I used purposeful sampling strategies, offered thick descriptions of the research process, and reported results in a deeply descriptive manner. Presenting greatly detailed information regarding

the context of this study, including the sample population, background, data collection, and analysis, allows readers to make informed comparisons (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Results

The aim of this study was to explore the decision-making process of reporting sexual revictimization through the lived experience of survivors with prior reporting history. Each participant was a survivor of sexual violence who had made a formal report and were subsequently revictimized. The process of deciding whether to report the sexual revictimization was examined through individual semistructured interviews. Interview questions were formed to provide information-rich data that could offer insight into the decision-making process for survivors and identify any potential impact of their prior reporting experience.

Interview questions asked for information around the reporting process and there were no assault-specific questions. However, the participants were informed that they could share any information they felt was relevant to the context of the questions asked. Some participants shared in-depth back stories that gave collateral information and other provided concise answers to each question. The trauma-informed approach I used in the interview process provided flexibility and allowed the participant to have control and agency over the sharing of information. This resulted in some interviews being less linear than others. Prior to ending each interview, I reflected on the interview questions to make sure each was answered in some form and asked follow-up questions if anything had been passed over. The first set of questions were specific to the first formal reporting

experience. The second set were specific to subsequent reporting decisions. The participant did not have to had reported the sexual revictimization, as the study sought to examine the decision-making process rather than the outcome. However, each participant gave critical insight into the rationale behind their choice whether to report or not.

Each participant was given an alternate identifier to protect their identity and were ultimately assigned a number 1-9 for the reporting of results. Data were analyzed with the research questions in mind, as well as the availability heuristic theory framework, to develop codes, themes, categories, and subcategories. Following rigorous analysis, codes were sectioned into 17 categories, which were then grouped by theme (see Figure 1). Five main themes were developed to offer insight into the decision process for reporting sexual revictimization. Themes identified were background factors, motivational factors, risk/benefit analysis, reporting outcomes, and hindsight. Because the interview questions were broken into two sections, the results will be presented with this differentiation, as well. Each theme is addressed in both sets of questions, culminating in answers to the research questions presented in this study.

Figure 1

Categories of Data Identified Within Transcripts

Categories Identified Within Transcripts
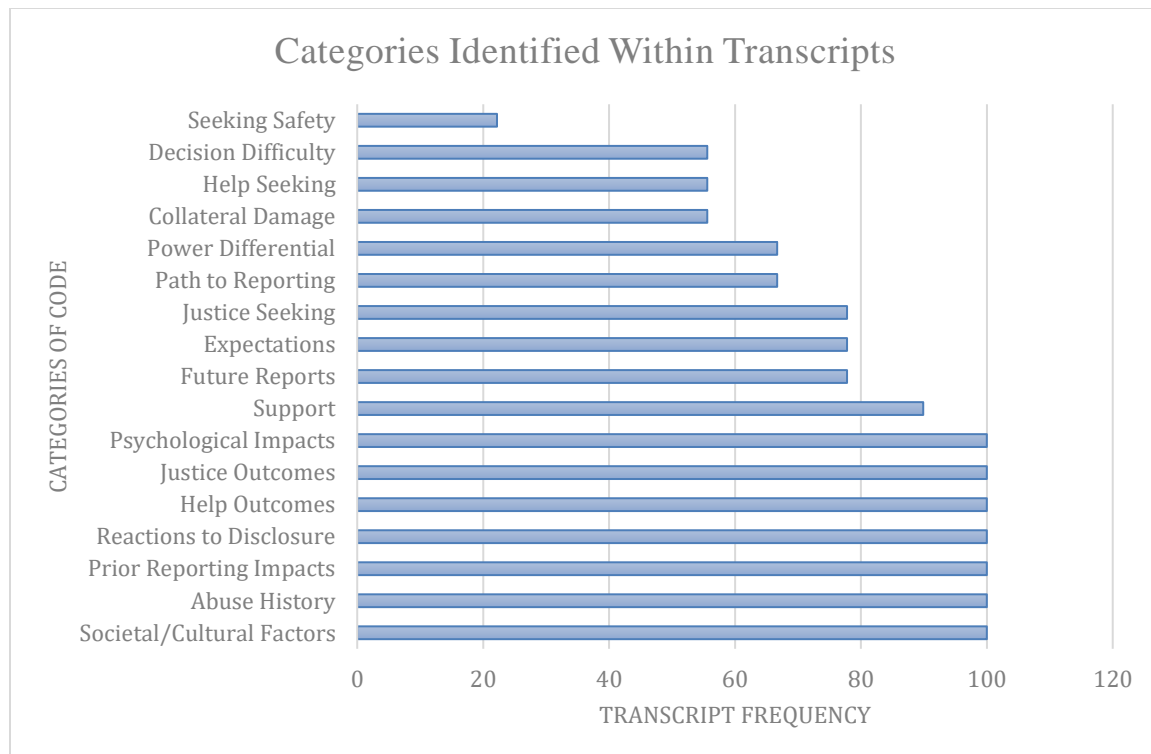
Background Factors

Background factors included information provided by participants relative to abuse history, societal and cultural factors, and support networks that contributed to the decision-making process. For most participants, these categories were interrelated. For example, three participants referenced a parent having also been sexually abused. Such segments contained data that were coded for both abuse history and informal supports. Three participants discussed being sexually victimized during their time in the military. This information produced segments that were coded for abuse history, structured support, and cultural factors. Two participants shared details about familial abuse where

the perpetrator was a relative who enacted violence against multiple family members. This information was also coded across the three categories that made up the theme of background factors. For many participants, their support network, informal or structured, was also directly related to their abuse history. Although the interview questions were specific to the reporting process and I did not ask about any assault-related details, all participants offered information related to their assault or the perpetrator. The open-ended questions allowed space for participants to share anything they felt was relevant to the context or reporting process. Data categorized to develop this theme were found within answers to almost all interview questions and within each transcript.

The category of support network consisted of the subcategories informal support and structured support. Informal support included information about family, friends, or social support groups and how this factored into their decision making. This category was coded in 89.9% of interview transcripts. Structured support consisted of data referring to constructs such as college or the military. This includes information on both the existence and absence of support, as well as the beneficial or detrimental impacts.

Participant 1 shared that she did not seek any guidance from any support person before her first experience. However, she talked with a friend about what happened to her prior to reporting revictimization, stating "she told me that I should report, like I should not have waited a long time." In regard to the initial reporting experience, Participant 2 discussed having disclosed to a group of other survivors who encouraged one another to report and accompanied each other to do so. For subsequent reporting decisions, she did not consult any supports. Participant 7 stated that her sibling had initiated a report which

prompter her own initial report 16 years after the abuse occurred. She reported that she also encouragement from her husband. Participant 8 stated, "I had support from my husband. I had support from my friend" when discussing the initial reporting experience. The friend she mentioned was also present for the assault and report. For the subsequent reporting decision, Participant 8 reported that she contacted her ex-husband right away and received support and guidance. Participants also shared about family relationships and dynamics that were not supportive. For example, two participants discussed a family dynamic where abuse was disclosed and was overlooked, brushed over, or the information did not leave the family.

Structured support networks discussed were college settings and military service settings. Participant 9 discussed a reporting experience during college that was initiated through disclosure to her RA. She stated, "So then my RA came and talked to me. And I was like, 'This is what happened.' And she's like, 'Okay, let's go to the hospital.'" Participant 9 reported she later discussed her experience with the dean after not feeling protected on campus.

Three participants reported having been sexually victimized during their time in the military. Each participant shared similar information about the military culture despite serving in different branches and during different eras. Regarding the impact of military culture, Participant 2 stated, "Um, and the military mindset, and just be tough and move on kind of thing and... I kinda was living with that too." Participant 3 shared something similar, stating "I mean, because I'd been told throughout my whole army career, suck it

up and drive on, you know, don't let it mess with your head." Participant 4 shared the following in regard to reporting sexual assault while serving in the military:

> The military… It's just it's still not, at least when I was serving, it just still wasn't a place where it's a good idea to report. You know because there's still a lot of victim blaming and things like that.

Based on the reports from the three participants who were assaulted during their service, military culture was categorized in with structured support network, though it was not supportive of reporting in these instances. It was evaluated as a structural environment that impacted their decision-making processes.

