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## From Survivor to Advocate: The Therapeutic Benefits of Public Disclosure

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From Survivor to Advocate:  
The Therapeutic Benefits of Public Disclosure

A Thesis

Present to

The Faculty of the Graduate Division of  
Counseling and Special Education

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DePaul University

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by

Katherine Infusino

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## Abstract

From Survivors to Advocate:

The Therapeutic Benefits of Public Disclosure

Katherine Infusino

This study examined the therapeutic impact of public disclosure for survivors of sexual assault. The purpose was to identify how disclosure in a public setting affected the recovery process of survivors of sexual assault. Three adult women were interviewed about their experiences. This study analyzed the meaning of public disclosure for these women in order to understand if it had therapeutic value in their recoveries. Each woman indicated that public disclosure helped strengthen her recovery. Public disclosure helped these women connect with other survivors and supporters, which assisted in alleviating feelings of shame. There is a need to study public disclosure for survivors of sexual assault further, but this study found that it can be helpful during recovery.

### Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **Overview**

Disclosure can be a difficult experience for many survivors of sexual assault. Survivors choose to remain silent for a multitude of reasons such as shame, guilt and fear that people will not believe their disclosures (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). Rape myths also act as barriers to disclosure when women or men fear questions that may arise due to assaults not matching the stereotypes created by rape myths (Ullman, 2010). It is believed that many incidences of sexual assault go unreported as a result of survivors feeling unable to safely seek help and share their experiences (Ullman, 2010). The many challenges of disclosure appear to be difficult to overcome making silence a better option for many survivors.

Although difficult disclosure can provide many benefits to survivors of sexual assault. Within a safe space where a survivor receives positive reactions, voluntary disclosure is shown to have positive effects and therapeutic value (Ullman, 2011). It is believed that disclosure allows for survivors to reevaluate traumatic events in ways that strengthen recovery (Ullman, 2011). More so it was found that when met with positive reactions, disclosure can help survivors begin finding info on coping, access medical services or simply provide a space to talk about it and feel believed (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, & Barnes, 2001). With this, feeling believed and having someone safe to talk to about the assault has been found to significantly lower a survivor's post traumatic stress and depression symptom presentation after an assault(Campbell et al., 2001).

There is evidence that public disclosure benefits the communities of survivors and

professionals working with survivors too. Survivors identified participating in research as a way to connect with and help other survivors experiencing similar emotions (Campbell & Adams, 2009). In addition, survivors viewed their participation as a way to educate professionals interested in advocating on behalf of survivors (Campbell & Adams, 2009). This is consistent with researchers that agree that more research on this topic to help educate the public must be done (Marx, 2005). Research, according to participants of one study, is a way to help educate professionals developing programs that can help other survivors (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Disclosure is an important part of the recovery process and can be a key component of facilitating positive social change in how sexual assault is viewed by the public.

### **Significance of the Problem**

The silence of sexual assault is concerning due to the prevalence of this type of violence throughout the world. Sexual assault is a public health crisis with the Centers for Disease Control finding that one in every five females and one in every 33 males will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes (2008). In a study with college students it was found that only just over half of the sample had disclosed their sexual assault to someone (Ullman & Filipas, 2005). Only a small percentage of this group disclosed to formal support systems like medical professionals or the police (Ullman et al., 2005). Furthermore, it is believed that over half of all survivors do not acknowledge or identify their trauma as rape (Littleton, Rhatigan, & Axsom, 2007). Many survivors remain silent for various reasons, but primarily because silence allows protection from the negative reactions of those they confide in. Consequently, numbers on sexual assault are typically reported as figures lower than what they truly may be due to many survivors choosing not to report their trauma.

The issue with survivors remaining silent is that it keeps them from receiving the support they may need following sexual assault. Silence also keeps those working in the field from gaining knowledge to better help individuals that identify as survivors. Research indicates that disclosure, within a safe, voluntary environment, leads to positive outcomes for survivors (Ullman, 2011). Participants of one study cited that talking about their assault within a supportive environment felt therapeutic because of the genuine interest of the interviewer (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Survivors participating in another study noted that speaking about their assault with a supportive interviewer helped identify new insights and raised their consciousness about the experience (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2009). More so, groups that are often underrepresented in sexual assault statistics noted that disclosure allows for them to tell professionals about the unique needs of minority communities that sexual assault impacts (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Although sample statistics indicate that sexual assault is widespread and prevalent in the lives of many different groups, silence hinders us from knowing the full story of what sexual assault is, how truly common it is and the myriad of experiences different survivors have following their traumas. If the silence continues we limit with the types of prevention and treatment programs that can be implemented to decrease the amount of sexual assaults that occur and best meet the needs of survivors in their journeys to recovery.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In spite of sexual assault's high prevalence in the United States it continues to remain an underreported crime due to many survivors choosing silence rather than disclosure. Survivors commonly face victim blaming and invalidation from trusted individuals in their lives, resulting in further harm described as secondary victimization (Ahrens, 2006). To avoid this survivors

often remain silent about their trauma (Ahrens, 2006). Remaining silent, however, allows for health issues like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and physical health problems to arise (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, & Barnes, 2001). Conversely, disclosure in a safe space has been shown to reduce health care visits and improve survivors' immune systems (Ullman, 2011). Furthermore, disclosing through activities like writing can lessen feelings of distress, anxiety and depression (Ullman, 2011).

The effects of nondisclosure consequently have negative effects on professionals working with survivors because it limits professionals' abilities to identify factors and consequences of sexual assault (Ahrens, 2006). Counselors in recent years have taken on the task of advocating on behalf of clients because through positive social change clients struggling with mental health issues benefit (Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009). Educating the public on sexual assault is cited as an important method in combating stereotypes and rape myths (Kelleher & McGilloy, 2009) and counselors are a logical fit for this role. With this survivors disclosing can be a critical source of information for professionals because survivors have the greatest understanding of sexual assault and its subsequent struggles. It is also suggested that there still is more for professionals to learn about the responses survivors have to various aspects of sexual assault and the treatment of resulting difficulties survivors cope with (Marx, 2005). Disclosure from a higher percentage of survivors can add to the knowledge professionals have already to help better advocate for and treat survivors.

Nondisclosure is also of particular concern when addressing the subject of ethnic minority women. Sexual assault most commonly affects ethnic minority women (CDC, 2008), yet due to stereotypes many of these women do not speak out (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman,

2009). Ethnic minority women face stereotypes and rape myths that deny their sexual traumas based on their ethnic or racial identity in addition to general sexual assault myths that create a normative idea what sexual assault (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Moreover, there is evidence that culturally bound syndromes and somatic symptoms present in ethnic minority female survivors of sexual assault but are not identified by practitioners (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Without disclosure from ethnic minority survivors there is still much to learn about how sexual assault affects these groups.

Breaking the silence of sexual assault is critical in both the lives of survivors and the efforts of professionals working with survivors. Due to countless barriers, though, a large portion of people impacted by sexual assault continue to seek safety through nondisclosure. In order to create greater awareness and create more successful sexual assault prevention programs survivors need to be able to share their experiences without fear of repercussions or shame. To disassemble stereotypes and rape myths, survivors of the various forms of sexual violence and of every ethnic, racial and cultural background need to be able to safely share their experiences. Silence is what keeps survivors from accessing the services they need as well as the factor that hinders the development of future services. As a society with the continuing high rates of nondisclosure, we are limited in knowing the full breadth and depth of sexual violence.

### **Methodology**

A primary goal of this study is to capture the unique stories of men and women that publicly disclosed their identity as a survivor of sexual assault. Recruitment will take place at various sites that specialize in working with survivors of sexual assault and at college campuses across a large Midwestern city. Participants will then complete a semi-structured interview. The

semi-structured interviews contain several open-ended questions that will help explore the topic of public disclosure further. Through this process the researcher hopes to elicit a deeper understanding of the benefits of disclosure for the survivor as well as the merits of public disclosure in the recovery process. Qualitative research is beneficial to this research because it helps gather a greater knowledge of social issues (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Furthermore, it is noted that qualitative research is important when conducting research with populations that have experienced trauma because it creates a space of listening for those individuals to overcome struggles they may have endured (Berrios & Lucca, 2006).

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed in order to conduct an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the content. IPA explores the personal and social meanings of events for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The two part analysis process involves interpreting how a participant understands an experience and then the researcher understanding the participant as she or he makes sense of the experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The goal of this process is to elicit a detailed story from each participant about her or his perception of the event (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In sexual assault research this is important because it will help the research understand the survivor's disclosure experience while also allowing the researcher to examine survivor's disclosure experience in political and social contexts.

As the interviews were analyzed themes within the interviews emerged. As similar themes appeared they were clustered under superordinate concepts to better understand the meaning of the event for the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In this case participants gave insight into their experiences with public disclosure and whether it was a beneficial part of their recovery process or not. As patterns of themes surfaced greater meaning was elicited from each

interview to better understand the complexity of the participants' stories (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The goal of this project was to compile themes in order to share the unique stories of the participating survivors with emphasis on the survivors' experiences with public disclosure.

### **Participants**

Participants of this study are all survivors of sexual assault that have disclosed this in a public venue. Women and men of all cultural backgrounds were recruited at agencies working with survivors in a large Midwestern city and from universities across the city as well.

Organizations that were contacted for recruitment included rape victim advocate organizations, mental health facilities that specialize in working with sexual trauma, local nonprofit groups that work on sexual assault prevention programs and local universities with organizations that focus on the topic of sexual assault. A summary of the project was sent to these organizations with a profile of the requirements for participation. Organizations that agreed to assist with recruitment received flyers for their offices and information about the study to include in any mass email newsletters that went out to their supports and clients. In addition to this, I made myself available to organizations when they had events so that I could recruit in person. Efforts to contact male survivor specific organizations and LGBTQ organizations were made to help add diversity to the participant pool.

Participants were required to be 18 years of age at the time of the study in order for consent purposes. Recruitment did not consider factors such as age at assault or form of sexual assault as the focus of this research was on the recovery process and public disclosure. Prior to informed consent participants were only asked if they had publicly disclosed her or his assault in order to screen in individuals meeting the study criteria for participation. Three participants met

requirements for this study and were interviewed.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms sexual assault and rape are defined in a myriad of ways. Sexual violence is defined by the Centers for Disease Control (2009) as, “any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone's will” (Sexual Violence Definitions Section, para. 1). This definition will serve as the meaning for the term sexual assault as it is used throughout this research. The term rape will be used to remain consistent with existing literature that is cited throughout this research.

Disclosure will refer to when a survivor shares their trauma with another person, through verbal or nonverbal means (Ullman, 2011). Public disclosure in this way will be when a survivor discloses her or his trauma in a venue that is accessible by a wider audience. This may be through research, a public advocacy/activist event or through various organizations that encourage speaking out about sexual violence. . Likewise, written modalities that are accessible by the general public such as, but not limited to, blogs, articles, social or social media posts will also be considered public disclosures for the purposes of this study.

Victim blaming refers to negative reactions a survivor may receive when telling someone about the assault (Ahrens, 2006). This can include placing the survivor at fault for the assault which may minimize her or his experience (Ahrens, 2006). Survivors that receive these reactions often experience secondary victimization (Ahrens, 2006). When a person experiences secondary victimization it can make the survivors feel as though she or he is being traumatized by the assault again (Ahrens, 2006).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include participant biases. Survivors who are willing to

participate are presumed to be further into their recoveries and may have different backgrounds than survivors who are unwilling to participate. Rape myths can be a determinant of whether a survivor discloses depending on how her or his assault aligns with certain myths (Ullman, 2010). The societal acceptance of this rape myth can be discouraging for survivors of other forms of sexual assault to disclose as a result (Ullman, 2010). Consequently, survivors of stranger rape may be more willing to participate in this study due to higher levels of support in their personal lives. There also is evidence that survivors that publicly disclose are at a point in their recoveries where they feel more comfortable speaking about their sexual assault (Campbell & Adams, 2009). This will have an effect on the type of participants willing to help with this study.

Another limitation of the study would be the inclusion of male survivors. Stigmas surrounding male survivors continue to silence men to a greater degree than female survivors of sexual assault (Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2008). Accusations of weakness and homosexuality arise for male survivors making it risky for men to disclose (Sorsoli et al, 2008). Men commonly report fear of isolation and fear that they will become abusers themselves as reasons for nondisclosure, in addition to shame (Sorsoli et al., 2008). Many external factors for men may keep them from participating because they may not have publicly disclosed, making them ineligible for participation in this study.

