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Survivors' Stories of Sexual Assault on Campus
Récits de survivantes et survivants victimes d'agressions sexuelles

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ABSTRACT
Sexual assault is a common experience, with nearly 460,000 occurrences happening each year in Canada. Research suggests that women attending university are sexually assaulted at a higher frequency than the general population. Sexual assault (SA) has wide-ranging harmful physical, financial, social, and psychological impacts. Prevalence rates of SA are higher among women than men (30% versus 8%). Given the prevalence rates of SA, there is an urgent need for more research into the experiences of sexual assault, particularly in terms of knowledge from survivors of sexual assault on campus. A narrative research method was chosen for this study because it affords survivors of sexual assault the opportunity to construct a personal narrative and to give voice to their experiences. The research question for this study was: "What narratives are constructed by survivors of sexual assault on campus?" All the survivors were current students at a university in British Columbia and had experienced a sexual assault within the past 5 years. Six narrative themes emerged: (a) difficulty considering the experience as sexual assault, (b) harmful emotional consequences, (c) a hesitation to report and disclose experiences, (d) a placating or freeze response, (e) a desire to reconnect with the perpetrator, and (f) the need for education, resources, and policy changes on campus. The findings have significance for university sexual assault policies and procedures and offer valuable information for sexual assault counsellors in their practice.

RÉSUMÉ
Avec près de 460 000 cas chaque année au Canada, l'agression sexuelle est une expérience répandue. Les recherches indiquent que les femmes qui fréquentent l'université sont plus souvent agressées sexuellement qu'au sein de la population générale. L'éventail des conséquences physiques, financiers, sociaux, et psychologiques est vaste. La différence observée entre les sexes est principalement attribuable au fait que les agressions sexuelles sont beaucoup plus fréquentes chez les femmes que chez les hommes (30 % par rapport à 8 %). Compte tenu des taux de prévalence des agressions sexuelles, il est urgent de poursuivre les recherches sur les expériences d'agression

sexuelle, en particulier auprès des survivantes et survivants d'agressions sexuelles sur les campus. Une méthodologie de recherche comparative a été retenue pour cette étude puisqu'elle offre aux survivantes et survivants d'agressions sexuelles la possibilité de livrer un récit personnel et de raconter leurs expériences. La question de recherche pour cette étude était : « Quels récits sont construits par les survivantes et survivants victimes d'agressions sexuelles sur les campus? » Tous les participants et participantes étaient des étudiants actuellement inscrits à une université de Colombie-Britannique et avaient été victimes d'une agression sexuelle au cours des 5 dernières années. Il en est ressorti six thèmes narratifs : (a) la difficulté à considérer l'expérience comme une agression sexuelle, (b) les préjudices émotionnels, (c) la réticence à signaler les expériences et à en parler, (d) une réaction de pacification ou de paralysie, (e) un désir de reprendre contact avec la personne qui a commis l'agression, et (f) le besoin d'éducation, de ressources, et de changements de politiques sur le campus. Les conclusions de l'étude ont une importance pour les politiques et procédures des universités en matière d'agressions sexuelles et elles fournissent des renseignements utiles pour les conseillers qui exercent dans le domaine des agressions sexuelles.

The #MeToo movement has brought to light the ubiquity of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual violence in our society ("#MeToo," 2019; Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018). In Canada, there are approximately 460,000 sexual assaults each year. Sexual assault is defined as "forced sexual activity, attempted forced sexual activity, unwanted sexual touching, grabbing, kissing or fondling, or sexual relations without being able to give consent" (Perreault, 2015, p. 4). While people across the gender spectrum can experience sexual assault, existing evidence suggests that women are at the highest risk for sexual assault and are the most vulnerable of Canadians between the ages of 15 to 24 (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Perreault & Brennan, 2010). There is limited research on sexual assault as experienced by male or gender non-conforming individuals (Hines et al., 2012). Thus, the literature reviewed for this article was based primarily on the existing research regarding sexual assault as experienced by female individuals as well as on the literature of sexual assault on campuses. That said, with the hope of broadening our understanding of this phenomenon, recruitment of participants for this study was open to people across the gender spectrum.