Societal and cultural factors included circumstantial information that impacted the decision-making process, such as perception of justice access, attitudes toward sexual assault and reporting, and position within society. This category was coded in 100% of interview transcripts. When asked about how she arrived at the decision to make the initial formal report, Participant 3 referenced her religious background multiple times as catalyst. She stated, "Because I was Catholic, I knew it was wrong. So based on…on my religion, silly me."

When asked what the main consideration was when she decided not to report the second assault, Participant 2 stated, "Probably was a toughness issue with the military." Participant 1 shared how the reporting experience impacted her perception of justice access based on an individual's position within society:

> I feel like currently where I am that justice, at times, takes a while. Some people may not end up getting justice, simply because they are part of the minority, or

they don't have money. So, it leaves you to wonder who's gonna help those who

are in such situations?

She had prefaced this by discussing her initial reporting experiences and stated

that she felt further victimized because she did not have the funds to pursue her own case.

Participant 6 shared something similar regarding access to justice when discussing

reporting decisions:

But there's... the Black community does not go out and get Caucasian justice.

They don't. They figure you a snitch. You got the white people in your business.

Don't... there's no trust in Caucasians. So no, there's no going out seeking help

from people that you've been taught your whole entire life will not help you.

Similarly, Participant 6 discussed attitudes toward reporting within her ethnic

community, stating "But my ethnic group is African American, by the way. And in that

community, you were taught not to trust police. And you were taught to keep your secrets

in the house."

Participant 8 discussed societal views of women who are victimized as impacting

her decision-making process:

Well, I think I have a lot of anger and frustration, to put it mildly, about

exploitation and victimization and sexual assault against women in our culture. I

have had that happen. I've had significant assaults happen. I remember the first

being nine. Then again 13. Then again 17. And then not again until later in life.

The next one I remember was the one I reported. Then a significant other about 2

years later, another very significant incident happened that I also reported. So, I

think just feeling, refusing to keep my mouth shut about it, refusing to pretend it

doesn't happen, committed to doing what I can do to end this horrible dynamic we

have in our culture. I think that that's really the motivator.

The category of abuse history consists of information provided by participants

that relates to their assault, family history of abuse, and factors related to the perpetrator.

This category was coded in 100% of transcripts. Multiple participants shared about

having been sexually victimized during their childhood and discussed the complexities of

how this impacted their reporting beliefs and decisions. When discussing formally

reporting childhood sexual assault as an adult, Participant 7 stated, "Because as I said, I

was glossed over as a kid, and I have expected to be glossed over again, as a 24-year-old

woman." Additionally, participants discussed how child sexual abuse impacted their

understanding of consent and boundaries. Relative to this, Participant 4 shared:

And then it's something like that, when you're that young, like I said, I mean, it

colored my picture of what was and wasn't acceptable behavior or treatment,

acceptable treatment towards me for my whole life until I became a, you know, an

adult and realized, okay, no, that's not okay.

Participant 9 shared a similar experience which illustrated the lasting impacts of

the sexual assaults she experienced in her childhood and adolescence. Relative to her

perception of consent and what was acceptable, she stated:

Because I felt like at that point, um, that it was my fault. I didn't know until I was

like in my 30s that none of that was my fault. And that all my decisions are based

on perceptions, of like wrong perceptions on my part. And, like how many people

I allowed to hurt me, like to take like how men talk to me. And like, I didn't

realize that men shouldn't have been saying the things that they said or doing the

things they do and get away with it.

An additional subcategory of assault related information relevant to reporting

decisions was the participants perceived severity of their victimization. Participant 1

discussed being asked for evidence when she made her first formal report, which she did

not have. She later mentioned this as a consideration in her subsequent reporting

decision. Participant 8 discussed having evidence being a factor in her experience

reporting sexual revictimization, stating that she didn't think her case would have

progressed without it. Two participants did not initially consider forced sexual advances

with physical contact to be assault. Participant 4 discussed that she did not formally

report sexual revictimization because she did not have physical injuries, which led her to

feel as though the assault was not severe enough to report. She stated, "I didn't feel like it

was, you know, severe enough that anybody would pay attention to it."

Family history of abuse was discussed by 33% of participants. This came up when

participants were talking about informal disclosure to their parent or relative and

responses they received. This is discussed more in the theme of outcomes, as the data was

coded as reactions to disclosure. However, the mention of abuse history within the family

network is also relevant to the understanding of what constitutes a report and attitudes

toward reporting. For example, Participant 6 shared in regard to her family, "That whole

host of family has so much sexual assault amongst themselves is not even funny. And

they still, still keep it hushed. So, talking to people about being sexually assaulted, it's not

something that is talked about." Participant 7 discussed the perceived differences between the abuse she and her siblings endured, and the dynamics created as a result. She stated, "When I disclosed, I was 11. And like I said, I wasn't believed. And the types of sexual assault that I experienced was different than my sister's. So, she received counseling, and I didn't." She reported that her brother was also abused and described her initial formal report as having been dictated to her by his report. She reported she was contacted by authorities to share her experience, stating, "because, he wasn't credible, they asked if anybody else was, and that was me. So, I did go in."

Factors related to the perpetrator were mentioned in almost all interviews. Some of the information that was coded into this category related to abuse tactics used by the perpetrator. This includes grooming and manipulation tactics, duration of abuse, and relationship to the perpetrator. Participant 9 discussed grooming and manipulation tactics used by her abuser when she was a child, stating that he would promise her the ability to do fun things afterward, such as driving the tractor or playing with the horses. Participant 3 discussed the manipulation tactics used by her abuser that she felt silenced her, also stating, "it was so heinous that it took me a long time to actually realize what had happened to me." Participant 2 describe her abuser employing physically intimidating tactics after she made an initial report. She was subsequently sexually revictimized by the same perpetrator.

Multiple participants reported being repeatedly sexually victimized on separate occasions by the same perpetrator over an extended period of time. Eight of nine participants reported the perpetrator in at least one of the assaults was someone known to

them. Five participants reported they continued to be exposed to the perpetrator after initial disclosure or reports. Two participants discussed being in a romantic relationship with the perpetrator prior to the assault. Participant 4 shared that the perpetrator being a stranger in another state impacted her subsequent reporting decision. In several interviews, information related to the perpetrator was also coded into the category of power differentials, as the perpetrator was often someone with more power and influence than the participant. Again, this demonstrates how the categories and themes were often interrelated.

Risk/Benefit Analysis

The theme of risk/benefit analysis was developed from categorized data that represented the part of the decision-making process where participants weighed the perceived risk of formally reporting with the potential benefit. Categories included in this theme were perceived decision difficulty, collateral damage, power differentials, paths to reporting and whether they offered a worthwhile reporting experience to the participant. Data within these categories were found in answers to almost all interview questions. Components of risk/benefit analysis was discussed by 100% of participants.

Perceived decision difficulty was discussed in each interview and addressed in the second set of interview questions. Question 14 asked if the subsequent reporting decision(s) were more, less, or similarly difficult than the initial reporting decision and in what ways. Six participants discussed the subsequent reporting decisions as being more difficult. Two of those reported that it was more difficult because their initial reporting experience was facilitated by an adult when they were a young child, removing the

choice component. Two participants discussed the fear of not being believed contributing to the difficulty of their decision. When asked what made the decision more difficult, Participant 1 stated, "Because I suspected that it would have probably been like last time, you know. I didn't get the support I needed then. So, what will make the difference now?" Three participants discussed having a lot to lose contributing to the decision difficulty. For example, Participant 6 talked about the loss of stability and family relationships if reports were made. Participant 3 recounted that her career, and those of her husband and friend, would be jeopardized if she reported. Participant 7 stated the following in regard to decision difficulty:

Well, the… the recent one was more difficult for me because of my age and my position, and the respect that people had for me. And also, the day and age that we live in, we've heard a lot about how defense treats rape victims. And it was very scary for me to even think about that or to weigh, you know, whether or not I could go through something like that and stand up underneath it. Or if I would, you know, just tuck my tail and lick my wounds. As a, you know, young woman, it was easier for me to do it then because I felt like I was actually having a positive effect on the children that were under his care, and that I could actually do something to stop what was happening to them. Whereas this, I couldn't stop what happened to me.

Two participants reported the subsequent decision difficulty to be similar to their initial reporting experience. Participant 2 stated that her mindset was comparable to the first time, as she would not have reported without the encouragement from a group of

survivors. Participant 8 reported that she immediately knew she wanted to report the first time and in her subsequent reporting decision. She described it as follows:

> Yeah, it was the same instinct. I had no idea it would turn into what it turned into. I don't know why. I just didn't think it through that much, I suppose. But yeah, I was abs... I never second... I never thought... thought of any other option than other to report it.