Similarly, survivors from racial, ethnic and sexual orientation minority groups may also be more difficult to include due to their own barriers regarding disclosure. Stereotypes specific to various minority communities work in ways to silence survivors of sexual assault (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman, 2009). Ethnic and racial minority groups in America are also dealing with larger systemic barriers specifically based on their ethnic and/or racial identity, which makes

identifying as a survivor more complicated (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Individuals identifying as LGBTQ indicated similar barriers, stating that because society ignores their communities it is more difficult to raise awareness around sexual violence in LGBTQ communities (Todahl, Linville, Bustin, Wheeler, & Gau, 2009). With unique barriers in place that keep survivors from various minority groups silent, it may be difficult to recruit participants to highlight the diversity of sexual assault survivors.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### **Disclosure**

Research has found that disclosure of sexual assault is an important part in the recovery process for survivors when there is a positive reaction to the disclosure (Ullman, 2011). Many survivors report that telling someone about their experience was cathartic and helped them get the experience out in the open (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007). Often survivors disclose looking for support and assistance to cope with the trauma of the assault (Ahrens et al., 2007). Consequently, studies indicate that most survivors tell at least one person about the assault (Ahrens, 2006) with family and friends usually being the first people a survivor tells (Ahrens et al., 2007). Disclosure at the beginning and throughout recovery helps survivors seek needed assistance from both formal and informal support systems so that they may healthfully process their assault.

#### **Feminist Theory and Empowerment**

Viewing sexual assault from a social and political perspective, empowerment (Brown & Bryan, 2007) and taking action to create positive social change (Stake, 2007) are ways in which feminist therapy attempts to help survivors recover and break the cycle of sexual violence. Working from the feminist therapy perspective with survivors is advantageous because it can lay the groundwork for feelings of empowerment in the survivor to go on to take meaningful action as an advocate (Stake, 2007). One form of action survivors can take to create awareness is public disclosure. In settings where public disclosure doubles as a form of activism, sharing upholds the aspect of feminist therapy that encourages political action (Contratto & Rossier, 2005).

Political action is supported by feminist therapy because it can help a client regain the power she or he felt they were missing prior to therapy (Contratto & Rossier, 2005). As a political and therapeutic tool, public disclosure can be a way for survivors to further awareness and strengthen recovery.

Feminist therapy, derived from feminist theory, understands the female experience as one with a history of invalidation and oppression (Contratto & Rossier, 2005). Prior to working from this standpoint therapists historically utilized introspective forms of therapy such as psychoanalysis (Contratto et al., 2005). This form of treatment typically placed therapists in a position of power by analyzing their client and deciding whether the client would understand the interpretation (Contratto et al., 2005). Psychoanalysis created an inherent power differential between therapist and client, perpetuating the power differential many women experience every day. This is particularly concerning when working with survivors. If the therapist has full control in the session the client may be reminded of the control her or his perpetrator had during the sexual assault (Ullman & Townsend, 2008). The goal then is to reduce in-session power differentials and increase feelings of client empowerment which is a paramount aspect of recovery in feminist therapy (Brown & Bryan, 2007).

Empowerment, in addition to the sense of power it gives a survivor, can also be a way for an individual to feel safe again within her or his body. For a survivor of sexual assault having a sense of control or power over her or his body can be a struggle due to the physical invasion experienced during the assault (Ullman & Townsend, 2008). Feelings of empowerment can help the survivor to feel connected to the body again, which is a key part of psychological healing following trauma (Herman, 1992). Connected within, the survivor's self can strengthen, further

facilitating the healing process. Survivors also benefit from empowerment because it has been shown that empowered individuals understand their emotions more and are able to tap into this understanding for guidance outside of therapy (Brown & Bryan, 2007). With a deeper knowledge of their experience and who they are survivors benefit from the empowerment component in feminist therapy because it connects them to a stronger sense of self.

A stronger self not only can strengthen recovery but also can empower survivors to act as advocates on her or his own behalf for sexual assault prevention. According to research, empowering events can inspire individuals to push back on patriarchal norms (Stake, 2007). It was found that students that studied feminist theory are shown to feel higher levels of activism against sexism because of their new found empowerment (Stake, 2007). Feminist therapy also emphasizes the importance of action following empowerment by looking at how therapists and clients can create social change through healing (Brown, 1994). Many survivors are silenced by fear that they will be blamed for their rape (Kelleher et al., 2009); however, empowered survivors can call into question the status quo. By empowering survivors to take action, such as public disclosure, real stories can be shared and a greater understanding of the intricacies of sexual assault can occur. This may also create a sense of ownership for survivors, further supporting the concept that empowerment leads to a stronger sense of self. With more survivors of sexual assault speaking out, rape myths can begin to be deconstructed and survivors can work towards stronger recoveries and greater social change.

#### **Positive Aspects of Disclosure for Individual Survivors.**

Disclosure following sexual assault is particularly beneficial in that it helps the survivor establish her or his experience as an assault and identify as a victim or survivor (Kelleher &

McGilloway, 2009). According to Ullman (2011) disclosure also allows a survivor the valuable opportunity to reappraise her or his trauma which can strengthen recovery. However, many survivors remain silent due to their traumas not fitting their own definitions of rape. The term hidden rape victim was created by Mary Koss to describe the group of survivors whose assaults meet legal definitions of rape but do not identify their experiences as such (Ullman, 2010). This discrepancy is most likely a factor in why rape is believed to be highly underreported. In one study researchers even estimated that roughly half of women that have been raped do not label it as rape (Littleton, Rhatigan, & Axsom, 2007). This is problematic in the initial stages of treatment because sexual trauma can trigger a multitude of problems that may require professional assistance.

Survivors that do not acknowledge their experience as rape also may take on responsibility for the trauma, causing further harm. Research indicates that hidden rape victims may feel at fault for the assault and engage in harmful self-blaming as a result (Littleton et al., 2007). Consequently, this avoidance in labeling the trauma keeps many survivors from reporting to the police or accessing the support services that may be needed (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). Disclosure, as a facilitator in seeking professional help, is crucial in this case because it links survivors with people who can support and help them during this difficult time. It is also suggested that survivors that do not acknowledge their rape may experience high levels of distress (Littleton et al., 2007). Although every survivor has different needs following an assault, acknowledging the event through disclosure in a safe space can help reduce potential negative emotional consequences. Additionally, disclosure can help the individual realize what support she or he needs in moving forward.

The impact a positive disclosure has on mental health following sexual assault is an important part of the recovery process. Disclosure has been linked to reductions in anxiety, depression and suicidality (Ullman, 2011). Sharing with either an informal support system (friends and family) or a formal support system (counselors and medical doctors) can help combat some of the stress of holding onto this information. In a study focused on writing about trauma results indicated that a group of college female rape survivors reported significantly less distress following written disclosure of their traumas (Ullman, 2011). Furthermore, participants reported that the experience of writing about the trauma was valuable (Ullman, 2011). These findings suggest that disclosure in a safe space can have a positive effect on a survivor's mental health. More so, survivors commonly disclose as a way to seek professional help (Ahrens et al., 2007). The benefit of this is that through disclosure survivors are able to connect with professionals that can help them with any emotional struggles that may arise following sexual assault.

There is evidence that disclosure may be beneficial for a survivor's physical health as well. Medical professionals have reported that following rape aspects of a survivor's immune system may be suppressed (Groer, Thomas, Evans, Helton, & Weldon, 2006). This puts survivors at risk for future health complications and illnesses. Ullman (2011) reports that survivors that disclosed benefitted from improved immune systems and less frequent medical care visits. Disclosure in Ullman's (2011) study indicated survivors may benefit physically from telling someone about their assault. The stress brought on by remaining silent can affect a survivor's physical quality of life too, therefore reinforcing the importance of disclosing as a way to release this stress.

**Barriers to Disclosure for Individual Survivors.**

Previously mentioned, it is believed that many incidences of sexual assault remain unreported with many survivors choosing to remain silent even in the company of family and friends. In spite of a multitude of national and international awareness campaigns for sexual assault, external factors beyond a survivor not labeling her or his trauma as sexual assault pressure people to remain silent. Ahrens (2006) reports victim blaming following a disclosure to both formal and informal support systems is a main reason women stop disclosing their trauma. When met with negative reactions like blaming and insensitivity, survivors begin to view disclosure as an ineffective means in the healing process (Ahrens, 2006). In these cases disclosure is not helpful and reinforces the safety that silence can bring.

Male survivors of sexual assault face even more external barriers to disclosure. For men, Sorsoli, Kia-Keating and Grossman (2008) indicate that factors such as gender and sexuality norms can act as barriers to disclosure. Sexual assault traditionally is viewed as something that cannot happen to heterosexual men. Similar to women, male survivors fear that they may face blaming and shaming regarding their assaults but that they may be accused of being gay as well (Sorsoli et al., 2008). Furthermore, men that reported childhood sexual abuse also described that disclosure as a child sometimes elicited violent reactions and beatings from the adults they told (Sorsoli et al., 2008). Reactions such as these have the potential to make a young boy feel at fault for the assault, creating much confusion and greater harm for boys if the sexual violence continues. Overall, it appears that external barriers to disclosure grow the more an assault deviates from the traditional rape myth, creating many particularly challenging barriers for men to overcome.

Rape myths and stereotypes that paint a narrow picture of what sexual assault is also act as a barrier to disclosure for many survivors. A common misconception of sexual assault is that it is a forceful, violent act committed often times by a black man against a white woman during the night (Ullman, 2010). During this scenario, the woman is screaming and fighting for her life and is not under the influence of any mind altering substances (Ullman, 2011). This image is typically what many people in our society judge stories of sexual assault against. The limited scope of this myth discourages many survivors that have experienced forms of sexual assault that deviate from this scenario from disclosing. As a result many survivors choose not to disclose due to their desire to avoid intrusive questions about the trauma (Ullman, 2010). This point is especially salient for males and individuals from ethnic, racial and sexual orientation minority groups that have survived sexual assault.

#### **The Negative Aspects of Disclosure.**

Nonetheless disclosure for all survivors is not beneficial. Studies find that survivors receiving negative support following disclosure experience more symptoms than individuals who receive positive support (Ullman, 2011). Specifically in one study, disregard from the person being disclosed to was related to symptoms of PTSD (Ullman, 2011). In this case, nonrecognition of the trauma can produce or add to the symptoms of the traumatic event itself. Moreover, survivors may resort to denying an assault ever occurred following a negative disclosure where a confidant minimizes the gravity of the trauma (Littleton, Rhatigan, & Axsom, 2007). The survivor's resulting denial, in this case, can further limit her or his ability to cope with the emotional stress caused by sexual trauma in a healthful manner. In situations where negative reactions are likely it is important for the survivor to weigh the benefits and consequences of the

disclosure.

### **Benefits of Disclosure for Professionals and Other Survivors.**

The benefits of disclosure are not just limited to the survivors themselves but can positively affect professionals working with survivors of sexual assault too. Beyond insight into the struggles of survivors, disclosure can act as a means to the types of services professionals can provide. Service providers included in one study noted that nondisclosure is a considerable barrier that keeps survivors from seeking mental health and rape crisis support services (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). As a result these facilities are underutilized, according to these providers, and is a factor in not receiving important funding to provide services to the communities they serve (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). In this way, providers benefit from survivors disclosing because it provides evidence of need for mental health and rape crisis services in the community when seeking program funding. Without funding providers may be unable to provide treatment and support to survivors. Additionally, providers highlight the need for more education and awareness raising opportunities as a method of helping survivors (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). This is another area where professionals' work would struggle if there was little or no funding due to underutilization. Professionals benefit from survivor disclosure because it confirms the need for funding specific to working with survivors of sexual assault.

Disclosure is also beneficial to other survivors of sexual assault in that it strengthens communities that can empathize with and support one another on a deeper level. This is often seen within female survivor groups where women with common experiences come together to heal (Clemans, 2005). Within survivor groups members can disclose in a safe space, while learning to trust others again (Clemans, 2005). Together survivors can share with one another

their own unique methods of coping with the emotional struggles of trauma recovery. Moreover, by uniting survivors in spaces like therapy groups, they can create bonds with one another and no longer feel alone in their recoveries. Group work with female survivors of sexual assault can also encourage women to regain their voice following the assault through building an empowering space of female-specific support (Clemans, 2005).