In a 2019 publication, Statistics Canada reported that four in 10 women had experienced unwanted sexual behaviours while in public places during the preceding 12 months (Cotter & Savage, 2019). The highest accounts reported of unwanted sexual behaviours took place in Victoria, BC, followed by Calgary and Vancouver. The odds of experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour in public were nearly four times higher for women than for men (Cotter & Savage, 2019). It is also worth noting, however, that many women do not report their experiences of sexual assault (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Johnson, 2017; McCart et al., 2010; Sable et al., 2006).

The literature emphasizes that sexual assault has wide-ranging harmful physical, social, academic, and financial impacts (Baker et al., 2016; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Campbell et al., 2006; Haskell & Randall, 2019; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Physical impacts range from gynecological health symptoms (Campbell et al., 2006) to non-genital injuries (i.e., face, head, upper and lower extremities; Sommers et al., 2006) to a decrease or lack of sexual desire (Faravelli et al., 2004), to name a few. Over half of survivors of sexual assault report being challenged with day-to-day activities after the assault (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Survivors may struggle socially following a sexual assault due to experiencing difficulties trusting or feeling safe around others and often find themselves isolating from their social networks (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). There is also research to show that past sexual victimization predicts poorer academic performance in college women (Baker et al., 2016). Research suggests that the financial costs of sexual assault include medical resources, psychological treatments, social housing resources, and absenteeism from work (Loya, 2015).

The psychological impacts for survivors are also significant. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) is more prevalent among women than men and is linked in women to a higher frequency of sexual assault (Haskell & Randall, 2019; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Studies report sexual assault to be one of the most harmful of psychological traumas (Haskell & Randall, 2019). According to Campbell et al. (2009), the reported mental health impacts on women in their study included fear/anxiety, post-traumatic stress, depression, alcohol dependency, illegal drug use, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. "One in five victims of sexual assault—both women and men—felt blamed for their own victimization. Most commonly, the perpetrator or the victim's friends or family were the source of this feeling" (Cotter & Savage, 2019).

Media reports tend to push the narrative of violent stranger sexual assault (Campbell et al., 2009), even though we know that this is only one type of assault, with men and women reporting unwanted sexual touching as the most common form. In addition, the distinction between stranger and acquaintance rape is important because it is a common misconception that a stranger perpetuates most sexual assaults when in reality the majority of them (77%) are committed by someone the survivor knows (Starkman, 2013). Public discussions about sexual assault on college campuses tend to focus on improving the judicial system so that more survivors report and receive improved support and resolution as well as on addressing punishment for perpetrators to de-incentivize future assailants (Khan et al., 2018). However, there is a great deal of information within the discourse of sexual assault that is not being discussed, such as how most survivors do not report, how those who do rarely receive justice (Cohen & Kyckelhahn, 2010), and how many find the process more harmful than helpful. Therefore, it is evident that there is a need for more research on how to offer better support to survivors and on how to increase sexual assault prevention efforts.

Sexual Assault on Campuses

Sexual assault is a more common experience for women attending university than those who are not (Krebs et al., 2007). The literature supports the higher frequency of sexual assault experienced by sorority members and perpetration by men in fraternities than those who are not affiliated with such societies on campuses (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Studies examining why this phenomenon has emerged among these societies have proposed that the hypermasculine beliefs associated with traditional gender roles adopted by men on sports teams and in fraternities is a risk factor (Tatum & Foubert, 2009). Hypermasculinity involves adherence to traditional gender roles, and the adoption of this belief system is correlated with increased sexual violence directed at women (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Extant research suggests that sorority members experience an increased risk of sexual assault because they typically have more frequent interactions with fraternity members (Franklin, 2010).

Among students at Canadian post-secondary institutions, it is reported that 11% of self-identified women and 4% of self-identified men were sexually assaulted in 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2020). Most students (71%) reported that they had experienced or observed unwanted sexual behaviours (online or in person) involving someone associated with their university. Besides the harmful psychological impacts listed above, student survivors experienced additional negative effects regarding their academic life. Nearly one quarter (23%) of women felt fearful after their assault (compared to 4% of men). Additionally, students may alter their routines as a result of an assault, including avoiding certain buildings on campus (18% of women and 5% of men) and missing classes (7% of women and 3% of men).