Participant 5 discussed her initial reporting experience taking place one week after the assault, but the subsequent reporting decision happened immediately. She reported she consulted with a friend before reporting the first time. When discussing subsequent reporting decisions, she stated she ran away from the scene and came across guards to whom she reported immediately. She stated, "Then I didn't have time to like, think of whether to report or not."

The category of collateral damage was created based on participant descriptions of damage suffered, or the fear of damage being done as a result of their reporting decisions. Collateral damage was coded in 55.6% of transcripts. Multiple participants were concerned for their safety or felt they had a lot to lose by coming forward with a formal report. For example, Participant 2 stated, "Um, I think I was thinking more of my own safety as far as if I reported him again. How safe would I be? Because they didn't seem to protect me very much in the first place." Participant 7 shared her thought process around reporting sexual revictimization and weighing the risks as follows:

> Well, ideally, I would have reported that immediately. But I wasn't able to I was a mess. I was afraid I was going to lose my family. I was afraid of losing my

reputation, I was afraid of losing my job, I was afraid of losing my friends, I was

afraid of how it's gonna affect my marriage and my kids. I was afraid of how it

was gonna affect my church family. And, you know, there's just a lot of people

that are cruel when it comes to rape, and they don't know how to deal with it.

And, and I was ostracized by some people, but mostly, I wasn't. And so, but that

those were the things that were weighing on me. And, and then of course, you

know, I didn't want him to do this to somebody else. So that was huge.

Participant 8 discussed the emotional damage endured by her 16-year-old-son

and having to relocate for their safety after her case went public. Participant 3 reported

that she did not report in effort to protect loved ones. She described impact of this as

follows:

And when I finally talked about in 2015, with the MST group support group that I

went into, it was pretty devastating. I actually couldn't even talk most of the time,

I was just crying so much that I was so angry, and I was so hurt. My life took a

turn for the worse because of this particular incident. I got divorced, I was a single

parent of three girls, You know, I was living at poverty level with my parents.

And this guy [perpetrator] was getting promoted. Amazing. My first husband

went on to be a lawyer. And here I was struggling just to make sure that my kids

had food for Thanksgiving. Which by the way, one Thanksgiving, we did not,

didn't have enough money to buy food, so I had to take them to a mission to eat.

Power differentials were present in 66.7% of transcripts. As coded in this study,

power differential refers to the perpetrator being in a greater position of power than the

participant, based on factors like age, money, or status. This was discussed in terms of both initial reporting experiences and subsequent reporting decisions. Additionally, power differentials were recognized in abuse tactics used by the perpetrator, such as leveraging, grooming, and manipulating the participant. For example, Participant 1 discussed her understanding of what happened after her initial formal report, stating "I later learned that the person went to the station and probably give some money for the case to just go away." Participant 3 discussed the power differential between herself and the perpetrator being the main consideration in her subsequent reporting decision. She described the abuser as the operations officer, someone with superior rank to her in the military service. She reported that the abuser had the power to send both she and her husband to opposite stations and did so to isolate her prior to the abuse. The orders she discussed also separated her from her two young children, which she described as a heinous tactic used by the abuser. She discussed this as follows:

This was grievous. What happened to me in 78-79 was grievous. To send my kids away? Well, first of all, for [perpetrator], to make... to sit there and be devious enough to make up a plan to get my husband out of … out of the unit so that he could bed me …

No, the influence.. influencing factors [when deciding whether to report], the second time around was the fact that he held three individual's careers. We were all lifelong soldiers. You screw around with our evaluations; you basically screwed our lives. So, that.. he knew that. He knew that. He absolutely knew what he was doing. That I would err on the side of logic, I would err on the side of, of

justice. I think I'm saying that right. But anyway, he knew that I was not going to

screw [husband] and [friend]'s career, he knew that. Because he.. No, no, no. He

knew that already. I was going to take the fall. And that's exactly what I did…

He was the operations officer. He was an officer. I was an NCO. It would have

gone as far maybe as the commander. They would have taken [perpetrator] and

yelled at him. They would have told him, "what they hell do you think you're

doing?". And then I would have been branded, because one, I was a female. Two.

I was minority. Three, I just had kids. So I was crazy ass because I just had a kid,

you know how hormonal people are when the kids, right. And, yeah, nothing

would ever happen. And I knew that by then.. I knew.. I was very comfortable

with the army worked, as far as complaint systems went. And I knew it would

have had to have been informal. But I also knew that if it was informal, he would

have been censured. But it would have ruined two other individuals. I mean, I

already knew my career was done for, that's a given, but I wasn't gonna be

responsible for my husband's nor [friend]'s career.

Participant 4 discussed similar understandings of reporting avenues for survivors

in the military, based on power differentials:

Um, so the, the process, when you report a sexual assault in the military, at least

when I was in the Air Force, is like, you're still, like, you still fall under that...

Because every time I saw it in this, you know, that's just obviously a very small

sample size. But every time I saw a sexual assault in the military, it was the male

supervisor against the female troop. And so you would still have to work for him,

and he would still rate you. And with the way making rank is, if he rates you

poorly, then you don't make rank. And you might not make rank for the next two

cycles, which puts you far behind your peer group, you know. And so ends up

forcing these women out of the service entirely, because they'll never... they won't

make rank. And so there's no point in staying. Yeah, you know, so it's all around

like the culture with it. All of it's just, it's very detrimental to women reporting

sexual assault.

Participant 5 discussed her experience with sexual revictimization in college

where the perpetrator asked her to come to his office to discuss her results prior to

assaulting her. Participant 6 discussed her father as the perpetrator when she was sexually

abused throughout her childhood and how he would try to keep her from her mother. She

reported that he had also groomed and abused her mother. Participant 8 reported that the

perpetrator of her sexual revictimization was a predominant member of their community,

creating a high-profile case when she formally reported. She stated, "It was very public.

Because he was a dentist, and because he went to jail, and because he lost his medical

license, it was a very public thing in my, in my town of about, you know, 100,000

people." She reported receiving messages on social media suggesting she commit suicide

in defense of the perpetrator. When discussing sexual revictimization, Participant 9

reported that she was overpowered by her adult family member when she was a child and

did not formally report the assault because she was afraid she would not be believed.

Paths to reporting were discussed in 66.7% of interview transcripts. The presence

of a reporting mechanism or a worthwhile avenue for reporting seemed to have bearing

on reporting decisions. For example, participant 3 recounted her first reporting experience while in the military as follows:

> And at that point, because there was no reporting mechanism for sexual assault, it would have to go under UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] for assault, battery assault, and he says that there was nothing there that they could... he wasn't even going to bother with paperwork, wasn't going to waste paper because it was no assault and was no battery.

Participant 4 discussed a similar opinion toward the paths for reporting in the military, stating "It is very much a, you know, cost benefit analysis that almost always ends up hugely in the cost margin, and not anything in the benefits margin."

Other participants discussed the reporting process as not being worthwhile. Participant 2 stated, "I just I guess I probably just didn't think it was going to get me anywhere. So why dredge it all up again and go through all that again?." Participant 6 recalled having to visit her father [perpetrator] in prison and him being allowed back into the home after his release. She described it as follows:

> And just like with me, after my father got out of prison for raping me, my mother moved him right back in house. I was 17 years old. He's back in the house. So you know, I mean, what was the use of me telling? Other than he stopped raping me, which is... was the main goal anyway. I mean, really, I just wanted it to stop. I didn't care how it stopped. I just wanted it to end. What I think is horrible is that, because he was my biological father, then I had to have visitations with him. Can

you imagine, somebody come breaking in your house, stealing all your shit, and

you got to go visit them in prison?

Additional participants discussed fearing the criminal justice process. Participant

7 referenced fearing the way victims/survivors are treated by defense attorneys during

trial. Participant 9 referred to victim/survivors coming forward as going through a

fishbowl. Additionally, she shared being triggered by watching coverage of sexual assault

allegations where the victim was not believed. She stated, "It triggered me so much he

and I had some tenuous talks about consent and about fault I had to explain or ask why a

women would come forward and deal with all that blame."