Research is another way survivors engage in helping themselves, one another, professionals in the field as well as challenge societal beliefs on the topic. In a study addressing why survivors engage in research, common responses cite a desire to help other survivors and the importance of adding to the knowledge of researchers in the field (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Disclosing through research, survivors are able to reach other survivors that may be silent and people that can assist in treatment and advocacy efforts. Letting other survivors know that they were not alone in how they felt was noted as an aspect of why research participation is important to survivor participants (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Furthermore, survivors viewed their disclosure during the study as a way to help educate people who want to learn about sexual assault and prevention (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Disclosing through research is a way for survivors to communicate the needs of their communities, add to knowledge on the subject and push for positive change in how society addresses sexual assault.

### **Sexual Assault and Minority Populations**

Sexual assault is a crime that does not target a specific group of individuals yet the aforementioned standard rape myth scenario only depicts white women as the victims of these crimes. Although women still are disproportionately affected by sexual violence over the course of their lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control (2008) sexual assault is most

prevalent in the lives of women of ethnic and racial minority groups. Studies focusing on sexual assault and sexual orientation also report that individuals identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual may also be at an increased risk for sexual violence, and that different forms of sexual violence impact these groups (Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011). This later point is also found in ethnic and racial minority populations too. Sexual aggression within a relationship is found to be more common in black couples than white or Hispanic couples (Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & McGrath, 2007). It is suggested that Latinas are more likely to experience an attempted sexual assault than a completed one (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman, 2009). Additionally, sexual violence is sometimes committed as a hate crime against GLB individuals (Rothman et al., 2011) which differs from the discussion of sexual assault surrounding the other minority groups affected by sexual violence. These results support that sexual assault affects all groups yet common misconceptions about who rape affects covers up the diverse faces of survivors.

#### **Disclosure amongst Ethnic and Racial Minority Populations.**

Nondisclosure can be an appealing choice for survivors from minority populations due to cultural traditions and norms that create additional stress for them. Many Latina survivors indicate respect for authority and male privilege as cultural norms that keep them from disclosing (Ahrens, Rios-Mandel, Isas, & del Carmen Lopez, 2010). Being that most sexual assaults are committed by men, a struggle is created for Latina survivors to either go against their culture by disclosing or remain silent. Similarly, female African American survivors report nondisclosure when raped by African American males (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). A study by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies shows that African American men committing violent crimes, such as rape, are imprisoned longer than other ethnic or racial groups (as cited in Bryant-Davis et

al., 2009). Consequently, many African American women feel an allegiance to their community to keep African American men out of prison in spite of their trauma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). In these incidences Latina and African American women may receive negative reactions to their disclosure because of cultural norms that support nondisclosure of an assault.

Religion, while helpful for many survivors, is also cited as barrier to disclosure and recovery for many survivors from non-white ethnic and racial backgrounds. In some instances religion justifies sexual violence against women, indicating that a woman is at fault for the trauma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). For survivors from cultures that hold stronger religious convictions, survivors may experience more difficulty disclosing due to how sexual assault and the role of women are discussed in many religious texts. In Confucianism, commonly practiced by Korean and Chinese cultures, male privilege is taught in a way that requires women to look to men as authority figures when determining what to do (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). In this instance, the male religious leader has the authority to decide whether the female should disclose an assault. In cases where the male perpetrator is either the religious leader or a member held in high esteem within the religious organization the situation is further complicated. In many cases if the woman goes against the religious leader and discloses the assault she may be viewed as the wrong doer by the entire community (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Similarly, this is also seen within the Latino community. Within some religious Latino communities it is believed that a priest cannot rape because of his devotion to God (Ahrens et al., 2010). As a result if a survivor were to disclose it is likely many simply would not believe the story. Yet, for many survivors religion is still regarded as an important component of their healing. Religious coping strategies are noted by survivors as effective tools to help with their recoveries (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).

In cases of sexual assault religion is both a barrier to disclosure as well as a mediator in the recovery process.

In addition to cultural beliefs and traditions, rape myths specific to different ethnicities, races and sexual identification greatly affect how individuals from non-majority groups are treated and deal with trauma. Stereotypes about African American women's sexuality that originated when slavery was still legal in America continue to inform how people view African American survivors of sexual assault (Tillman, Bryant-Davis, Smith, & Marks, 2010). According to the myth African American women always enjoy sex and therefore they are unable to be victims of sexual assault (Tillman et al., 2010). This implies that African American women are unique in their sexual functioning and obtaining consent before sex is unnecessary. Latina women face similar stereotypes that invalidate their experiences with sexual violence. Stereotypes portray Latina women as hyper-sexual and seductive (Feagin & Feagin, 1996 as cited in Bryant-Davis et al., 2009) and imply that Latina women may be at fault for the sexual assault. As a result, it is common for Latina survivors to remain silent because of fear that others will not believe them (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Rape myths specifically based on cultural stereotypes such as these may result in these groups reporting sexual assault less, creating greater silence in these communities where sexual assault is often more prevalent.

Rape myths specific to Asian American and Pacific Islander populations provide an interesting dynamic when discussing the myths based on these groups. In one study, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were more likely to believe in rape myths and view survivors in a negative manner than white participants (Mulliken, 2006 as cited in Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Still, there are rape myths specific to this community as well. It has been found that many non-

Asian men seek Asian women for sex because of the myth that Asian women are erotic beings that are less likely to report an assault (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). For Asian American women that have been sexually assaulted, the conflicted views make disclosure particularly difficult. Culturally, they may not be believed and even blamed for the trauma, making nondisclosure a favorable choice. Yet, their nondisclosure reinforces the myth that they will not disclose which allows for men to continue to prey on these women.

### **Disclosure in LGBTQ Populations.**

Just as sexual assault is more prevalent for women of ethnic and racial minorities, there is evidence that it may also be more prevalent for gays, lesbians and bisexuals too. According to a meta-study analyzing the rate of sexual assault for GLB individuals, there are indications that gays, lesbians and bisexuals have an increased risk for sexual assault over the course of their lives (Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011). While the reported percentages of assault vary across studies, a systemic review of 75 studies suggests that in population-based studies anywhere from 15.6-85% of lesbian and bisexual women and 11.8-54% of gay and bisexual men experience sexual assault over their lifetimes (Rothman et al., 2011). Similarly, transgendered individuals may experience sexual violence at a higher rate as well, with 64% of respondents in one study disclosing a sexual assault (Grant, Herman, & Tanis, 2011). These percentages suggest that gay, lesbian, bisexual men and women, and transgender individuals are more likely to experience sexual assault in their lifetime than the general U.S. population. The higher prevalence rates for individuals identifying as GLB suggests a need for further research into prevention and treatment of sexual assault in this community.

Rape myths specific to the LGBTQ communities promote a gendered definition for

sexual assault, excluding this group as legitimate survivors. Akin to the perception that men are unable to be sexually assaulted, LGBTQ survivors are often invalidated because of the myth that rape can only happen between a man and a woman (Todahl, Linville, Bustin, Wheeler, & Gau, 2009). Common rape myths about LGBTQ communities, as reported by a focus group comprised of people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, included gay males being more sexually active, older lesbians not engaging in sex, and transgender individuals being sexual predators (Todahl et al., 2009). These myths deny that sexual assault affects LGBTQ individuals or blames them for instances of sexual assault. Unclear definitions of sexual assault, focus group participants claimed, allowed for ambiguity that allows people not to acknowledge that sexual violence occurs in LGBTQ communities (Todahl et al., 2009). Consequently, since sexual assault involving these individuals may not meet legal or social definitions, affected LGBTQ individuals may find limited options when coping with the trauma.

This idea complicates matters around disclosure when LGBTQ individuals seek social support or professional assistance regarding their trauma. Participants of the previously mentioned focus group further indicated that societal beliefs, like rape myths, appear to hinder support service centers' abilities to effectively meet the needs of this population (Todahl et al., 2009). With fewer safe options when seeking services, LGBTQ individuals may experience greater oppression than heterosexual survivors when sexually assaulted. As a result, focus group members explained that LGBTQ individuals that may feel shame about their sexuality may have this feeling reinforced if having to seek services from discriminative providers (Todahl et al., 2009). One participant highlighted that transgender individuals face various layers of shame beyond their assault, especially when dealing with intake forms that often do not provide a space

for chosen name rather than legal name (Todahl et al., 2009). The additional stigmas LGBTQ individuals deal with due to their sexual orientation make disclosure difficult because there are more stereotypes to combat. Silencing an entire population of people, rape myths specific to LGBTQ communities create barriers to treatment for survivors.

The need for sexual assault support is particularly important for LGBTQ survivors due to unique struggles that may arise for them in their recovery process. In a study focused on lesbian survivors of sexual assault, internalized homophobia was examined to see how it affected the recovery process (Gold, Dickstein, Marx, & Lexington, 2009). Typically internalized homophobia is linked to acceptance of homophobic myths, some of which involve the belief that sexual assault is an impetus for homosexuality (Gold et al., 2009). It was found that internalized homophobia in lesbian survivors was connected to the severity of PTSD symptoms they experienced (Gold et al., 2009). Experiential avoidance behaviors were also linked to internalized homophobia and symptom severity as well, serving as a coping mechanism for the internalized homophobia following the assault, that consequently resulted in more severe PTSD symptoms (Gold et al., 2009). When comparing these results to a similar study featuring gay male survivors, it was found that gay males with internalized homophobia experienced stronger psychological symptoms following assault than the lesbians participating in this study (Gold et al., 2009). This indicates that internalized homophobia for gay men and lesbians should be of concern following sexual trauma because it can lead to greater psychological struggles. Thus, disclosure in these cases may be especially difficult due to the survivor's own prejudices against themselves and her or his trauma. The researchers of the current study suggest that focusing on acceptance of sexuality and sexual trauma are important factors in the recovery process of

lesbian survivors (Gold et al., 2009). Overcoming internalized homophobia can help lesbian survivors in building a stronger recovery and potentially dispel myths that link homosexuality to sexual assault.

### **Advocacy and Public Space**

Historically social movements, “seek to influence the cultural stories and moral scripts that determine how we perceive the world” (Power, 2009, p. 270). In order to achieve this, social movements of all types use public spaces public spaces to raise awareness and create social change. Specifically, sexual assault activism taking place in public spaces can assist in shedding some of the silence that drives sexual violence and rape myths. The drive for greater sexual assault awareness is similar to the HIV/AIDS awareness raising efforts during the 1980s. The AIDS Quilt was an awareness raising tool that effectively utilized public space to dispel stereotypes regarding who HIV/AIDS affects and advocate for these individuals' rights (Capozzola, 2002). An important aspect of the presentation of the AIDS Quilt was that it humanized those who died and connected viewers to people memorialized on the quilt (Power, 2009). When the AIDS Quilt initially began, people living with HIV/AIDS were highly stigmatized because the disease was thought to only affect gay men. As families and loved ones created panels for the quilt, viewers saw there was more to the deceased individuals than their sexuality. As a result, people began to see that HIV/AIDS affected everyone not just gay males (Power, 2009). Advocates for the AIDS community were able to create awareness and show the depth of HIV/AIDS through their use of public space. Similarly, sexual assault advocacy groups are trying to create the awareness that there are many forms of sexual assault committed against more than just women and children.

Theater is one way in which sexual assault awareness groups are using public spaces to discuss the prevalence of sexual assault and prevention efforts (Rich, 2010). Groups like Theater of the Oppressed are using theater to discuss the subject and get viewers thinking about how everyone can better support survivors and prevent sexual assault (Rich, 2010). The theater group notes that drawing empathy from viewers for the survivors depicted in their shows help people connect emotionally with the subject matter (Rich, 2010). Creating empathy, audience members leave understanding on a deeper level the impact of rape (Rich, 2010). When people can begin to feel the deep impact of this form of violence, they can begin to challenge stereotypes on sexual violence they believe in. Furthermore, a benefit of using theater to create awareness is that Theater of the Oppressed is able to present sexual assault in a way that shows its complexities (Rich, 2010). Theater groups can create realistic scenarios that directly call into question common rape myths. This can help audiences can see that sexual assault is not a simplistic experience where right and wrong are clearly defined.

Bringing sexual assault to a public arena is crucial to making progress towards preventing the violence from continuing. Experts on the subject still suggest that sexual assault survivors remain a largely silent community, isolating themselves from each other and helpful services (Ullman, 2010). The media facilitates some of this isolation as well by portraying sexual assault and issues survivors struggle with following the trauma as individual matters (Ullman, 2010). Although all survivors have different needs following their traumas isolation keeps survivors from finding solidarity within the greater community of survivors (Ullman, 2010) and from experiencing the therapeutic effects of universality. Moreover, it is important to remember that survivors still must live in the social world outside of therapy (Ullman, 2010). Advocacy and

activism in public spaces brings awareness to people not directly affected by sexual assault and can help educate them so that the world is a safer space for survivors. Utilizing public space to create further awareness of sexual assault can have long term positive effects on the lives of survivors and lay the ground work for more effective prevention work to be done.