Universities have a variety of programs, personnel, and policies in place that are aimed at supporting survivors of sexual assault (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Quinlan et al., 2016), including campus sexual assault centres, women's centres, residence advisors, student support centres, and campus security. Even though there is an increasing number of supports on campus, they are used infrequently by survivors (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Few students who had been sexually assaulted on campus spoke with someone connected to the school about their experience (8% of women and 6% of men) or used any formal resources available to them (Statistics Canada, 2020). Of women who were sexually assaulted in a post-secondary environment, 11% sought out mental health support outside of the college/university and 3% reported to the police. Many survivors indicated that they did not report because they believed what had happened was not serious enough (74% of women and 72% of men), whereas others stated that they were unaware that they could report their experience (26% of women and 10% of men; Statistics Canada, 2020).

Most research on campus sexual assault utilizes survey questionnaires, and although it is important to know how many survivors exist or how they scored

on levels of distress, we also need to know how they lived through the experience of sexual assault, what the experience meant in their lives, and what they needed afterward to survive and thrive. There are a handful of qualitative studies on the topic. For example, DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017) conducted a qualitative grounded-theory study to investigate college students' help-seeking decisions after a sexual assault, and doing so helped the authors develop a theoretical understanding to this process. Halstead et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study using four focus groups to analyze themes about using campus health centres as a sexual assault resource. They gathered participant recommendations on how to adjust the work of the centres to meet students' needs better. Another qualitative study using a focus group design asked 1st- and 4th-year female students to explore how college students understand and label ambiguous sexual assault scenarios (Deming et al., 2013). The authors found that college women are often influenced by rape myths and norms when labelling situations that meet the legal definition of rape. After reviewing the research literature on sexual assault on campus, we concluded that students' voices and perspectives on this topic were needed given how prevalent these experiences are becoming.

Purpose of the Study

This research is timely given the ways in which universities are frequently in the spotlight for their inadequate response in addressing the high prevalence of sexual assault on campus. For example, in British Columbia, provincial legislation (Bill 23) required post-secondary institutions to create individual sexual assault policies by May 2017 (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2016). Given the prevalence of sexual assault on campuses and the new policies being formulated at Canadian universities (Benedet et al., 2016; Gunraj et al., 2014) regarding this problem, the findings are highly relevant to informing policy, prevention efforts, and counselling practices on campus.

Researchers have suggested that women attending university are sexually assaulted at a higher frequency than those who are not attending (Krebs et al., 2007). Given the information of the high prevalence and low reporting of sexual violence during the post-secondary years, we sought to understand the experiences of survivors of sexual assault on campus with the aim of informing university policy-makers and service personnel who are responsible for student safety on campus. In addition to the widespread prevalence and harmful impact of sexual assault, many universities are being criticized for failing to respond to support survivors effectively (Kane, 2016).

Given the lack of qualitative research on the topic of sexual assault on university campuses in Canada, it seemed timely to investigate this phenomenon using a qualitative method. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of sexual assault survivors whose assault had occurred on a Canadian university campus. The research question was: "What narratives are constructed by survivors

of sexual assault on campus?" A narrative research approach provided insight into the range of experiences of sexual assault survivors, with the goal of illuminating unique areas for improvement in supporting survivors that may not be easily captured by quantitative methods. Our intention was to provide relevant and practical information about how to support sexual assault survivors on university campuses by understanding their experiences and the challenges they faced in obtaining appropriate support.

Narrative research was deemed suitable as the method for this study because it creates opportunities to hear from survivors themselves in terms of the aftermath of their experiences, the meaning they made of these experiences, the ways that they coped, and the ways that their sense of safety and their relationships with others may have been impacted, to name a few effects. According to narrative researchers, we come to understand others and our world through the narratives we tell. According to Logan and Buchanan (2008), the ways that we language our experiences and communicate our understandings offer us the links needed to enter into the experiences and meaning systems of others. Narrative research involves the co-construction of participants' narrative accounts, meaning that findings are a result of dialogue/conversation with researchers. It provides rich descriptive material of the phenomenon under study—the sexual assault of student survivors on campus, as described in their own voices.