Motivational Factors

The first set of interview questions inquired about participants' initial reporting

experiences. Questions 3-5 asked them how they arrived at the decision to make a formal

report, what they would describe as the most influential factors when making this

decision, and what types of guidance they received before they decided to report.

Answers to these questions offered richly descriptive data that was synthesized and

divided into categories of safety seeking, help seeking, and justice seeking. These three

categories make up the theme of motivational factors for formally reporting sexual

assault.

Seven participants reported help seeking, justice seeking, or safety seeking for

themselves or others as a motivating factor in their initial reporting decision. Two

participants reported that the first formal report was made for them because they were too

young to do so. Participant 4 reported that she initially disclosed to her mother at the age

of 6, so her mother contacted law enforcement on her behalf. Participant 6 reported that she was an infant, and the report was made by a physician after she was presented with severe physical injuries consistent with sexual abuse.

Participant 6 reported that her mother was aware of the continuous, severe sexual abuse that was perpetrated by her father. When she was 9 years old, she wrote a letter to her mother, ultimately prompting her mother to call authorities, which initiated a formal investigation. She discussed it as follows:

So, I wrote a letter to my mom, because she was still working nights. And in the letter, I told her I couldn't take this no more. And if I had to stay here with him, I was gonna kill them both. She calls 911 and they told her to call child protective services. Child protective services told her to take me to [redacted name of medical center]. She took me how the medical center and they did a rape kit on me. And then, we ended up going to... see a few days later, we ended up going to the courthouse, and I had to give my statement. And they were saying I was going to be safe and that, you know, that is over and you to begin the healing process. And you know, you just need therapy, which I never really got as a child.

For other participants, there were a combination of motivating factors. Participant 1 stated, "I was considering that I would get people who would help me with counseling at the center. And also, I was considering that I will get immediate like justice." When discussing motivations to report, Participant 2 shared the following:

I think the main thing was… was that everybody else was starting to come forward. And I guess I just felt it was something that I probably should do also,

considering everybody else was doing it. I thought it would just probably add safety in numbers for one thing.

Participant 3 shared that her main motivation for making an initial formal report was justice seeking. She shared that her ideas around seeking justice were informed by her religious background:

Uncategorically, it was seeking justice, because I had been taught for 13 years, that God was just. And if there was a wrong, you just had to bring it up and then it would be fixed. So, I was seeking justice because what happened was not consensual. And to tell me that it was, or even to indicate and insinuate that it was a good thing was absolutely BS. So yes, absolutely, seeking justice.

Similarly, Participant 5 stated her main motivation was making sure that justice was served. Participant 7 reported that she was motivated to protect three children that were in the care of the perpetrator who sexually abused her and her siblings. She stated, "It was more about them and not me, but I was still very thankful to help their... their trauma to end at that point. You know what I mean? It never ends. But the physical part."

Participant 8 discussed her first formal reporting experience not having been the first time she was sexually assaulted. She was victimized multiple times in childhood and adolescence. When she was assaulted as an adult, she reported she knew right away she wanted to call the police. She stated, "But I feel strongly, for myself, in reporting incidents because I think it's a venue for change." Participant 9 reported that she disclosed to family members, but it was not addressed. She then sought support from a guidance counselor at her school, which lead to a formal report.

The second set of interview questions inquired about subsequent reporting decisions for participants. Questions 14 and 16 asked participants what things they weighted in their minds when deciding whether to make a formal report and what they felt was the biggest consideration when making the decision. Question 17 asked participants to describe any guidance they received for this decision process. Answers to these questions provided insight into the participants' lived experience when deciding whether to report sexual revictimization and the data were categorized and fell within the same theme of motivational factors. Three participants chose not to formally report again after their initial reporting experience. Six participants formally reported sexual revictimization experienced after their initial report. For the participants who chose to report again, their motivations were also categorized as help seeking, justice seeking, and/or safety seeking. As previously stated, Participant 6 was motivated to end the abuse to which she was continuously subjected. Participant 8 was motivated to seek justice and her report also prompted 4 other individuals to come forward and share similar experiences perpetrated by the same individual. Participants 1, 5, 7, and 9 also reported motivation to seek justice and helping services when making subsequent formal reports.

Reporting Outcomes

The theme of reporting outcomes was developed from data sorted into the categories of reactions to disclosure, help outcomes, justice outcomes, and psychological impacts. Reactions to disclosure included both positive and negative responses. Help outcomes consisted of subcategories, such as services and supports received and protection and safety outcomes. Justice outcomes consisted of subcategories of data

regarding the criminal justice process and accountability outcomes. The data within this theme were derived from both sets of questions. Reporting outcomes from the first experience making a formal report are significant, as many participants referenced those outcomes in their decision-making process for whether to report subsequent assaults.

Reactions to disclosure ranged from supportive to detrimental and seemed to contribute to the decision-making process for formally reporting sexual revictimization. Participant 2 shared that when she initially reported, she was blamed and was told the assault was her fault because she didn't say no. Similarly, Participant 3 described the response to her initial report while in the military as follows:

So when I went in, one of the first questions I was asked is, "well, what did you do?." I literally almost started bawling at that point. "What did you mean? What did I do?" So the thought process there was apparently I enticed in some way with my army white t shirt, or my you know, fatigues, someway, somehow, it was my fault.

She further reported that she was asked if she was flirting with the perpetrator or if she expressed consent and then backed out. Additionally, Participant 9 stated that she attempted to report subsequent revictimization but was not taken seriously and was brushed off. She anticipated her actions would lead to a conversation where she could report what happened to her but was dismissed and instructed to work things out with the perpetrator, instead.

Participant 4 reported her mother's reaction to her initial disclosure leaving her confused as a child:

Well it.. confusing, I guess, because, like, she freaked out. And I was like, Um,

okay. So that this is bad then, right? Like, this is the bad thing. Okay. You know,

because, like, I had been convinced that it wasn't, wasn't a big deal. And it wasn't

something to be, you know, to tell anybody about and it was just, just love and

whatever. And so, I was like, oh, okay, so you're freaking out. And now I'm

freaking out, because you're freaking out. So I guess confusing is probably the

biggest thing for that. For that initial disclosure.

Participant 5 shared that her friend's response to her initial disclosure helped give

her courage to make a formal report. Conversely, when discussing disclosure to family

members, Participant 6 stated, "If I brought that up, they would shut me up. They would

deflect the conversations. It was just a known hush secret." Participant 7 reported that she

was told for years that she was lying and that the abuse did not happen. She ultimately

reported the victimization 16 years later but stated that the initial reactions to her

disclosure made her report much more difficult.

Participant 8 reported that she knew right away that she wanted to contact the

police and so she discussed the incident with the hotel concierge, asking him to help her

call the police. She reported she felt he was attempting to dissuade her and stated, "He

kept asking me, 'Are you sure you want to do this?' which I found very, I don't know,

loaded, if nothing else." She ultimately continued with the report and participated in the

criminal justice process to pursue the case. Participant 9 reported that when she disclosed

to her family prior to formally reporting, she was not believed or taken seriously and was

called a liar. She referenced this multiple times throughout the interview as having

impacted her later decision-making processes, as she discussed multiple incidents of sexual revictimization following the initial formal report.

The category of help outcomes was comprised of data that illustrated the helping services received by participants, as well as perceived protection and safety, after their formal report. Of nine participants, three reported they received helping services after their initial formal report. Six participants reported they did not receive the help they were seeking or any supportive services following their initial report. Participant 6 reported that the first formal report of sexual assault when she was an infant resulted in her family moving across the country, eluding any further investigation or opportunity for helping intervention. She discussed help outcomes from her second report as follows:

> I went to the prosecutor attorney... and before I got there, my mother groomed me, right. She says, "Tell them, when they ask you 'what do you want from your father,' tell him that he needs help. He doesn't need to go to jail. He needs help." So, after I finished talking with the prosecutor attorney, and she was like, "Well, what do you want to do for your father?" I'm like, "Well, my mother said he need help and that he needs to go." She said "Yeah, but what do you want?" … "I think he needs to go to prison, and he need to stay there forever." He, you know, she said, "Well, you know, there's counseling and things like that, that we could do." I say, "Did you hear what I told you? This woman told me to tell you to get my father help. Do you think she's gonna take me to counseling?" So, I knew I wasn't gonna get any. So, the lady said, "Well, when you get older, and you can make your own choices, you can do it then."