### **Survivors as Facilitators of Change**

Through her research, Ullman (2010) highlights the need to empower survivors to become activists for sexual assault. This is consistent with feminist therapy principles of empowering the client (Brown & Bryan, 2007) which has been found to lead to greater levels of activism (Stake, 2007). With this, it is suggested that survivors may experience stronger recoveries through prevention work and speaking out against sexual violence (Ullman, 2010). Public disclosure is a way that survivors may strengthen their recoveries and advocate for positive changes in how society views and works sexual assault survivors. With researchers agreeing that there is still a lot to be learned about how survivors individually react to sexual trauma and the various forms of treatment available (Marx, 2005) public disclosure can be an insight into the recovery process of survivors that have taken on advocacy roles. More so, as more survivors come forward as activists there is the potential for positive outcomes for the survivors themselves, the communities of survivors, professionals working in the field and our society as a whole.

### Chapter 3

#### Methodology

##### **Overview**

The goal of this study is to tell the stories of survivors of sexual assault and how public disclosure has affected their recovery processes. Through semi-structured interviews participants had the opportunity to share what public disclosure of her or his assault means to them as a survivor and how it has impacted her or his personal recovery process. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted to identify themes that emerged during the data collection process. As themes within interviews were identified the researcher analyzed their meanings to understand how public disclosure affects the recovery process for survivors of sexual assault.

##### **Study Design**

Qualitative analysis was utilized for this research in order to investigate the emotions involved with disclosing one's experience of sexual assault in a public space. A common use of qualitative analysis is to explore special populations using specific techniques to examine the effects (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). This study hoped to identify the therapeutic benefits of public disclosure for sexual assault survivors, making qualitative analysis an appropriate methodology. Furthermore, qualitative methods allow for participants to share their experiences in overcoming trauma in their own words rather than those of the research (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). This method allowed survivors to share their unique stories and give insight to counselors and advocates working in the field into the process of recovery for individuals choosing to publicly disclose. Most importantly, qualitative methodology has the potential help others living with

similar experiences to overcome their own struggles (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). As survivors share their experiences with public disclosure and any sexual assault prevention advocacy they have done, they can inspire other survivors to seek the services and opportunities to help strengthen their own recoveries.

Qualitative research also is useful in studies that focus on current social justice issues that sometimes are not accurately portrayed (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Often mass media sources, like television news programs, focus more on the negative aspect of a situation and leave out anything positive that follows (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). For example, news sources often concentrate on the traumatic events survivors live through rather than the stories of survivors overcoming trauma (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Qualitative researcher can help identify these stories of overcoming traumatic events and act as a medium to hear the stories mass media neglects (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). For sexual assault research, this is critical because survivors and advocates of sexual assault compete against negative myths that can perpetuate the silence of survivors. Along with evaluating the value of public disclosure for survivors, this study hoped to challenge the current societal views of sexual assault and survivors that the media helps create by showing survivors that have overcome her or his trauma.

Additionally, it is suggested that qualitative research can act as a facilitator in assisting populations like sexual assault survivors overcome some of the struggles faced in recovery (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). By talking about their assaults in research interviews, female survivors indicate that they benefit from the ability to reflect and discuss their experiences in a supportive environment (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Survivors also note that participating in research is helpful because it helps raise awareness, which they believe contributes to creating positive

social and systemic change (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Participation, survivors in one study mentioned, made them feel like they were helping build better programs and resources for other survivors (Campbell & Adams, 2009). By adding to the literature on this topic researchers can better understand how speaking out about sexual assault has the potential to positively impact a survivor's recovery.

Using an original survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants on their experiences with public disclosure of their assaults. In-person interviews are commonly used with survivors of sexual assault due to evidence suggesting that the atmosphere usually invites discussion and support (Campbell & Adams, 2009). In one study, survivor participants indicated that talking to a researcher was therapeutic because of her or his genuine interest in what was said (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Semi-structured interviews can help support this type of environment by creating an atmosphere where the survivor participant can answer the questions, but add her or his own unique thoughts on the topic that a structured interview may fail to address. Furthermore, this form of interview acknowledges that every survivor's experience with sexual assault recovery is different. Open ended questions allow the survivor to explain in her or his own words how public disclosure made them feel and how it has impacted her or his recovery.

The semi-structured interview also lends itself well to the concept of the feminist interviewing process. One part of feminist interviewing focuses on reducing hierarchy between the researcher and survivor participant during the interview (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, 2009). Reducing the hierarchy, or power differential, can help create a more comfortable space for the survivor to open up about her or his experience without feeling pressured by the

researcher (Campbell et al., 2009). Similarly, with a semi-structured interview the participant has more choice in deciding how much or little is shared during the session. In order to create this space, the literature on feminist interviewing suggests continued reminders following the informed consent of the participant's choice, power and control to share whatever they are comfortable with during the interview (Campbell et al., 2009). The honesty and openness of the researcher to genuinely answer questions was also cited as an additional factor in reducing hierarchy (Campbell et al., 2009). Implementing these tools during interviews helped create a safe space that benefits the survivor and helped the researcher capture rich, compelling data.

### **Participant population**

Three women met requirements for participation and were interviewed for this study. Participants all are survivors of sexual assault that have publicly disclosed their assaults. Survivors participating in this study were between 21 and 35 years old and were of varying cultural backgrounds. All participating women are from a large Midwestern city. Recruitment took place at organizations that work with survivors such as rape victim/survivor advocate groups, organizations that conduct sexual assault prevention programs and college campuses. Signage at these sites and email communication, via newsletters, were the main method of participant recruitment. Additional sites that specialize in working with men and LGBTQ communities were contacted to included in recruitment in order to diversify the participant pool and represent two groups that are often underrepresented in sexual assault research. Due to no response from these specialized sites none were included in the recruitment process.

### **Data Collection and Confidentiality**

This study looked to answer if public disclosure helps strengthen a sexual assault

survivor's recovery. Strength of recovery following public disclosure was evaluated based on interviews with participants that focused on how participants felt before, during and after their public disclosures. To gather this information participants first filled out a demographic profile to capture information such as age, gender identification, sexual orientation, and ethnic and/or racial identification (see Appendix A). The demographic profile also asked participants to list any services, such as medical, legal or mental health, they sought during their recoveries. With this, the participant was also asked how much time passed after her sexual assault before publicly disclosing the trauma. At this time the participant received an informed consent form. After this information was obtained a semi-structured interview was conducted, during which the participant answered open ended questions about her experience and recovery.

The semi-structured interview asked participants to describe her experience with public disclosure (see Appendix B). Questions asked included what motivated the participant to publicly disclose her sexual assault, how she felt before the disclosure and then after the disclosure. Participants were asked about any negative consequences following her public disclosure. These questions were open-ended in order to allow the participants to discuss elements of her disclosure that the questions did not directly address. Additionally, during the conversation the interviewer asked the participant to elaborate on portions of the discussion to understand what public disclosure meant to the participant.

Interviews, with the permission of participants, were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher following the interview process. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept on a secure, password protected external memory device in a locked file container only accessible by the researcher. Consenting participants were allowed to choose whether or not they wanted to be

identified in the study by her first name or not. Due to the nature of this study participants have publicly identified as survivors of sexual assault before and may feel it is not necessary to remain anonymous in this research. All participants granted permission to use their first names for purposes of this project.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to help tell the stories of participants that have disclosed publicly that they are a survivor of sexual assault or have told her story publicly as an advocate for change. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, IPA is an appropriate method of analysis because it views all interviews as distinct accounts, without minimizing an experience, while calling attention to a broader subject (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Participating survivors are from diverse backgrounds and had various experiences, therefore flexibility in telling their unique stories as survivors and advocates is critical in respectfully conducting this study. Similarly, IPA has been found to work well with rare topics of investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Public disclosure's effects on the recovery process is a topic with limited prior research, making it a good fit for this analysis method.

Once interviews are completed the researcher transcribed the audio recordings. During this time the researcher began to listen for common themes throughout the interviews and formulated themes. Upon completion of transcriptions interviews were reviewed separately. Every interview was analyzed without the influence of the previous interview. During review, themes were identified in each interview and clustered under superordinate concepts specialized for each participant. Themes and concepts were refined as the researcher reviewed each interview independently.

During the first readings of each interview, the researcher began taking notes on the content in order to begin making sense of the information shared (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Comments were on on developing patterns throughout the text, word choice, repetition of words or phrases, or anything that stands out as important to understanding what the participant said (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Upon rereading the interviews, themes emerged that stood on their own or clustered under superordinate concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Pieces of the interview were highlighted at this point to distinguish evidence to support the themes and concepts identified by the research. This portion of the analysis was important in beginning to understand the meaning of the experience for the participant and understanding how the participant made sense of that experience.

Each interview was reviewed independently to allow for new themes or concepts to surface. Analyzing each interview separately is consistent with recognizing the differing experiences and recovery processes for each participant of this study. Furthermore, this approach also allows for the research to respect the similarities and differences between interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Viewing each interview in this manner helps the researcher remain aware of new information that relates back to the overarching theme of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA, in this study, works to focus on the meaning of public disclosure for each participant and provides insight into how public disclosure can impact the recovery process in various ways.

## Chapter 4

### Results

Although each participant's experience with public disclosure was unique in its own way, all three women indicated that it was a positive experience that added value to their recoveries. Similar themes appeared from case to case, yet what public disclosure meant to each participant differed. To highlight their unique experiences, each participant's case is presented individually to distinguish the different meanings public disclosure brought each woman's recovery. With public disclosure things like barriers to disclosure, how survivors overcame barriers and feelings during and after disclosure were identified to better understand the impact public disclosure had on each woman's recovery. Each woman gave permission to the usage of her first name and is referred to throughout her case study as such.

There were superordinate themes common to all three interviews. The participants were specifically asked about barriers and concerns, motivation to disclose, how she overcome the barriers or concerns and her recovery after public disclosure. As a result, each woman's case study highlights these core superordinate themes. However under each superordinate theme each woman had more specific themes, such as silence, nerves or embarrassment that supported the larger theme cluster, and these specific themes identify the different experiences each woman had with public disclosure and her recovery process. Furthermore since interviews were semi structured, each woman shared various other details that were important to her story. This created special superordinate themes for each interview, like reactions to public disclosure, life before public disclosure and barriers specific to an initial disclosure. Treated the same way at the core superordinate themes, these extra superordinate themes reflect other feelings and events that

related to the topic of the interview.

## **Larysa**

### **Background.**

Larysa, a Caucasian woman in her 30s identifying as heterosexual, publicly disclosed her experience with sexual assault eight years ago in a therapy group. Prior to disclosing, Larysa remained silent due to a negative initial reaction from a school nurse the day after the assault. Later she sought therapy for addiction, an eating disorder and self harm behaviors but did not mention the assault. While in an intensive outpatient program for her eating disorder she met with a therapy group that required all members to compile narratives called “My Story” in order to evaluate what may have contributed to their eating disorders. Curious about the assault, Larysa included it in her “My Story” and for the first time in her life the significance of the event was validated.

### **Barriers and concerns before public disclosure.**

*Stigma and self blame.* The nature of the assault opened Larysa up to internal and external blame as well as stigmas related to being assaulted as a college freshman. Focusing on how she was drunk during the assault, Larysa internalized the experience as the result of poor decisions made on her part. She reflected, “I know it was a drunk thing at a party and I was a freshman in college and...you know all the cliches.” Due to common rape myths it was easy for Larysa to discredit the assault and blame herself. Reflecting on how she perceived the assault prior to public disclosure, Larysa said, “it was, you know a drunk thing at a party and I was a freshman in college and...you know all the cliches.” As a result of the assault not fitting the mold of common rape myths, Larysa blamed herself entirely for it, which became detrimental to her

quality of life after.

***Silence, being vulnerable and telling men.*** Silence, though a barrier to disclosure, worked as a way for Larysa to protect herself from the reactions of others. Based on her negative first experience with disclosure and her own struggles with self blame, Larysa remained silent about the assault. During her silence Larysa remembered the nurse's reaction and thought, "why would anyone else think any differently?" Through silence she was able to avoid further blame for the assault or minimization of the feelings she had in regards to the assault. Specifically, Larysa used silence as a protective tool when in therapy groups with men. After her initial public disclosure in a group of women the social and gender constructs around sexual assault made it difficult for her to disclose in groups with men. Larysa feared that, "they were gonna look at it and be like...you just think this because you're a girl." Furthermore silence helped her avoid feeling vulnerable in these situations. The assault was a secret Larysa kept to herself, and to share it with others opened her up to their reactions and judgments. The fear of feeling vulnerable worked in conjunction with silence in order to protect herself from others.