Method

This study was framed within a social constructionist epistemology. In essence, social constructionism posits that interpretations of the world are self-created and affirmed through language and interactions with others (Burr, 1995). The theory holds a relativist ontology. The chosen approach for this study, narrative inquiry, builds on social constructionist perspectives. In narrative inquiry, meaning is constructed through dialogue or storytelling. Narrative inquiry points to the construction of one's narrative: how one tells a personal story is as important as what is said. Our stories have effects and can be empowering. Our words can produce change and effect action (Riessman, 2008).

Primary Researcher's Positionality

As stated in Clandinin's (2007, 2013) work regarding narrative inquiry, the narrative inquirer does not observe participants objectively, but rather takes a subjective position in connecting relationally with participants' social and intrapersonal world. The first author identifies as a sexual assault survivor herself. She was drawn to this research after publishing her own experience of sexual assault as an online article and receiving an influx of messages from people sharing their own experiences of sexual assault. She was inspired by the resilience and courage of these survivors but also saddened by the lack of support many had faced. Victim

blaming by friends, family, intimate partners, and medical and law enforcement personnel were a common thread in the stories she heard. The experiences that were shared with the first author highlighted the devastating degree to which we as a society fail survivors of sexual assault. The first author wanted to conduct this narrative study in order to give survivors the empowering experience that she had had of being able to tell one's story to help more survivors see their experiences reflected in order to feel less alone. The author was hopeful and curious about how this study could uncover information that may help to inform university policies and counselling resources in terms of how to support survivors on university campuses better.

Participants

Four survivors were interviewed regarding their experience of sexual assault on campus. Three of the survivors identified as female and one identified as male. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years of age. Three of the participants were Caucasian and one was partly Asian and partly Caucasian. All survivors were current students at a university in western Canada at the time of the interview. Each participant's story is presented through a narrative approach to research, placing it within a particular social context (Riessman, 2008). The personal experiences shared in this study may resonate with readers and have meaning through the act of reading the particular events of another person's life.

It is known that sexual assault experiences are reported more frequently by women than by men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). It is also understood that these experiences are highly under-reported (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). The authors decided to keep recruitment open to people across the gender spectrum in order to learn more about the variety of experiences of sexual assault. Because the goals of narrative research are not to generalize the results, neither a representative sample nor a large sample is necessary. Typically, narrative research sample sizes range from four to eight participants, but there is no set number. The sample size is dependent upon the richness of the description (Riessman, 2008). Recruiting a small number of participants allowed for deep and thorough narrative experiences to emerge from the interviews and analysis.

The survivors were recruited from one university in British Columbia. A purposive sample was obtained with the selection criteria of being an English speaker since narrative research requires in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and it was also the primary language of the researchers. The survivors also were current or past students who had experienced sexual assault on campus while enrolled as a student within the last 5 years to reflect the current and recent experiences of this phenomenon and to address the recall of recent significant events as important to the trustworthiness of the study.

Survivors were recruited through poster notices on campus. No form of financial compensation was provided since the intention was to recruit individuals

whose goal for participation was simply to use this research as a platform to tell their story. Telephone screening interviews with interested participants were also conducted. In the telephone interviews, the purpose of the study, ethical considerations (e.g., anonymity, confidentiality, ability to withdraw at any time), and the expected time commitments were outlined. The survivors were told that this topic can be distressing and that this research was not a counselling session but instead a means for each participant to tell their story. The interviewer (first author) was prepared to exclude participants who showed signs of distress during the telephone screening interview and to provide them with appropriate counselling referrals, but this did not occur. The four survivors provided pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Informed consent procedures were administered and all participants agreed to the consent protocols for this study. The research was approved by the behavioural research ethics board at the university in question.