Additional participants shared that they were not protected after their initial reports, as well. Participant 2 stated in regard to the perpetrator, "Um, the individual was not removed from our unit and so he kind of had free access to me the whole time were there." Participant 3 experienced a similar lack of protection after her initial report while serving in the military.

The category of justice outcomes consisted of the perpetrator accountability and the criminal justice process. In many of the experiences shared by participants, perpetrators did not face accountability. Only one participant reported that the perpetrator was held accountable following their first formal report, though multiple participated in the criminal justice process and wanted to pursue a case. The absence of accountability seemed to impact the subsequent reporting decisions of many participants. When asked if her initial reporting experience had gone differently how it may have impacted her subsequent reporting decision, Participant 1 stated, "Yeah, if... if I got justice then, then... then I will not have hesitated to report."

The criminal justice process was discussed by most participants. This category contained information shared regarding any part of the criminal justice process that the participant emphasized and seemed relevant to their subsequent reporting decisions. Participant experiences within the criminal justice process varied. However, most participants described the process having been a negative experience. One participant did not share an experience with the civilian criminal justice system, as their initial report and subsequent revictimization occurred during their time in military service. The initial

report was made within her chain of command. Participant 1 described the criminal

justice process during her initial reporting experiences as follows:

> I found one woman policeman who just was there. She was taking records. And I
>
> told her I had come to report a case. And now she asked me, do I have some
>
> evidence? And I say two days had lapsed before like me reporting. So I told her,
>
> not yet. I just knew that I had been assaulted. Now, so she told me, maybe I just
>
> need to like, give out some information or.. and they will do some follow up. But
>
> I didn't get that.

This participant decided to formally report sexual revictimization and stated that

the criminal justice process was the same as her first experience but with different

officers. Participant 4 had a similar experience with her initial reporting process. She

reported that she remembered talking to law enforcement and a detective and then the

contact abruptly stopped. She later learned that the district attorney declined to prosecute

the case. She was not offered any supports during this process. When asked how this

process impacted her decision to report sexual revictimization, she stated:

> Oh, hugely, hugely. A massive... I mean, everything from like the way the deputy
>
> and the detective talked to me to, you know, the fact that they didn't press charges
>
> against somebody who was 10 years older than I was. You know, like, because
>
> "Oh, he didn't hurt you. There's no marks on you." You know, so that, that I guess
>
> that colored in my mind, what was worth reporting, if that makes sense.

Participant 2 described the criminal justice process during her initial reporting as also having impacted her future reporting decision. She described the experience as follows:

Um, it was all men. This was the mid-80s. So, it was all… all men that were doing the interviewing. Um, and I remember it was kind of a, I don't know, dingy interview room. And there was about three guys in there and I was by myself. And I just kind of felt like they're ganging up on… on me, basically.

Additionally, she reported that there was no follow-up contact after her initial report and when she later checked for a record of her report, it had not been filed. Participant 5 reported that she did receive follow-up contact after her initial report, but because it took a long time, she felt they had forgotten about her case. Participant 8 reported that when the police arrived to take her report, she felt patronized, doubted, and indirectly pressured to not make a formal report. She stated, "the police felt more sympathetic to the perpetrator than to me. And again, just kind of their demographic and their body language and their behavior and their language. I didn't feel supported by the police at all."

Participant 6 reported no supports were provided to her as a minor during her reporting process. She stated that counseling was discussed with her but there was no follow-up, and her mother did not facilitate a connection to this service. She discussed having to have visitation with her abusive father two weeks after formally reporting the sexual abuse he perpetrated against her. Although her father was ultimately sentenced to prison, Participant 6 was also forced to attend visitations with him.

Participant 7 reported a positive criminal justice experience during her initial

formal report. She described the investigator as having informed her of what the process

would entail and being sympathetic to her experience. Similarly, Participant 9 discussed

the criminal justice process in her initial report as a positive experience. She described

the investigators as careful and kind. She stated that individuals from Department of

Children and Family Services were gentle and comforting and that law enforcement "did

everything right." However, she decided to report sexual revictimization later in life and

had a different, more negative experience. When asked if the initial reporting experience

informed her decision to report sexual revictimization, she stated "Absolutely, 100%.

Because I felt like, regardless of anybody else, family or otherwise, that the law had my

side. And then when I went through that experience with a second time, the law did not

have my side". She ultimately terminated the criminal justice process during her second

formal report.

The final category of the outcomes theme was psychological impact. This

category contained data referring to the psychological impacts sustained by survivors as a

product of their victimization and the psychological impacts that were a result of the

initial reporting process, which may have impacted their future reporting decisions. This

category was coded in 100% of interview transcripts and discussed in both sets of

interview questions. Specific interview questions designed to capture the data around

psychological impacts of the initial reporting process were numbers 7 and 9 (see

Appendix A). However, participants shared information regarding the psychological

impacts they endured as a result of their lived experience throughout various segments of the interview.

Participant 1 shared that the initial reporting experience made her feel calm, at first, as she felt she was going to receive help. However, she later felt confused and anticipation about what may be happening with her case while she remained unaware. Participant 2 reported feeling vulnerable for years after her initial reporting experience. Following sexual revictimization, she did not report or disclose the abuse for 20 years. She discussed the impacts of this as follows:

> I've been diagnosed with PTSD, major depressive disorder, hyper vigilance, anxiety. I've had a host of weird medical ailments as a result of carrying all this depression, anxiety and PTSD around for all these years. I've been under therapy now for over 10 years. And I'd say I'm better. But nowhere near what I was before this happened.

She also discussed changes in her worldview, specifically her outlook on people and her ability to trust and becoming hyper-vigilant. Participant 3 discussed similar changes in her worldview. She also reported that the process made her feel devalued. Comparably, Participant 4 shared that the initial reporting process made her feel like her experience did not matter and that no one cared enough to do anything about it. She reported that this impact stayed with her, ultimately influencing her decision to not report sexual revictimization. Participant 5 stated that making an initial report took a lot of courage and the experience left her feeling frustrated and as thought she could not trust anyone. Participant 6 reported that she stopped talking for a year when she was a young

child after feeling like no one listened to her when she tried to tell adults about the abuse

she suffered. In reference to her the impacts of her initial reporting experience,

Participant 7 stated the following:

> It was something that very much frustrated me because it took me back in time.
> And I had worked very hard to get over, not over but past the abuse that I had
> suffered. So it was ripping open scabs that I was not prepared to rip open.

> She followed up with stating that she felt empowered when the process was over

because she was able to help other victims who were abused by the same perpetrator. She

added that the trauma she endured after being sexually revictimized made the subsequent

reporting experience and criminal justice process very difficult. Participant 9 reported

feeling intense self-blame and doubted the validity of her experience. She described the

lasting impact as follows:

> I will tell you that it's still to this day, I still wonder if it was my fault. And I know
> logically, it's not. That emotional scar, that those officers did, those investigators
> did, that second time around. That…that really impacted me. And to this day, I'll
> have those illogical feelings of, Wait, was that my fault?

Hindsight

The theme of hindsight was created from the categories of data which described

the participant expectations, perceived impact of the reporting process, and how the

process impacted their subsequent reporting decision or any future reports. The category

of participant expectations contained data which discussed any expectations the

participant may have had going into the initial reporting process and whether these

expectations were met. Question 8 asked if the reporting process met the participants'

expectations or go the way they had anticipated and asked them to elaborate. The

category of perceived impact of the reporting process was developed from data found

throughout the interview, but more specifically from Interview Questions 7, 9, 17, and 18

(see Appendix A). Additionally, data were categorized by perception of how the process

impacted their decision to report sexual revictimization and attitudes toward future

reports. This also included segments where participants discussed whether they would

advise someone else to make a formal report.

In Interview Question 9, participants were asked whether the initial reporting

process met their expectations or when the way they anticipated it would. Responses to

this question varied. Two participants shared that the initial reporting process met their

expectations. To elaborate on her expectations, Participant 8 shared the following:

> Yeah, I mean, because I have been a private practice therapist for 10-15 years and
>
> was married to a criminal defense attorney for many, many years. I did have a fair
>
> amount of understanding of how that process would go, and the outcome wasn't
>
> necessarily as important to me as the process.

Four participants shared that the initial reporting process did not meet their

expectations. Participants whose expectations were not met anticipated justice, help,

timely follow-up, and to be listened to and taken seriously. Three participants reported

they did not have expectations for the reporting process. Participant 4 reported that she

was too young to know what to expect. Participant 7 stated she did not really have

expectations but hoped for justice and help for other victims. Participant 6 discussed

having no expectations for help, justice, or validation based on beliefs about access to justice and lived experience with long-term familial abuse.