***Negative self image.*** Larysa's self image was greatly affected by the assault. She was incapable of seeing her self worth which consequently prevented her from speaking about the assault to anyone. After the assault Larysa was unable to remember many of the events of the evening. With no memory of verbally saying no, Larysa thought she must have consented. This created internal conflict for her because she thought, "well I must have said yes, even if I don't remember it because that's just who I am." From this she began to believe that if she did not say no in that moment then she must be someone that always says yes to sex. Convincing herself that this was who she was, Larysa absolved her assailant of fault and constructed a self image without

a sense of her worth in sexual encounters with men. This further harmed her when she began to date after college.

**Affects of first disclosure.**

*Negative initial response and blame.* The nurse Larysa initially disclosed to the day after the assault focused on her alcohol consumption stating, “maybe this will teach you not to drink so much next time.” As the person in power that she looked to for help, the nurse's negative reaction had a significant impact on how Larysa viewed herself and the assault. In that moment Larysa trusted the nurse as a knowledgeable resource. Reflecting on that day Larysa said, “if someone had actually, like, looked at me and been, like, you know what, like let's get you attention...if it had gone that way it might have been a very different story right now.” Instead the nurse fed Larysa's self blame and internalization of negative thoughts after the assault. With this she believed that if a nurse said it was her fault then all medical professionals would agree. This disclosure kept Larysa from telling anyone because to her the assault was insignificant and the result of her poor decisions.

*Minimization and buy-in.* In addition to blame the nurse's response minimized both Larysa's feelings and the assault. By placing blame on Larysa the nurse lessened the significance of the assault. This reaction made Larysa believe that the assault was not important. According to the nurse, what mattered that night was that Larysa was drunk rather than the man that took advantage of her. As a result Larysa bought into the minimization of the assault thinking of it as, “this awful thing happened, but I was drinking.” Using drinking as a qualifier Larysa began to view the assault with less importance and emphasize that what mattered was her level of intoxication.

**Motivation to disclose related to treatment.**

*Mental health struggles and feeling miserable.* After the assault Larysa struggled with an eating disorder, addictions and self harm behaviors. She worked on these issues for eight years between the time of the assault and her first public disclosure, but she was unable to overcome them. Participating in an intensive outpatient treatment program for her eating disorder, Larysa said that, “I knew I was miserable.” As her friends developed healthy romantic relationships she questioned why her life was the way it was. Larysa knew that the quality of her life was not good, and she wanted to change the behaviors that she later realized were due, in part, to the assault. Wanting to overcome her struggles with mental health Larysa sought treatment at that time as, “the opportunity for me to open that door and see if this is the key.”

*Curiosity and being in treatment.* With motivation to recover from her eating disorder and improve her quality of life Larysa became curious about the assault while in treatment. “I think that part of it was that this was my, it was like a litmus test to see...if it was significant,” she said. Although silent about the assault for eight years she felt the weight of it. “A part of me always of course knew that this was not was not that simple,” Larysa said of the assault. Within the treatment program she was attending her curiosity grew as she was encouraged in the therapy group to write a narrative called a “My Story”. Reflecting on her past as she wrote it Larysa realized that nothing else in her life seemed like a building block for where she was at that moment. Seeing her “My Story” as an opportunity she included the assault to see if her instincts about it were right. This experience in a way gave her permission to get curious about the assault.

**Motivation to disclose.**

*Helping other survivors.* After her initial public disclosure Larysa gained new

motivations to disclose the assault to other therapy groups. The support and empathy she received from her own therapy group has motivated her to speak out so that other survivors can receive similar positive reactions. By speaking about her own experience Larysa hopes that others will be able to open up about their experiences with sexual assault so that they can strengthen their recoveries. On her motivation to help others Larysa said, “that's part of my rebuilt self worth and rebuilt sense of community...is that other people have benefitted too.” This indicates that Larysa values connecting with other survivors and speaking out so that no one has to feel alone.

***Awareness.*** While Larysa does not often discuss the details of her assault outside of therapy groups she does use her experience as a way to bring awareness to sexual assault. As a freshman college student she said, “I wasn't prepared for those kinds of situations.” . When speaking with girls at the barn where she rides horses, Larysa uses her experience with sexual assault as a way to talk to girls getting ready to leave for college. Larysa tells them about taking care of themselves while at college parties in order to be safe. Talking about this Larysa said, “I try not to be like a grown up, but I'm like drinking is gonna be big there so you have to stay safe, you have to stay with your friends. And you have to be careful when you're at frat parties.” She hopes that through speaking to these girls they will be better prepared for some of the unfortunate realities attending college can have for females.

**Overcoming barriers and concerns.**

***Safe space and group trust.*** The atmosphere of the group was an important factor for Larysa. Therapy groups allow therapists to control many variables, but they still are bringing together strangers that can react in ways that may further harm members. In Larysa's case, she

needed to feel safe within the group before being able to become vulnerable and open up about the assault. Based on her experience with the nurse, Larysa knew that those she thought she could receive support from may not actually react positively. In order to overcome her concerns regarding vulnerability in the group, self blame and minimization of the assault, she needed to trust that group members would help her recovery rather than hurt it. Emphasizing her need to feel vulnerable in a safe space she said, “I think it was really a good place to be vulnerable. And it was vulnerable with the right people.”

***Support and connection with group members.*** The members of the group were also paramount in helping Larysa overcome her concerns about disclosure. As she wrote her “My Story” she noted feeling supported by others and encouraged to explore her history. With this she witnessed the courage of other group members opening up about the traumas in their lives. These stories motivated her to include the assault in her narrative. Conversely, Larysa still worried about the other group members judging her experience and minimizing the impact it had on her life in comparison to their own traumas. She said, “some of the things that happened to these other girls were so horrible...just stuff that I thought was way more serious than what happened to me.” The trust that group members built prior to Larysa sharing her “My Story” ultimately helped her decide to include the trauma because, “I already knew that they trusted me with their things and so that was going to allow me to trust them with mine.”

**Reactions to disclosure.**

***Relief and validation.*** Larysa experienced relief and a sense of validation after her public disclosure to the group. “I think that validation piece was [a] huge, huge part of it,” Larysa noted. Her nerves leading up to the disclosure were relieved when group members validated that the

assault was something significant that she should explore through therapy. Telling other women that had been sexually assaulted too was helpful because Larysa felt she could trust their reactions when they told her the assault mattered. Reflecting on this Larysa mentioned, “it really was that initial feedback, that reaction from the therapist and that reaction from the other girls in the room that has these traumatic things that had happened to them.” Comparing her experience with those of other group members and then again in groups after was always helpful, and they validated that this was not a normal college experience. These reactions reminded that she was right, it was significant. It was a relief for her curiosity to be validated; it gave her permission to trust that what she felt was true.

***Gratitude and surprise at other's powerful reactions.*** During the disclosure to the group Larysa said, “I was really surprised that there was so much anger too...The people that I disclosed to that first time and ever since people get really angry at this person that had taken advantage of me.” These powerful reactions further confirmed that the assault was important. In regards to her self blame, their anger also implied that the assault was not Larysa's fault. Hearing their anger Larysa noted, “it started taking the responsibility off me. And certainly there was responsibility on me too.” Larysa explained that she felt gratitude for their reactions because she needed to tell people that would not react negatively. Although she still felt partially to blame because of her drinking, Larysa began to trust that she could talk about the assault in therapy and receive the support she needed.

***Exhausted, alone, fearful, but hopeful.*** The public disclosure brought about many different emotions for Larysa in the days following. During the evening after the disclosure she expressed feeling exhausted and alone. That evening said said, “it was shaky because it's not

something that you can like point to and say I need a day off.” She still felt the need to remain silent about the assault outside of therapy, and this made it difficult for her when the disclosure left her exhausted for work the next day. Larysa's disclosure brought up a wide range of emotions that required her to focus her energy on emotionally taking care of herself in that moment. With the exhaustion and loneliness, Larysa also felt both fearful and hopeful after the disclosure. She was fearful that, “this wouldn't go anywhere.” Yet Larysa was hopeful at the same time that it would. Focusing on how the disclosure would help Larysa said she felt, “...a little bit of hope in being able, or seeing that there's something that I need to work on that might make things better.”

**Public disclosure's effect on her treatment.**

*Clarity and a new direction for treatment.* After eight years of minimizing the assault and believing it was her fault Larysa began to gain clarity through public disclosure. As a new focus for her treatment she saw how the assault was at the root of many of her body image struggles that drove her eating disorder. “Looking back now my anorexia and the reason that I went so rail thin was because [the] trauma happened when I was so heavy that I felt like at this weight that's all I'm worth so I need to be the opposite of that weight,” she said. She also saw how the assault fed into her alcohol addiction because she struggled to be romantically involved with men without the aid of alcohol. After the disclosure she learned, “I don't need to be drunk on dates. I can relate to men in a way that's not disordered.” As she continued to share her story with therapy groups she shared comments from other group members with her therapist. Their insights helped Larysa and her therapist view the assault's affect on her life from different perspectives. This created a clearer roadmap for her treatment. In regards to her first public disclosure, Larysa believed, “okay, now I have a trauma and so now x, y, and z needs to start

happening.” With this mindset she and her therapist were able to develop a treatment plan that was right for her.

**Recovery and public disclosure.**

*Distance and reframing the assault.* Able to sit with the emotions that often came when speaking about the assault, Larysa soon began to distance herself from the events of that evening. She was able to speak about the trauma in the past tense and focus on just the aspects that mattered to her recovery. “It’s not the same trauma as it was right before I disclosed,” Larysa stated, indicating a distance between her and that night. With this she also began reframing the assault to relieve her of the guilt she felt. The positive reactions to her public disclosure helped her believe, “now we can start changing the direction of my own beliefs.” Now Larysa is able to speak about the assault not as something she caused, but instead as something that happened to her. While she still lives with a sense of guilt based on her level of intoxication, Larysa realizes that in that moment she still had rights and she still mattered.

*A stronger sense of self and empowerment.* Following the public disclosure Larysa began to rebuild her sense of worth. Public disclosure, as a factor in her stronger sense of self, helped her talk through the assault and receive support from others that showed her that she matters. “To have someone actually say you are worth something in this process. You are worth more than what was done to you,” Larysa said. This allowed for her to understand that in that moment she had rights and deserved to be treated with value. Furthermore public disclosure empowered Larysa. She said, “I felt a little bit of that power coming back...I wasn’t able to fight back. Bottom line...And I think operating under that assumption for years after that, it started you know, kind of giving me that back from the first group disclosure.” In that moment her power

was stolen, and silence kept her from regaining it. Speaking about it helped her find her strength, and she began to control her future without the burden that silence placed on her. On her public disclosure Larysa concluded, “I feel like I'm worth more and so I don't feel like I have to disappear into the woodwork.”

## **Megan**

### **Background.**

Megan, a Caucasian woman in her early 20s identifying as heterosexual, publicly disclosed as a survivor of sexual assault about two years after it occurred. She sought individual therapy about a year and a half after the assault, but found that at that time it was not for her. Instead Megan has focused her recovery on speaking out through events like *Slutwalk* and *The Vagina Monologues*. Her experiences with public disclosure have been positive, empowering her to speak out against the norms that continue to silence many survivors of sexual assault. Through public disclosure she has been able to help raise awareness and strengthen her recovery.

### **Barriers and concerns before disclosure.**

*Feeling alone, embarrassed and silence.* Megan felt a great deal of embarrassment after the assault which caused her to hide it from everyone in her life. This was her main reason for choosing silence. Embarrassment in Megan's case indicates that on some level she felt partially at fault for the assault. Hiding it protected her from facing potentially negative reactions from others that would make her feel worse. Consequently, her embarrassment and hiding the assault also made her feel alone with the memories and emotions she felt. Silence, Megan noted, was detrimental to her quality of life though. “Ignoring it...I think that's why I've struggled with it for so long. It's cause I didn't say anything or do anything about it,” she reflected. While silence

helped her avoid embarrassment or negative reactions, it also prevented her from working on recovery.

***Internalizing other people's responses.*** Talking to other people about the assault was difficult for Megan. This was apparent when Megan's friends declined her invitation to attend *Slutwalk*. She struggled with internalizing friend's responses to the invite, perceiving that their decisions had to do with her rather than the event or other factors. "It seemed like people just didn't care and I think it was also more on me. That people didn't really care that I had been sexually assaulted," Megan said. Attending *Slutwalk* showed Megan that others cared about her experience and wanted to support her in recovery. She perceived their negative responses as judgments on her, reinforcing her embarrassment and loneliness in some ways.