Procedures

Each participant was interviewed individually in a research lab at a university. The interviews were audio-recorded and were 1 to 2 hours in length. The central research question guiding the study was: "What narratives are constructed by survivors of sexual assault on campus?" The primary question we asked participants was: "Can you tell me the story of your sexual assault—in particular, the circumstances leading up to it, what happened following the assault, and your decision of whether or not to report it?" Space was left for the survivors to construct their stories in full. We advised survivors as follows: "Please take as much time as you need to describe what you are comfortable with and the circumstances of your experience. With regards to the details of the sexual assault event itself, please share as little or as much as you are comfortable sharing. If there was more than one experience, please speak to the one you recall best that occurred on campus."

According to narrative inquiry methods, follow-up and clarifying questions were saved until the end of the interview and were used for further clarity on topics discussed (Murray, 2008). These questions remained open-ended to stay true to narrative research methods. If a participant struggled to construct responses, some of the clarifying and prompting questions that were asked included the following examples: "What was your experience of deciding whether or not to disclose your sexual assault? If you did disclose, what was that like for you?" "What was your experience of deciding whether or not to report your sexual assault? If you did report, what was that like for you?" "How were you supported after the sexual assault?" "What did you need that you did not receive following your sexual assault?" "Given that you reported the assault to the campus security personnel, what failures and successes did you experience in the university's response to your sexual assault?"

Narrative Analysis

A narrative analysis of participant interviews, as outlined by Riessman (1993), was conducted. As per the conventions of this method, interviews were transcribed verbatim and full narrative accounts were constructed for each participant, a process that involved putting events in sequential order and maintaining the plot line of the story as told. A narrative account was created for each participant based on the content, structure, and sequence of events in their story. Following Riessman's approach, the analytic procedure is repetitive and centred on dialogue with movement between the participants' voices. The theoretical framework of social constructionism and narrative theory was foundational to the researchers' perspectives and interpretations. The knowledge created from the research was co-constructed between the researchers and the participants, with social and cultural contextual factors taken into consideration.

A narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was then conducted on each individual narrative to identify major themes across the four narrative accounts. The transcripts were carefully read several times to understand content and context, then coded for main units of meaning related to the research question. Next, codes were collapsed into main categories and final categories were then collapsed into main overarching themes. The final narrative analysis resulted in six overarching themes. A description of each theme was created and exemplary passages were extracted from the original transcripts. The four participants' individual narratives are not included in the findings due to page limitations, but the participants' voices are shared in each of the six themes presented here.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness was established through participant member checks and expert peer review. The principal researcher met with all four survivors for a member checking follow-up interview. One of the survivors, Skylar, had additional comments that were added to her narrative as a result of her perspective on her sexual assault having shifted in the 8 months between the first and the final interview. Four narrative criteria were used to evaluate the quality of the findings: resonance, comprehensiveness, pragmatic value, and coherence (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993, 2008). During the member checking follow-up interview, the researcher shared each participant's final narrative based on the story the participant had shared in the research interview. The criterion of *resonance* was assessed by asking each participant to read their own story and to respond to whether or not the story resonated with their experience of telling their story in the original interview. All survivors agreed that their final narrative resonated with their experience. *Comprehensiveness* was determined by asking the survivors, "Is there anything missing in your narrative as written?" Only Skylar added to her narrative account. The criterion of *pragmatic value* was achieved through consulting with expert peer reviewers (colleagues with extensive trauma research expertise) as to the potential

impact of the research findings for counselling practitioners. Lastly, participants and experts were also consulted to determine *coherence*, which asks whether the research is understandable and clearly articulated. All participants and the expert peer reviewers stated that the findings met all criteria for trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical protocols for research involving humans. All steps were taken to protect the vulnerable population of sexual assault survivors from retraumatization. This included selecting survivors who had volunteered to share their sexual assault experiences unreservedly. While the interviewer's formal training in compassionate responding was an asset, she did not treat or ascertain the mental health–related therapeutic outcomes of the interviewees. The second author has extensive experience in the field of traumatic stress and narrative research and was also available to meet the participants for any needed debriefing and emotional support. Survivors were not asked to share more than they were comfortable with. They were made aware that they had full confidentiality and the right to stop the interview or turn off the audio recorder at any point and to withdraw from the study if they chose. Participants were reminded of these points and were offered a debrief session with the second author if they showed signs of distress during the interview. Participants were also made aware of available complimentary counselling services. Resource booklets containing counselling services on campus for sexual assault survivors were compiled and provided to participants following the interviews.