Perceived impact of the reporting process has been discussed throughout the result section in many different categories. However, a stand-alone category was created from data specifically resulting from Interview Questions 17 and 18. In Question 17, I asked participants how they thought their first experience with formally reporting impacted their decision to report again. Participant 1 shared that her first experience caused her to delay reporting the second time because she was afraid the process would be the same, which did not meet her expectations or result in desired outcomes. When asked the same questions, Participant 2 answered, "Oh, it... after that experience, I would never report again. I mean, it was...it impacted me severely." Participant 3 reported that the initial experience left her feeling jaded and set up her expectations for how any future reports would go. Participant 4 answered the question, stating "Oh, it had a lot like… it had a huge impact on me because it really made me feel like, you know, anything short of somebody beating me half to death didn't matter. So why bother?" Participant 5 stated that not receiving help during her reporting experience left her feeling as thought she could not report again. In relation to the impacts of her reporting experience, Participant 6 stated, "And it's a horrifying process and to not have any validation. It's like, Why? Why would I do this to myself again? Why? Because I already know the outcome." Participant 7 stated that her first reporting experience made her feel afraid that she would be blown off again. Participant 8 was the only participant who did not think her initial reporting

experience impacted her subsequent reporting decision. When asked about any impact,

she stated the following:

> I mean, I'm open to think that there may be one, but I'm not... I can't see it. I think
>
> I just would have reported both of them. Either way they had turned out, I don't
>
> think I would do anything differently... depending on the result of either of them.

Participant 9 is the only participant who shared that her initial reporting

experience positively impacted her subsequent reporting decision. She reported that she

felt law enforcement was supportive of her, despite her family's negative reactions to her

disclosure. She discussed this as an influencing factor in her decision-making process.

Question 18 asked participants if they felt their subsequent reporting decision

would have been different if their first reporting experience had gone differently and in

what ways. Answers to this question varied. However, most participants affirmed that

they may have chosen to report the subsequent revictimization had they received help,

justice, or protection following their initial report. Participant 1 stated that she would not

have hesitated in reporting again if she received justice the first time. Participant 2 stated,

"I think if I would have been more supported it would have gave me the courage to come

forward". When asked in what ways she thinks her subsequent reporting decisions may

have gone differently if her initial experience was different, Participant 4 shared the

following:

> Um, well, I think like, all the way from the, you know... like, I think I would have
>
> immediately, like, gotten medical treatment and, you know, immediately gotten,

you know, advocacy and contacted the police and, you know, all of that stuff,

instead of just like, shutting it away and locking it up.

Participant 7 offered that she could not say whether things would have gone

differently. She elaborated as follows:

I want to say yes. But truly, I can't really answer that with a definitive yes.

Because nobody knows what they're going to do or how they're going to respond

until they're in that situation. I probably wouldn't have waited or been, you know,

so afraid to say something if I had not been treated that way when I was a kid.

However, I truly don't know. Because like I said, when, when you're full of

trauma, you're not thinking straight and do anything thinking straight that day.

And you know, lots of people can look at it and dissect it and say, "Well, why did

you do this? Or why did you do that?" Well, you know, you're not thinking

straight because you have got a lot of trauma going on in your brain. So, I can't

honestly say yes, I would have done things differently. And I can't honestly say

no, I wouldn't have done things differently.

The final category of the hindsight theme, future reporting decisions, was

comprised of data detailing participants thoughts on whether they would report again in

the future or advise others to report. Interview question number 19 asked participants if

there was any other information, they would like to share with me about their decision

process or reporting experience and how this may relate to future reporting decisions.

One participant stated that she did not have anything further to offer in this regard. Eight

of nine participants responded with additional insight. Seven participants informed they

would report in the future or advise others to formally report. However, multiple participants recognized that survivors should have choice and opportunity to do what they feel is best in their situation. When asked about future reports, Participant 2 shared the following:

Um you know, I'm, I'm very careful now with my surroundings. So hopefully I never have to report again or have to do that. I think now though, I've had enough, um, therapy and enough realization of what brought me to this point that I would hope that I would come forward and turn somebody in for this. Um, I think we've evolved enough too, from the mid-80s to now, that things are handled differently. I mean, I don't think it's perfect by any means, but I think it is better. There's not so much of the blame game towards women. I think we do still get blamed quite a bit, but I think it is better. So, I think you know, just… just time and... and just learning about myself is... probably would change my view on if I should report or not.

Participant 6 stated, "I'm an advocate of reporting, because hopefully, by you reporting, you'll be the last victim instead of the third or the fourth or the 15th or the 30th. You'll be the last victim hopefully." Three other participants discussed advocating for victim/survivors, as well as using their story to help others and educated the public. Many participants discussed the importance of being empowered by knowledge.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impacted survivors' decisions to formally report sexual revictimization. Emphasis was placed on survivors'

lived experiences of reporting sexual assault and how this may have impacted subsequent reporting decisions. In Chapter 4, I discussed the research setting, participant recruitment, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis. I demonstrated the evidence of trustworthiness by discussing the dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability of this study. Lastly, I reported richly descriptive results, broken down into five major themes.

The five themes discussed in this chapter were background factors, risk/benefit analysis, motivational factors, reporting outcomes, and hindsight. The information categorized into these themes provide comprehensive answers to the listed research questions. The results of this study show that the decision-making process for survivors with a history of formally reporting sexual assault when considering formally reporting sexual revictimization consists of weighing information from all five themes. Additionally, eight of nine participants reported they perceived the impact of their first reporting experience to have informed their subsequent reporting decisions. The themes of outcome and hindsight specifically discuss the perceived impacts of participants' initial reporting experience on their subsequent reporting decision.

In Chapter 5, I will conclude this study by discussing the interpretation of findings, to include the application of the availability heuristic theory. I will state the limitations of this study and present recommendations for future research. Lastly, I will discuss ways in which this study may impact positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Sexual violence is a global public health issues with extensive, pervasive consequences for survivors, families, communities, and society as a whole. In the United States, less than 40% of sexually victimized women formally report their experience (Berkseth et al., 2017; Farahi & McEachern, 2021). With research indicating considerable risk for revictimization among survivors and low rates of reporting sexual assault, exploring the lived experience of survivors deciding whether to report sexual revictimization was warranted. Previous researchers have explored factors that impact whether a survivor of sexual violence will initiate a formal report, why they may report, and barriers to reporting; however, the research on reporting sexual revictimization is limited. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that impact a survivor's decision to formally report sexual assault revictimization, with a focus on survivors' previous experience(s) of reporting sexual assault and how this may have impacted subsequent reporting decisions.

After methodically analyzing the data collected from nine semistructured interviews, five main themes emerged: background factors, risk/benefit analysis, motivational factors, reporting outcomes, and hindsight. In addition to the research questions and an exhaustive review of the existing scholarly literature, I used the theoretical framework of the availability heuristic to interpret results in this study. The findings of this study offer critical insight into the victim experience and have implications for victim services and criminal justice practices, including the need for more trauma-informed reporting processes, educational efforts to better equip survivors

with information about their rights, and alternative services for those who decline to proceed with a formal report. In this chapter, I present the interpretation of findings, limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of Findings

Prior to conducting this study, I extensively reviewed the existing research literature in the areas of reporting sexual assault, responses to sexual assault disclosures, and sexual revictimization. The results of this study build upon the existing literature and share many consistencies with previously conducted research. However, the emphasis placed on prior reporting experiences and perceived impact on subsequent reporting decisions and the framework of the availability heuristic makes this study unique. Because the results of this study were categorized into five themes, I also discuss the interpretation of findings within those same themes. Themes and their subcategories were interconnected for all participants to some degree, particularly as it relates to subsequent reporting decisions and the perceived impact of initial reporting experiences. Each theme and the subcategories discussed provide insight into the decision-making process referenced in the research questions of this study.