***Stigma and myth.*** Stigma around body size and myths of what a survivor of sexual assault looks like hindered Megan's ability to talk about the assault as well. Not fitting the mold of the small, helpless females of rape myths, she believed that others would not believe her if she said anything. On this Megan stated, "I think people kind of assume that people with my body type don't really get raped, which is frustrating." Disclosing ran her the risk of her experience being invalidated due to rape myths. This could potentially have cause further harm for Megan. With this Megan continues to live with the stigma of not looking like the stereotype of a rape survivor.

***Culture of Origin.*** The values that Megan learned from the community she grew up in significantly impacted her decision to remain silent before beginning college. At home she was unable to talk about the assault because of the conservative, reserved nature of her community that was apparent in her own personality at that time. Megan expressed how the culture of her

college peers helped her open up, and she learned that it was okay for her to talk about the assault without repercussion. In order for Megan to begin disclosing, she needed the environment to be ready to listen without judgment. Reflecting on this, Megan said, "...I was in a new city, a new place, doing something completely different than a lot of my friends...I met a lot of different people and I guess I was much more reserved and conservative then."

### **Motivations to disclose.**

*Activism and Awareness.* Megan's first public disclosure was at *Slutwalk*, an event to bring awareness to sexual assault and combat victim blaming based on what a person was wearing during an assault. Congruent with her social justice values, *Slutwalk* and later *The Vagina Monologues*, helped Megan engage in recovery through working towards awareness and long term social change around sexual assault. "I want more people to recognize that this does happen," which is why she continues to participate and become more involved with *Slutwalk*. Creating awareness around sexual assault is important to Megan, and it can be inferred that some of her drive is rooted in her own experience with sexual assault. Based on her own challenges with stigma and rape myths, her participation has the power to represent women and men struggling with similar issues. More so, her devotion to activism and awareness indicate her desire to end sexual violence so that no one has to go through what she has.

*A need to talk, work on recovery and herself.* Along with her desire to engage in activism and promote awareness, Megan realized that she needs to work on recovery and participate for her self. After the disappointment of friends not attending *Slutwalk* with her, Megan began to put herself first when it came to participation. This past year she resolved to attend with friends or without because she feels engagement with *Slutwalk* and connecting with

other survivors has been crucial in her recovery. “I think I was more willing because I wanted to try something new and I guess fix my emotional state...,” Megan stated on how important public disclosure at events like *Slutwalk* has been to her recovery. Speaking out has provided her a cathartic release while welcoming a greater meaning in her life as an activist and survivor.

### **Overcoming barriers and concerns.**

*Support from others and a connection with survivors.* Prior to her initial public disclosure, Megan's boyfriend at the time was a significant factor in helping her overcome concerns she had about attending *Slutwalk*. He saw how it weighed on her, and how it was affecting her relationships. Encouraging her to speak about the assault, she felt positively supported which countered her fears of not being believed or being blamed for the assault. Similarly, her roommate the following year stepped in during a low moment to encourage Megan to attend *Slutwalk*. Having people like this in Megan's life helped her know that people cared about her, and that people would support her through recovery. At that time in Megan's recovery she was still using silence to protect herself, so the positive support of people important to her was crucial in being able to overcome barriers and concerns.

Once at both *Slutwalk* and later *The Vagina Monologues*, it was important for Megan to feel a connection to other survivors. “Seeing everyone else there, it kind of brought me up a little bit,” she said. The sense of not being alone coupled with the validation other survivors could provide helped ease her concerns so that she could speak openly. This was important while participating in *The Vagina Monologues*. During a cast event everyone was encouraged to speak openly about their feelings and experiences. In that moment Megan needed the comfort of others being vulnerable so that she could be as well. At *Slutwalk*, Megan even viewed other attendees as

mentors she could turn to for support. Feeling connected to other survivors, Megan no longer had to be embarrassed or fearful that others would criticize her. Her feelings were normalized on a deeper level with people that understood what she was feeling, making it safe for her to speak.

### **Reactions to disclosure.**

*From sad to relief, liberation, reflection and healing.* Megan experiences a wide range of emotions following a public disclosure. Sharing is emotional for Megan, and immediately following she often feels sad, heavy and upset. This could be due to remembering the assault and feeling some of the things she felt during or after the assault. With this though Megan also feels a sense of liberation and relief with her public disclosures. On this Megan said, “I always just kind of feel tired and exhausted, like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulder.” The act of sharing is still significant for Megan. Although it may be a relief to share she has to work in the moments after to emotionally take care of herself. Megan also likes to reflect on and evaluate her public disclosures as a way to check in with her self. During this she is able to process the disclosure and how she is feeling as a tool to help with her healing process. In spite of the uncomfortable emotions that may arise, Megan emphasizes how her public disclosures have been positive experiences and they appear to be important factors in strengthening her recovery.

### **Recovery and public disclosure.**

*Decreased anxiety and multiple public disclosures.* Megan reported at the time of the interview feeling less anxious when it comes to talking about the assault. Talking more about it has allowed her to feel less embarrassed and release some of the fears about other's responses. As a result, Megan has publicly disclosed multiple times. This may be a sign of her increased comfort in talking about the assault and overall greater strength in recovery. With less anxiety as

well, symptoms related to speaking about the assault have decreased. This can also be perceived as progress in recovery.

***Decreased fear and ease in sharing.*** Similar to her decrease in anxiety, Megan reported no longer being afraid of going to public disclosure events by herself. At the latest *Slutwalk* Megan expressed how she felt comfortable enough to write her disclosure on her body. Her greater buy-in to the event reflects her decrease in fear with public disclosure and greater strength in recovery. On her decrease in fear of disclosure Megan said, “it felt better every time to tell someone. And it got easier too.” The positive experiences Megan has had with disclosure have worked to alleviate her concerns with talking about the assault and improve her recovery.

***Increase ability to sit through emotions and connect with those who understand.*** There have also been signs throughout Megan's time with public disclosure that she has experienced an increased tolerance of the feelings that may come with disclosure. During one of her more recent public disclosures, Megan said, “knowing that it's okay to cry about it and being able to share that and cry while talking...it felt good to kind of relieve that and to share it with everyone because then they all knew and they could support me.” . She recognizes the importance of allowing herself to let go and cry as emotions arise because she knows that she will return to feeling better afterwards. More so she said, “I think I've gotten better about jumping out of that quicker,” in regards to picking herself up after a public disclosure.. As she mentioned the act of disclosing can make her sad still, but now she is better equipped emotionally to bring herself back to a grounded, centered mindset. This indicates that she has become better at taking care of herself emotionally in recovery than before. Rather than reliving the memories and fixating on them, Megan can bring herself back to the present day, and distance herself from the assault.

With this in mind Megan is hoping to build up the courage to speak with a professional so that she can continue strengthening her recovery.

***Normalizing feelings.*** After the assault Megan felt different from her friends which added to her sense of loneliness. Reflecting on this she said, “not a lot of my friends have had an experience like I've had. They've been catcalled, but I think mine is definitely more extreme of a case.” Since public disclosure this has been countered by many positive reactions from supporters, and through connection to groups and people that understand her experience. Public disclosure allows Megan to access opportunities to feel normal about her feelings as they relate to the assault. Her connection to others at these events validate her experience, and they remind her that she is not alone in recovery. “I was able to let it out and kind of like slowly realize through three years later till now that it's okay for me to say things like that,” Megan said of speaking about the assault. Normalization gives her permission to share and feel however she does with less concern that she will be invalidated or is alone..

***Reframing the assault, viewing herself as important and feeling better.*** Through public disclosure and the types of events Megan participates in she has been able to reframe the assault. Doing so she relieved herself of some of the blame she took on. Additionally, she made herself her the main reason to attend *Slutwalk* this year, stating, “it was for me this year and last year it was for getting my friends to join me.”. Putting her self first, Megan engages in events for her own recovery. Reflecting on who she was before public disclosure Megan said, “if I hadn't said anything up until now I'd be a completely different, probably very angry person.” Likewise she feels that public disclosure positively impacted her life, stating, “it's made me feel better.” At this time she continues to seek out opportunities to engage in social justice work around sexual

assault. These opportunities allow Megan to feel like she is doing meaningful work on an issue she cares about, which in turn has helped strengthen her recovery as well. Breaking her silence she said, “it's just a relief I guess that I don't have to keep it inside anymore and I think it has to do with my idea behind why it happened to me, or how it happened to me. And it's not my fault.”

## **Sandie**

### **Background.**

Sandie, is a Hispanic woman in her 30s that identifies as heterosexual, and she has been an advocate for breaking the cycle of sexual violence for years. Assaulted as a child, 20 years passed between when the assault occurred, and Sandie began speaking out. As a child and young adult, she felt alone, and she feared her family's reactions since her assailant was a member of her family. While struggling with depression she drank, and she tried to create a facade of having it all together. As an adult, Sandie entered therapy, and began to feel empowered through her work. Her first public disclosure was for a local video project on childhood sexual assault. Since then Sandie has made it a priority in her life to reach out to others survivors. She has publicly disclosed numerous times, and works to connect with other survivors so that no one feels alone like she once did.

### **Life before disclosure.**

*Secrecy, loneliness and little hope.* Before treatment and public disclosure, Sandie indicated that the quality of her life was poor. The assault, which occurred during her childhood, was a secret most of her life. During her silence she said, “on the outside I looked fine but on the inside I was dying.” Keeping it a secret increased her loneliness, and it gave her a sense of hopelessness. Without being able to talk to others during this time, she was not able to connect

with anyone that could show her that survivors can live normal lives after sexual assault. More so, she felt that current society can be hostile towards survivors. Sandie wishes that, “that society can stop blaming us [survivors] and stop feeling so uncomfortable when we share our stories.” According to Sandie this reaction makes secrecy a safer option for some. Consequently, in her life she felt more alone, and she did not know if things would ever get better for her. In a difficult place, Sandie said, “sometimes you just want to give up....how does this get better?” Feeling alone and with few options, combined with the significant pain she was in, Sandie admitted that at points she wanted to give up..

***Struggles related to mental health and a poor sense of self.*** While silent about the assault, Sandie turned to less healthful coping mechanisms to handle her emotions. She explained that prior to treatment she drank a lot and struggled with eating. Before speaking she stated, “I had no connection to myself. I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't sleep, I was going through a lot of things that ill people go through.” With her lack of connection to herself, she reported feeling depressed. Sandie also found it hard to love herself, stating, “when you don't love yourself, you kind of always need that reassurance. And that's where I struggled the most because I never had that reassurance.” Her inability to internally find love for herself drove her to external sources to find it, but her silence kept her from receiving validation for the assault that would reassure her of her worthiness to be loved. Unfortunately without this sense of love and reassurance, Sandie said, “I would get depressed, really depressed.”

#### **Barriers and Concerns before disclosure.**

***Negative first disclosure, minimization and her family's reaction.*** Sandie's first disclosure to her parents ended in her silence that lasted roughly 20 years. Since her assailant

was her sister's husband, her parents minimized the assault, and encouraged her to let it go. "I never had a voice as a child because when I told them [they said] oh you know he just said he touched your boob, it was nothing," Sandie recalled of her parents' response. At that time these were the most important people in her life. If they did not believe her, she may have thought that no one else would. More so speaking out about the assault could have hurt her relationships with her family. She was concerned, "about what were they gonna think? Or how were they gonna respond to it?" Recognizing the potential for negative reactions from her family, Sandie understood that public disclosure could attract reactions from them that would further hurt her. These consequences may have been less ideal, making silence a better option for Sandie at that time. Before Sandie publicly disclosed for the first time, her family and the man that assaulted her remained her main concerns.

*Shame, guilt and nerves.* After the assault Sandie internalized what happened, believing that in some way it was her fault. In therapy she realized, "it wasn't my fault and that wasn't who I am." Before treatment and public disclosure, her shame grew as she continued to hold in the assault. She expressed, "I always felt more ashamed and more dirty." Recognizing that this is common for survivors of sexual assault, Sandie spoke about how the guilt and shame was a significant factor in keeping her silent. She believes that many survivors do not speak up because of these negative beliefs as well. "I thought about all the other kids that are in my situation or adults that have gone through the same thing I did and are still feeling guilty or worthless," Sandie said, connecting her own feelings of guilt and worthlessness barriers to what other survivors may feel. With these barriers, the nerves prior to speaking out can seem insurmountable.

***Silence.*** All of the barriers and concerns Sandie experienced reinforced the usage of silence to protect herself before treatment. She learned from her first disclosure to remain silent because it may negatively impact important relationships. In her case silence may also have helped Sandie push aside feelings of guilt or shame so that she did not have to feel bad about herself. In a way, silence became her best option even when it was hurting her. Moreover, as a tool it reduced Sandie's chances of being blamed for the assault, or experiencing invalidating or minimizing reactions that could further harm her. "It's something that has been just between myself and my stuffed animal," Sandie said of her silence, indicating that sharing with another person was not an option for her at that time.

**Overcoming barriers and motivation to disclose.**

***Awareness, activism and social change.*** Changing how society views sexual assault through awareness and activism is central to Sandie's motivations to publicly disclose. On this she said, "I don't think people recognize how hard it is to deal with sexual abuse." She emphasized the importance of raising awareness in order to help people understand what sexual assault is like. Furthermore, Sandie believes that society has to change because it is important for survivors to be able to speak openly about their experiences without fear of blame or re-victimizing responses. She hopes that with awareness, "one day we can all get together and believe that it wasn't our fault and that society can stop blaming us." Likewise, Sandie is motivated to publicly disclose because she believes it will teach non-survivors how to empathically respond to survivors. When speaking to non-survivors Sandie said, "I get to tell people have more patience. Have more compassion...Think about what they're going through." This indicates that Sandie sees the value in sharing real stories that may impact people deeper

than scenarios they may have been presented with in the past.

*Addressing myths and prevention.* Dispelling myths about sexual assault is another motivation for Sandie's public disclosures. She hopes that through sharing her story she can help people understand that things like what one wears or how one acts do not invite sexual assault. Addressing victim blaming based on myths, she states, "it reassures the negative views that we have on ourselves when someone else is saying, well, if you didn't dress this way it wouldn't have happened." By speaking out against myths, Sandie hopes for a reduction in victim blaming incidents. Consequently, invalidating myths can help survivors struggling with negative beliefs about themselves after an assault understand that it is not their fault, or based on something she or he did.

In addition to addressing myths, Sandie also hopes her public disclosures will help to prevent more sexual assaults from occurring. Focusing on childhood sexual assault, Sandie speaks to parents about her experience, and about potential indicators of childhood sexual assault. In speaking with other parents Sandie said, "the change I've created is that it happens all the time." In response, parents have told her that because, "you shared your story or I read something about what you said on Facebook I've talked to my kid." By talking with parents and helping them open up communication with their children, Sandie has subsequently been a factor in preventing sexual assault. On this she said, "three of my friend have had situations where their kid was almost sexually assaulted, but because they had told them no matter what you always call me their child [went] into a closet and called." Public disclosure, in this way, has been a helpful tool for Sandie to assist parents in beginning dialogues that can ultimately prevent an assault.

*Helping survivors and connections.* Throughout the beginning steps in her recovery Sandie want to connect with other survivors. Sandie thought connecting with survivors would help her learn about steps she could take in her own recovery and feel less alone. This continues to motivate her public disclosures so that she can provide the knowledge she has gained in her recovery to other survivors that may feel like she once did. “I thought about all the other kids that are in my situation or adults that have gone through the same thing that I did and are still feeling guilt and worthless,” Sandie said in regards to why she continues to share her story. Through her own public disclosures she hopes others may feel less alone, and find strength to progress in recovery.

Connecting with professionals and non-survivors has been important in helping Sandie overcome concerns about disclosure. On support from therapists she said therapists, “don't even know us when a lot of times our families can't even like support us.” In return public disclosure gives her the opportunity to thank professionals that helped her through recovery, and allowed her to reclaim her voice. By speaking out to professionals and non-survivors, Sandie has been able to access empathic people that could help her through recovery. She also sees that allying with them is a way she can become more involved in the movement to change social norms around sexual assault. During a recent event for the organization Sandie worked closely with during her recovery, she said speaking, “was a way of also saying thank you because had it not been free [therapy] and been actual other survivors that are interns there I don't know that I would have been here.” Continuing to work with them to share her story, Sandie is able to connect with and help other survivors.

### **Reactions to disclosure.**

***Vulnerability and pride.*** Public disclosure has been a positive experience for Sandie, but with it still comes vulnerability and an array of emotions. She expressed that she still often cries when sharing her story with others because it is still something that is personal to her. There is still vulnerability in sharing her story because for 20 years she learned that sharing could open her to invalidating responses. On the vulnerability of sharing, Sandie mentioned, “I never thought I would let anyone in so close to my life.” Now publicly disclosing to strangers, and trying to reach out to as many survivors as she can, Sandie regularly shares something she kept a secret for so long. At the end of it all though she says, “I’m really proud of them [public disclosures] and I look forward to doing more of it.” Due to her motivations and her deeper belief in what she is doing, Sandie has found greater meaning in public disclosure.

**Recovery and public disclosure.**

***Strength, no shame and hope.*** Reflecting on the assault now, Sandie expressed that she no longer feels shame for what happened. There is much emotional distance for her from when she felt the need to keep the assault a secret, and from when she believed that it made her dirty or was her fault. With the help of therapy and through her many public disclosures, Sandie feels stronger. “I’ve come from someone who wanted to die for [so] long to now feeling strong enough to go and speak about this,” Sandie said about her strength in recover. With her strength she has been able to speak out, indicating that having a base of recovery was needed before she was able to publicly disclose. As Sandie progressed further in recovery and became more involved with raising awareness for sexual assault she regained a sense of hope. “I feel like anything is possible,” Sandie said on her sense of hope now.

***Positive reframing of her self.*** Working through recovery helped Sandie begin to value

herself again. “I just started to love myself more,” she decided before her first public disclosure. She now knows that she matters as a person regardless of what happened in her past. The assault does not make her dirty as she once thought, and now she feels like, “I can accomplish anything.” Although publicly disclosing for many reasons loving herself and helping others is most important. “I’m done with people just leaving it alone, this needs to be talked about,” Sandie said, echoing the words spoken to her when she told her parents about the assault. Leaving it alone led to her loss of connection with herself; it blocked her from loving herself. Choosing to love herself motivated her to speak out, which brought with it a positive sense of self and the ability to help others.

***Reflection and Empowerment.*** The act of public disclosure is empowering for Sandie because she was silent for so long. Acting on her own need to speak out broke the silence that her family encouraged, and provided a sense of strength that she could do something that she knew was right for her. She noted that speaking out has, “affected me in the positive way because every time I speak I realize how hard [it was]. It’s almost like when you step away from something and you look back and [are] like wow. I’ve come this far.” Public disclosure allows Sandie to reflect on her growth in recovery. She has the opportunity when she speaks to look back on where she was before therapy and public disclosure. Likewise, Sandie said of one particular public disclosure that, “it made me feel really strong and it made me feel like I was doing the right thing even though it wasn’t easy for me to share.” Emphasizing her growth, she feels empowered when realizing that she has overcome difficult things. Overall, public disclosure helps Sandie view herself as a strong, empowered woman that can help others, and change the way society thinks about sexual assault.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

#### **Restatement of the Study Purpose**

Sexual assault continues to be a significant problem in the United States and across the world. With many sexual assaults going unreported (Ullman, 2010) helping clients can be a complicated task for professionals working with someone that does not report sexual trauma. For clients that do identify as a victim or survivor it is important to work with them so that they can feel safe outside of therapy. Literature on disclosure suggests that by talking about sexual assault a survivor can begin to reevaluate a traumatic experience and strengthen her or his recovery (Ullman, 2011). Feminist therapy emphasizes the importance of first empowering the client, then the client can engage in meaningful action to promote systemic change (Stake, 2007). Public disclosure was explored to see how speaking about sexual assault beyond the private office of a therapist impacts the recovery of a survivor. It was hypothesized that the participants' recoveries would benefit from public disclosure based on assumptions highlighted by the feminist therapy approach to working with sexual trauma survivors.

#### **Discussion of Public Disclosure and the Problems of Sexual Assault**

##### **Victim blaming.**

Guilt related to the assault was commonly expressed by each woman participating in this study. In Larysa's case, victim blaming was at the root of her silence and guilt. After being blamed by the nurse for the assault, Larysa developed negative core beliefs and struggled with her mental health. Larysa's story is consistent with literature on negative responses following disclosure and increase of disruptive mental health symptoms (Ullman, 2011). Similarly, the

minimization that Sandie received from her family members factored into her own struggles with depression. Their cases support evidence that disclosure is not always a safe option for survivors. Furthermore, this suggests that it may also be important that public disclosures take place in a validating, supportive environment.

In spite of the negative affects of victim blaming, it also was identified as a motivating factor for public disclosure by Megan and Sandie. Both women remained silent afterwards due to their guilt, which indicates that they feared blame that would validate their guilt. Although not disclosing her own experiences with victim blaming, Megan's participation in *Shutwalk* is in part due to the event's goal to combat victim blaming based on clothing. Similarly, Sandie expressed a drive to continue advocating for changes in the ways society responds to survivors of sexual assault. Their drive to change the system and help other survivors is consistent with literature that cites helping other survivors and adding knowledge to the field as common reasons why survivors participate in research (Campbell & Adams, 2009). By speaking out, these women hope to help other survivors by educating non-survivors as a way to change a system that often blames victims.

It can be inferred from the experiences these women had with victim blaming that it is still a problem; however, Sandie and Megan's motivations to publicly disclose show that they believe public disclosure can shift the perspectives of others. By sharing their own stories, Megan and Sandie provide real accounts of sexual assault for non-survivors that may not fully comprehend what sexual assault is and therefore be more inclined to blame a victim. This method of raising awareness is similar to Theater of the Oppressed's technique of eliciting empathy from viewers by featuring realistic scenarios related to sexual assault (Rich, 2010).

Public disclosure takes Theater of the Oppressed's tactic a step further by allowing a survivor to directly speak to non-survivors. This provides the most accurate account of how sexual assault can affect an individual and humanize the subject for some. So while victim blaming is a barrier to disclosure, the results of this study also suggest that it can act as a motivator for public disclosure as well.

**Advancing professional knowledge.**

As advocates, professionals have the power to be a significant force in changing systems that impact their clients. In order to most effectively challenge a system, professionals rely partially on knowledge gained from working with clients directly impacted by a system. Larysa's case underscores the importance of clients feeling comfortable enough to disclose in session. Based on her negative experience with a university nurse, Larysa was unable to access the therapeutic support she needed after assault. Working with therapists for years on her eating disorder, self harm behaviors, and addiction, Larysa's treatment was hindered by her silence. Once she publicly disclosed, her therapist was able to focus her treatment, which improved her progress in recovery. Noted in the literature, professionals are still learning about the affects sexual assault has on survivors and how to address their therapeutic needs (Marx, 2005). Public disclosure was a turning point for Larysa's recovery because her therapist at the time was able to develop a better treatment plan that addressed her needs.

In addition to her eating disorder treatment, public disclosure helped Larysa access different groups and forms of therapy. Nondisclosure is identified by one study as a leading reason survivors are unable to access mental health and rape crisis support services (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). This was true for Larysa who did not receive support after the assault from

rape crisis organizations or mental health services that focused on sexual violence. Larysa recognized after her public disclosure how her treatment prior to sharing did not address the root of her maladaptive coping mechanisms for dealing with the assault. After disclosure Larysa noted attending groups specific to survivors, which helped validate her feelings and provide new perspectives on the assault. Her experience supports that public disclosure can help therapists develop better treatment plans for survivors, especially ones coping with multiple mental health related issues.

### **Silence.**

The negative effect silence can have on the recovery process was apparent in each woman's reflection on the time prior to when she began speaking publicly about the trauma. Megan noted feeling angrier before public disclosure. Larysa battled an eating disorder and self harm behaviors. Sandie turned to drinking struggled with depression. The stress silence created manifested in various ways that caused decreases in each woman's quality of life. The literature supports that disclosure is linked with a reduction in symptoms like anxiety (Ullman, 2011) and that acknowledgement of an assault helps decrease distress (Littleton, et al., 2007). After publicly disclosing Megan noted less anxiety when speaking about the assault. She also postulated that without public disclosure she would be much angrier today. Acknowledging the assault for Larysa provided her with vital insight into understanding why she was using unhealthy coping behaviors. Insight as a result of the public disclosure helped Larysa feel less distressed by where she was at that time in her life. Public disclosure for all three women, it appears, helped alleviate symptoms that in part silence contributed to.