Background Factors

I developed the theme of background factors from data that detailed abuse history, societal and cultural factors, and support networks that were significant to the decision-making process. These categories were interconnected for most study participants. In this study, the background factors discussed by participants seemed to impact their opinion of

whether they had been victimized, the severity of the victimization, attitudes toward

reporting, and whether the victimization was serious enough to report or be taken

seriously. Prior researchers have studied the decision-making process for reporting sexual

assault and have identified the initial step to be determining whether they have been

victimized or if the actions perpetrated against them violated their acceptable boundaries

and the severity of their experience (Ahrens et al., 2007; Browne, 1991; Liang et al.,

2005; Lorenz et al., 2019; Muniz et al., 2022). As discussed in the literature review,

survivors may feel unsure whether their experience qualifies and sexual assault,

especially when it is not consistent with stereotypical scenarios perpetuated by rape

myths (Ahrens, 2006; Hahn et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2011; James & Lee, 2015; Lemaire

et al., 2016; Muniz et al., 2022; Newins et al., 2018; Patterson & Campbell, 2010;

Sprague, 2021; Weiss, 2011).

Much of the information shared by participants in this study relative to this theme

detailed the ways in which society, culture, and support networks shaped their view of

what was acceptable, serious enough to report, and attitudes on reporting in both their

initial and subsequent reporting decisions. Participants' perception of justice access was

also connected to their perceived position within their social environment, a system to

which they belong, or society as a whole. Some participants specifically referenced the

way society views and treats victims of sexual assault as having affected their decision-

making process. Others specifically referenced their understanding of what happened to

them, based on their lack of knowledge in regard to consent, boundaries, and appropriate

sexual contact, as having been influential. Smith and Cook (2008) discussed the need for

clear, foundational knowledge of consensual sex in order to determine when consent has been violated. The findings of this study suggested that participants felt empowered when they had the knowledge necessary to identify violations of their boundaries and/or safety to make informed decisions about whether to engage in a formal reporting process.

Risk/Benefit Analysis

The findings of this study support risk/benefit analysis as a key component of the decision-making process for both initial and subsequent reporting decisions. Weighing the risks and benefits of formally reporting sexual assault is also grounded in the literature as a step of the decision-making process (Anderson & Overby, 2021; Browne, 1991; Burton & Guidry, 2021; Liang et al., 2005). For participants in this study, assessing the risks and benefits of formally reporting involved the consideration of power differentials; collateral damage; and the perception of an accessible, worthwhile reporting avenue. The findings of this study were consistent with those of previous studies that highlighted the reality that there is not always a perception of safety in reporting, particularly with the presence of structural stressors, limited means and options, dependence on their abuser, and racial/ethnic biases (see Anderson & Overby, 2021; Browne, 1991; Burton & Guidry, 2021; Liang et al., 2005). Survivors with greater access to resources, financial stability, and protective supports may be more likely to formally report sexual revictimization, especially if they were met with validation and protection following their initial report. Multiple participants discussed the abuser in one or more of the assaults they experienced as having had a greater power or status and/or having had leverage over them, which impacted their choice and ability in reporting decisions.

Additionally, the findings showed that survivors may weigh the outcome of their initial reporting experience when considering risks and benefits during subsequent decisions, particularly when there are power differentials at play.

Motivational Factors

Findings of this study showed that motivational factors considered in reporting decisions, both initial and subsequent, are consistent with the existing research literature. Study participants were motivated to make a formal report in both decision categories by help seeking, justice seeking, or seeking to protect and/or support others. Help-seeking motivators included the desire to access protection/safety and helping services. Helping services consisted of a wide range of services, including counseling, advocacy, and/or medical treatment. Participants seeking safety were looking for a path to end ongoing abuse, threats to physical safety, or accessibility to the abuser. Study participants also discussed their desire to protect and/or support others when considering whether to formally report, including protecting future possible victims, vulnerable people accessible to the perpetrator, or to support other victim/survivors who came forward to formally report. Multiple participants specifically stated that they felt as though reporting was the "right thing" to do, indicating feelings of moral responsibility. These findings are consistent with the existing research literature that shows survivors cited the safety of themselves or others, desire to protect others from future victimization, feelings of social and moral responsibility, perpetrator-oriented reasons, and personal and/or therapeutic reasons for making formal reports (see Brooks-Hay, 2020; Demers et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2018; Patterson & Campbell, 2010; Taylor & Norma, 2012).

Reporting Outcomes

Reporting outcomes for study participants consisted of justice outcomes, help received, reactions to disclosures, and psychological impacts from initial reporting experiences and subsequent decisions to report. All but one participant stated that the initial reporting experience directly impacted their subsequent decision process. Justice outcomes were discussed as the criminal justice process and accountability for the perpetrator. The majority of participants described a negative experience with the criminal justice system. One participant reported very affirmative interactions with her initial reporting experience that positively influenced her subsequent decision to report; however, her subsequent experience was not positive or similar to the first, leading her to terminate the process. Another participant discussed vigilantly watching for signs of disbelief from the officers taking her subsequent report. She reported she intended to terminate the process if she felt as though she was not being believed or taken seriously, based on recollections of her initial experience. Study participants who received help following their initial reporting experience reported positive impacts. Participants who reported they did not receive help, services, or safety/protection considered this in their subsequent decision-making process. Additionally, many participants shared that the perpetrator of their abuse was not held accountable after their initial reporting experience, which impacted their decision-making process in subsequent situations.

As demonstrated in the literature review, many survivors encounter negative and often harmful reactions to their disclosures, which can lead to a decreased likelihood of help-seeking behaviors with future victimization (Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens et al., 2007;

Fisher et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2011; Swingle et al., 2016; Ullman, 2011). Every

participant in this study encountered at least one negative, damaging reaction during their

initial reporting experience. This was consistent for those who went on to formally report

an occurrence of sexual revictimization as well. In fact, the majority of responses

reported by study participants were negative and included victim blaming, disbelief, and

efforts to dissuade participants from going through with the formal reporting process.

Not being believed seemed to be the most detrimental negative response

discussed by participants in this study. This response had clear, lasting impacts on the

decision-making process for subsequent reporting decisions. Conversely, when

participants received positive, supportive responses, it helped to reinforce that they were

doing the right thing by formally reporting their victimization. Feeling as though they

were doing the right thing was listed as a motivator for multiple participants when

discussing the decision-making process. Furthermore, encouragement to formally report

by an informal support was listed as a key motivator in the decision process as well.

Participants discussed a range of disclosure reactions from informal and formal

report recipients that were beneficial and detrimental to their reporting decisions. Prior

research has shown that the response a survivor receives when disclosing can

significantly impact their participation in the criminal justice process, decisions to report

in the future, and the overall healing process (Demers et al., 2017; Dworkin & Allen,

2018; Hirai et al., 2020; Iles et al., 2021). This finding is confirmed by the results of the

current study as well. While responses received were a component in the decision process

for all participants, outcomes varied. For example, some participants who were

discouraged from reporting an assault did not go through with the formal report, while others did so despite the discouragement or negative response. Participant who reported being encouraged to report ultimately did so. Regardless of the reporting outcome, responses recounted by participants contributed to the overall reporting experience with lasting impacts.

Hindsight

The theme of hindsight was significant to this study because the second research question explored whether participants perceived their initial reporting experience had any impact on subsequent reporting decisions. When directly asked if and how initial reporting experiences impacted their subsequent reporting decisions, only one participant stated that they did not believe the outcome of her first experience impacted her subsequent decision to report. Specifically, she stated that she was open to seeing a connection but believed that she would have reported again regardless of the initial outcome. All other participants were able to articulate the ways in which their initial reporting experience influenced their subsequent reporting decision. Findings within this theme were derived from information reported by study participants that described prior reporting impacts, expectations of the reporting process, and future reporting decisions. When looking back on their initial reporting experience, some participants stated they felt like they could never report again. Other participants did go on to report again but discussed how the initial experiences shaped the way they approached the subsequent formal report. Some participants who did not subsequently report stated, in hindsight,

they wished they had reported, would have reported knowing what they know now, or would report in the future.

Findings in the Context of Theory

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the availability heuristic. According to the availability heuristic theory, people construct expectations about the probability of a situational outcome based on memories of prior experience(s) with a similar scenario and the ease with which related memories come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).Yamashiro and Roediger III (2021) further posited that ease of recollection does not automatically equate to frequency of situational occurrence and that memories can be more accessible based on how emotionally vivid they are and whether they impacted the social identity of the individual. In the context of this study, participant recollections associated with the initial reporting experience were elicited with ease based on the intense emotional impact and relevance to social identity. In Chapter 2, I suggested that it would be likely that survivors of sexual assault with previous history of formally reporting would draw upon their recollection of this experience during subsequent decision-making processes. The findings of this study indicate that survivors with a history of formally reporting sexual assault reflected on prior lived experience(s) to make outcome assumptions when facing subsequent reporting decisions. This is evidenced by statements, such as "I was wondering whether it was gonna be like last time," and numerous comparable sentiments when discussing subsequent reporting decisions. Whether the recollection was not being believed, not being protected, not receiving help or justice, facing threats to safety or well-being, having received the help they desired, or

feeling supported and protected and feeling like they did the right things, participants of this study were able to connect prior reporting experience to their subsequent decision-making process.