Physical health was not explicitly discussed by any of the participants, yet in regards to

Larysa's case it can be inferred that her physical health may also have benefitted from her public disclosure. In a study by Ullman (2011), survivors that disclosed appeared to have better immune functioning and sought out medical professionals less. Living with an eating disorder and seeking out both intensive outpatient and inpatient treatment programs, Larysa's physical health could have been impacted by her silence following the assault. Eating disorders have the potential to cause considerable physical harm and forms like Anorexia Nervosa are considered to be the most deadly mental health disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Noticing how the assault affected her body image and disordered eating behaviors while she was silent, public disclosure helped her separate her self worth from her physical appearance. No longer “rail thin,” Larysa no longer relies on anorexia to cope with the sexual assault.. Consequently public disclosure helped uncover important insights that assisted in the treatment of her eating disorder.

Overall public disclosure was important in helping each woman begin connecting with other survivors and people that could support them through recovery. Through public disclosure, Sandie was able to connect more deeply with the organization that helped her in the first steps of recovery. Additional speaking opportunities have also allowed her to meet other survivors, and they provide her the ability to remind them they are not alone. Connecting with other survivors to learn about how others have worked through recovery, in addition to gaining a sense of community was important in strengthening the recovery of all three women. The need for survivors to not feel alone in recovery is consistent with literature on why survivors publicly disclose through mediums like research (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Furthermore, events like *Shutwalk* for Megan helped connect her to a larger community of survivors so that she did not

have to feel isolated. Her experience with public disclosure is consistent with research that emphasizes the importance of finding solidarity with larger communities of survivors (Ullman, 2010). With a sense of empowerment following public disclosure each participant was able to overcome silence.

### **Conclusions**

Identifying as a survivor of sexual assault and disclosing are important steps in recovery. Acknowledging that an incident is a sexual assault allows for a person to access support services or report it to law enforcement (Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). Similarly disclosure can provide a cathartic release (Ahrens, et al., 2007) and start the valuable process of reappraisal (Ullman, 2010). The experiences of the women interviewed illustrated the importance of disclosing with safe people. Their stories were consistent with the literature that states negative reactions to disclosure can be detrimental to the recovery process of a survivor (Ullman, 2011). When Sandie disclosed to her parents about the assault, she was met with minimization and told to let it go. Larysa was also harmed by a negative reaction when she was blamed for the assault by the university nurse. It was been found that victim blaming is a leading cause of nondisclosure because in those instances it becomes an ineffective way towards finding help (Ahrens, 2006). Like Larysa and Sandie, a survivor may generalize a negative reaction from one person to others, which may cause she or he to choose silence as protection method.

Despite public disclosure having positive effects on Larysa and Sandie's recoveries, their experiences illustrate the importance of selective sharing. In can be inferred from Sandie and Larysa's experiences that a stronger base in recovery ideally should precede a public disclosure. With a stronger base it is likely a survivor may be able to more accurately sense whether a public

disclosure will be met with positive reactions or be a positive experience for her or himself. Megan came to realize how a strong recovery helps combat real or negative perceived reactions from others in the instance when friends would not attend *Shutwalk* with her. Ultimately her greater buy-in to the event and public disclosure came once she had a stronger sense of recovery. When there is no concern of victim blaming or other negative responses, the findings of this study support that public disclosure can positively impact recovery.

The connection with professionals and other survivors was an important element for the women interviewed in this study. Public disclosure for each woman provided an opportunity for her to connect with others that could positively support her recovery process. Research on groups for survivors of sexual assault highlight the importance of coming together with other survivors to heal and learn to trust others again (Clemans, 2005). This was consistent with Larysa's experience in therapy groups when she disclosed. The positive reactions she received were crucial for her because they validated the curiosity she had in regards to the significance of the assault. As others helped her come to this realization, she was able to begin working through the affects the assault had on her life. This provided her with the access to treatment that allowed for her to strengthen her recovery. More so the different perspectives of other group members helped Larysa in her individual therapy because she was able to share their ideas with her therapist. Consequently, these insights gave her and her therapist different ways to view the assault and ultimately reevaluate it in a way that helped Larysa let go of some of her guilt.

The validation of other participants at *Shutwalk* was also crucial in Megan's recovery. Since she was not in formal therapy, she sought out the support of other participants to validate her feelings. By connecting with other survivors, Megan was able to build mentor-like

relationships to help her when she struggled with the assault. Megan's increased buy-in to *Slutwalk* illustrated by her involvement in the planning stages of future *Slutwalks*, and writing that she is a survivor on her body shows how her comfort with the event increased. In groups for survivors, one way members help each other is through empowering the other members to regain their voices (Clemans, 2005). It can be inferred from Megan's increased participation that she has regained and strengthened her voice with the help of the positive support at *Slutwalk*.

During the earlier days of Sandie's recovery, she found it difficult to connect with other survivors. Speaking with rape crisis center volunteers was helpful because some were survivors, yet these interactions oftentimes were still grounded in professional relationships. She emphasized that talking to other survivors would have been helpful as she began to work through the assault in therapy because it could have inspired hope for her recovery. Talking to other survivors would have shown Sandie steps she could take in her own recovery. This could have instilled the sense that she is not the only person feeling a certain way either. This is common for survivors to want to connect with others with similar experiences so that they do not have to feel so alone (Campbell & Adams, 2009). Now connecting with other survivors is a primary motivator for her public disclosures. By speaking about her own experience, Sandie hopes to help other survivors in the way that she needed when she began her recovery.

Viewing public disclosure as a tool in changing the social system that in some ways perpetuates the cycle of sexual violence also contributed to stronger recoveries for Megan and Sandie. Both women value raising awareness and activism as ways to shift the how parts of American society think about sexual assault. This is congruent with feminist therapy that encourages action by the client to address the oppressive system following her or his

empowerment in the healing process (Brown, 1994). Demonstrating this, Sandie had begun her healing process and drew upon this for strength as an advocate for survivors. In this way she was able to approach public disclosure with the tools to emotionally take care of herself while engaging in an activity that she believes can create positive social change. Her recovery strengthened after speaking out due, in part, to the positive meaning being an advocate has brought to her life.

Likewise Megan's experiences with public disclosure have also strengthened her recovery and created more meaning in her life. *Slutwalk* has been a way for Megan to push back on the norms that facilitate victim blaming. By wearing what she had on when she was assaulted, Megan is able to validate for herself that what she wore did not welcome the assault. More generally, it discredits the idea that what one wears is appropriate rationale for an assault. Megan's experience with *Slutwalk* is supported by literature that finds empowering events can inspire people to combat patriarchal norms (Stake, 2007). With a sense of empowerment following her first participation in *Slutwalk*, Megan has more deeply engaged with communities that work to challenge patriarchal systems that maintain the cycle of sexual violence in American culture. Most important the meaning Megan has gained from these events has been vital in strengthening her recovery.

In addition to fighting for social justice for survivors, all three women spoke about their desires to help other survivors more directly. Each woman saw her public disclosures as ways to reach out to other survivors. For Sandie, public disclosure meant being able to help other survivors know they were not alone and show them that survivors live normal lives after an assault. In Larysa's case, public disclosure is a way for her to reach out to other survivors in

therapy groups that may need to use that space to speak about their experiences, and receive positive support and feedback from other group members. To Megan, public disclosure is a means to ending victim blaming that many survivors endure. Their devotion to the communities they are a part of illustrate how helping each other out can be an important part of recovery. Overcoming their personal adversities, the survivors of this study have been able to transform their traumas into a positive force for helping others. When asked, each woman confirmed that public disclosure has positively impacted her recovery.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study are limited by the small sample size of participants. There are considerable factors that keep survivors from speaking out publicly about assault, which limited the overall population of survivors that would qualify for inclusion. Furthermore the requirement of in-person interviews limited the sample to participants able and willing to meet with the researcher at the authorized interview site. This requirement disqualified multiple, otherwise qualified, participants from participation at this time. As a result of the small sample size, the results of this study are not generalizable to the overall population of survivors with public disclosure experience.

Due to a small sample size the diversity of participants was also limited. It is believed that ethnic minority women are most often the victims of sexual assault, but due to various barriers do not speak out (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Likewise male survivors often remain silent due to fear of shaming or stereotypes (Sorsoli et al., 2008), as do individuals identifying as LGBTQ (Todahl et al., 2009). Although organizations specific to these groups were contacted about the study, these sites were unable to assist with recruitment efforts at this time. As a result,

the findings of this study do not speak to the diverse communities of survivors from these cultural groups.

### **Professional Implications**

The results of this study suggest that public disclosure may be a facilitator in strengthening a survivor's recovery from sexual assault. Working from a feminist lens in therapy, clinicians can address the systemic aspects of an assault (Brown & Bryan, 2007) to begin the healing process and alleviate a client of any guilt she or he may feel. As the client becomes empowered through this process, the therapist can encourage a client to engage in meaningful actions that address the systems that allow for sexual violence to continue (Contratto & Rossier, 2005). The cases presented in this study indicate that public disclosure was a useful method to survivors interested in helping other survivors and advocating for social change. All three women stated that public disclosure was a positive aspect of their recovery, which may be why each continues to speak out publicly about her experience with sexual assault. Their experiences support the feminist therapy model that recommends that empowerment can lead to action (Stake, 2007), which can foster stronger recoveries (Ullman, 2010).

For counselors interested by this way of working with survivors of sexual assault, it is important to note that where and when a client publicly discloses is important. From the cases presented in this study, public disclosure should be met with positive reactions. Counselors should consider where a client is in recovery before suggesting taking action like public disclosure because of the potential for negative reactions from strangers. With this it may be important for the counselor to talk with the client about an event beforehand if there is any concern about the public disclosure impacting the client in a negative manner. Consequently, the

counselor should be aware of what the event entails. For example, it may be best to consider the factors that the participants of this study found helpful during their disclosures. Taking into consideration whether the event will help the client connect with other survivors, provide positive meaning, foster the sense that she or he is helping other survivors, or creating positive social change may be important for a counselor to know. By having a strong rapport with the client, encouraging action like public disclosure and processing the public disclosure can help the counselor support the client in a way that promotes a stronger recovery.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Ullman (2010) suggested there is a need to empower survivors of sexual assault so that they can act as advocates for the greater communities of survivors. Research that addresses how survivors taking on the role of advocate impacts their recoveries can help us better understand the relationship between recovery and self-advocacy. Additional research on the subject could provide helpful evidence for practitioners interested in incorporating more of a social justice component to their work. Similarly, future research could also explore how or if various mediums of self disclosure impact the recovery process in different ways.

Furthermore, other than broadly looking at how public disclosure affects the recovery process, it is important that future research breaks down this concept from the perspective of different groups of survivors. The researcher suggests a closer look at how public disclosure specifically affects the recoveries of men, survivors identifying as LGBTQ and differing racial and ethnic minority groups than the ones represented in this project. Likewise, other factors like religious affiliation and collectivist cultural norms may be considered for additional research on public disclosure and recovery too. Different cultural groups hold different views on sexual

assault, which significantly can impact whether a survivor decides to disclose to other members from that group. There are also different ways cultures react to sexual assault survivors, which could greatly affect whether public disclosure is a viable option for survivors of certain cultural populations. More research is needed in this area to determine if public disclosure is helpful for survivors of all groups.

Furthermore, it may be important to view the type of assault and if public disclosure is beneficial for survivors of various forms of assault. Future research may want to address whether public disclosure has a different impact on survivors that have experienced childhood sexual assault, rape by a stranger, date/acquaintance rape, or other forms of sexual assault. Due to survivors of differing forms of assault receiving different reactions based on their assaults, research could work to identify how, if any, public disclosure impacts recovery in other ways for them. The three women interviewed in this study experienced three different forms of sexual assault, which appeared to result in varying mediums of public disclosure. For individuals that experienced a more stigmatized assault, like acquaintance rape, it would be interesting to see if their experiences with public disclosure are as helpful as for those who experienced a less stigmatized type, like stranger rape.

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*Appendix A*

**Demographic Profile**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Racial/Ethnic Identity:

Sexual Orientation/Identity:

Did you seek any type of support or professional services following your assault? Yes/No

If yes, please list or describe the support or professional services you received:

How much time passed between your assault and when you publicly disclosed?

*Appendix B*

**Interview Schedule**

1. Please describe the event at which you made your first public disclosure:
2. What motivated you to speak out publicly about your experience?
3. Did you have any concerns prior to sharing your experience publicly?  
If yes, what were your concerns? How did you overcome them?
4. How did you feel about your public disclosure immediately following it? In the days after?
5. How do you feel about your public disclosure now?
6. How has publicly disclosing that you are a survivor of sexual assault affected your recovery, if at all?