Limitations of the Study

While existing research demonstrates that survivors of sexual assault are disproportionately identified as women who are then at considerable risk for recurring victimization (Breiding, 2015; Ullman & Vasquez, 2015; Walker et al., 2019), people of all gender identities are impacted by sexual violence. The sample population of this study was comprised of only women over 18 years of age. For this reason, the findings of this study can only be generalized to that specific population and do not account for the experience of other gendered individuals who have experienced sexual violence or are at risk of sexual revictimization. Additionally, each participant in this study was an adult, despite many discussing their initial reporting experience stemming from childhood sexual assault.

Another limitation to this study was the social distancing measures enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic that set parameters around data collection methods when the study was being formed. I designed this study to be conducted virtually because face-to-face data collection would pose unnecessary health risks to me and the participants. Moreover, to protect the identity of study participants, video was not utilized during recorded data collection. The absence of face-to-face interaction and video observation during data collection restricted my ability to incorporate participant facial expressions and body language into the data collection and analysis process.

Recommendations

The findings of this study provide insight into the decision-making process for survivors with a history of reporting sexual assault when considering formally reporting sexual revictimization. More specifically, the findings offered information on how sexual assault survivors perceive the impact of any prior reporting experience on their decision to formally report revictimization. Themes derived from the data confirmed that the decision-making process is consistent with the existing research literature on reporting sexual assault and that prior reporting experience does have impact on future reporting decisions. I formed my recommendations for future research based on insights from data analysis and a comprehensive review of the existing research literature.

The findings of this study illustrated that many participants were not met with support and the helping services they needed after initial disclosure or events of sexual revictimization that followed. Many participants chose not to report subsequent assaults after their initial reporting experience. As Carson et al. (2020) stated, research focused on survivors choosing not to disclose sexual assault is limited. Because access to helping services is often prompted by disclosure, I recommend further research on the pathways and barriers to helping services for survivors who choose nondisclosure.

Although participants in this study were all above 18 years of age, the majority discussed their recollections of initial disclosures taking place in childhood. Multiple participants were sexually revictimized in childhood, as well. The research literature on sexual revictimization supports that many revictimized survivors were initially assaulted prior to 18 years of age (Conley et al., 2017; Cusak et al., 2019; Das & Otis, 2016;

Ullman & Vasquez, 2015). Additionally, findings of this study specifically highlight the lasting impact of childhood disclosure experience on views of self, consent and boundaries, and what constitutes help seeking or formal reporting efforts. I recommend future research on the decision-making process for reporting in individuals prior to adulthood would benefit helping professionals in building and applying educational prevention methods and interventions that meet the needs of survivors across developmental stages. Furthermore, this study confirmed that informal supports who are often the recipients of initial disclosures have impact on the survivor's future disclosure patterns. Existing research has demonstrated that disclosure recipients feel more prepared to better respond to future disclosure if they are able to process their experience as a responder (Biss & Geist-Martin, 2022). Future research on the disclosure recipient's preparedness for responding to sexually victimized peers could benefit all parties involved in the disclosure process.

Implications for Social Change

Building on the existing research literature, findings of this study support the need for worthwhile avenues for reporting sexual victimization and the development of more robust helping systems for survivors who choose nondisclosure. Based on the barriers to disclosure and the weight of associated risks, many of the participants in this study decided that formally reporting sexual revictimization was not worthwhile in the moment. However, nearly all participants who chose not to report expressed that they would report in the future, would encourage others to report, and/or wished they had reported in hindsight. For most participants, this sentiment was associated with their present

knowledge of victim rights, consent and boundaries, what constitutes sexual assault, and supports and services that are available to survivors. Continued early education around consent, healthy relationships, and boundaries is crucial for individuals to gain an understanding of what is coercive, abusive behavior and how to report this to a safe adult. The findings of this study also supported the need for community education on victim rights and what to expect when formally reporting sexual assault. Additionally, many participants expressed the importance of choice in reporting sexual assault or sexual revictimization.

The decision-making process for a survivor when considering formally reporting sexual violence, particularly with the psychological impacts of experiencing sexual violence, can be extremely complicated. Survivors of sexual victimization often experience shock, fear, despair, confusion, depression, anxiety, vulnerability, and helplessness in the wake of being assaulted, which are opposite comportments needed for initiating the disclosure of such a grave experience that requires exposure, and risk taking (Browne, 1991). Additionally, this study builds upon the existing literature showing that formally reporting sexual victimization further exposes survivors to ongoing trauma and nondisclosure can impede the survivor's ability to access safety and critical resources. The continuation of this well-documented issue highlights the need for more individualized, victim-centered, trauma-informed care and advocacy services to ease some of the strains that come with formally reporting. As discussed by Brooks-Hay (2020), advocacy and helping services should also extend beyond survivors that choose

to report to those who need guidance in their decision-making process without the condition of mandatory reporting and to individuals who choose nondisclosure.

The findings of this study were consistent with the research literature which shows informal disclosure usually precedes formal reporting. Because peers and other informal supports are most likely to be recipients of initial disclosure, sexual assault educational efforts should include information on what a formal reporting process may entail and alternatives for survivors who are seeking help and safety that choose not to be involved in a formal report or the criminal justice process. Additionally, rape myths and harmful responses should be covered in educational efforts to minimize further trauma to survivors.

Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the decision-making process for survivors with a history of formally reporting sexual assault when deciding whether to formally report sexual revictimization. An additional focus of the study was to explore what if any impact survivors felt their initial reporting experience had on their subsequent reporting decisions. A phenomenological approach was used to collect and analyze data from nine participant interviews. The results of this study showed that the decision process for reporting sexual revictimization with a history of a prior formal report is similar to that of making an initial report. However, the impact of initial reporting experiences was shown to be factored into the subsequent reporting decision processes. Background factors, risk/benefit analysis, motivational factors, reporting outcomes, and hindsight were the five main themes within the decision-making process for reporting

sexual revictimization among study participants. The majority of participants were able to articulate the precise ways their initial reporting experience impacted their subsequent reporting decisions. With the heightened risk for sexual revictimization among sexual assault survivors and devastatingly low reporting rates, formal report recipients should be mindful that sexual assault reporting interactions may directly impact a survivor's future reporting decisions. As Browne (1991) stated, the pathway to sexual assault disclosure and healing interventions should be worthwhile for the survivor and "it is society's responsibility to prepare these paths, to make them known, and to maintain them" (p. 153). In conclusion, the findings of this study offer critical insight into the reporting experiences of survivors of sexual revictimization which can be used to inform positive social change in regard to the establishment, promotion, and maintenance of worthwhile reporting pathways.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

The first set of questions are about initial reporting experiences:

1. How would you describe your first experience formally reporting sexual assault?

2. How much time had passed between the incident and the report?

3. How did you arrive at the decision to make a formal report?

4. What would you describe as the most influential factors when making this decision?

5. What types of guidance did you receive before you decided to report?

6. What types of supports or services, if any, did you have after your report?

7. What was the follow-up process like for you?

8. How did the reporting experience leave you feeling?

9. Did the reporting process meet your expectations or go the way you anticipated? Please explain.

10. What, if any, lasting impacts has this process had on you?

The second set of questions are about subsequent reporting decisions:

11. How much time passed between your first reporting experience and the next incident?

12. When after did you decide to let someone know what happened?

13. What types of advocacy services did you access, if any?

14. What are some of the things you weighted in your mind when deciding whether you would make a formal report?

15. Was this decision more, less, or similarly difficult than the first? In what ways?

16. What do you feel was your biggest consideration when making the decision?

17. Please describe any guidance you received for this decision process.

18. How do you think your first experience with formally reporting impacted your decision to report again?

19. Do you feel your decision would have been different if your first experience went differently? In what ways?

20. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your decision process or reporting experience and how this may relate to future reporting decisions?