Findings

It is important to note that there was a diversity of narratives among the four survivors. This diversity speaks to how sexual assault experiences are much broader than what is typically portrayed in the media. Even so, a thematic cross-narrative analysis of all four stories highlights six shared themes: (a) difficulty considering the experience to be a sexual assault, (b) harmful emotional consequences, (c) a hesitation to report the sexual assault and disclosure experiences, (d) a placating or freeze response experience, (e) a desire to reconnect the friendship with the perpetrator, and (f) the need for education, resources, and policy changes on campus. Before describing the six themes, we provide the contexts of the survivors' sexual assault experiences.

Contexts of Survivors' Sexual Assault Experiences

Skylar was sexually assaulted at the end of her first year of university by a male co-worker who had been almost twice her age. He developed an emotionally manipulative relationship with Skylar, where he behaved inappropriately on many occasions leading up to the sexual assault. She reported her sexual assault

to the police, an experience she described to be even more traumatic than the sexual assault itself:

> I did report to the police. When I tell my friends the story, especially at first, I would say all the things that I felt caused it to happen, and they would all say, "No, you were really drunk and we know you don't handle alcohol well, you had put a bucket near the bed and this guy is sober enough to drive, and he is twice your age, he knows better." But the police don't really care. I remember when the police told me that they did not think he did anything wrong and that he took the appropriate steps to maintain I was consenting. I was so much angrier and more upset than I would have been if I never even bothered to go to the police. I feel sort of failed by the police. I sort of hate the fact that he won't really face real consequences. I think that hopefully I will be able to move forward with my life and be a successful person. Maybe he will see that and know that he didn't have the effect that maybe he wanted to.

A close male friend sexually assaulted Julia when they attended a party on campus together. Twice during the evening, he sexually touched her without her consent in a way that was painful. Julia found it very difficult to make sense of how someone who had once been a close friend could act in a way that was so hurtful toward her:

> I tried to convince myself that I was in love with him—that I was into it sexually. That I was okay with what happened. For the week and a half that I was with him, I mentally removed myself from everything. It felt like I lived a different life for the week that I was with him. I could only convince myself for so long, and I just couldn't keep convincing myself when he would touch me.

Marcus's sexual assault had occurred when a high school friend touched him in a sexual way when they were both intoxicated at a house party. He recalled feeling uncomfortable and unable to communicate to his friend that he wanted the touching to stop. He agreed that what happened to him was by definition sexual assault, but he struggled to label it as such because he felt he was partly to blame:

> Once that ended, I never considered it a sexual assault, but technically by definition it is. It is tricky because I always felt that it was my responsibility to keep myself in a coherent state.… I wasn't clear on what I wanted.… I was misleading at times, like flirting back and all that.

Bridget experienced her sexual assault while living in a residential building on campus. She woke up to a man she had never met (and whom she learned later was a friend of one of her roommates) in her bed, attempting to cuddle and kiss her:

> I woke up to him getting in my bed. That felt very invasive, obviously, because I was sleeping. So I was just like in my underwear or whatever. So he started trying to cuddle me and kissing my shoulder and stuff. First of all, I said, "Who the heck are you?" because I had not met this person. Then I asked him to please leave, and he just said, "No. I just want somewhere to sleep."

The contexts of each participant's sexual assault differ as shown in the previous descriptions. Now we turn to the main findings in the study.

Theme One: Difficulty Considering the Experience as a Sexual Assault

All of the survivors had points in their story where they had difficulty describing the experience as a sexual assault. Most of the survivors knew their assailant. Both Marcus and Bridget said that they saw their experiences as fitting the definition of sexual assault but felt as though their experiences were more so in the "grey area." Marcus believed that he had some responsibility in what happened because he was flirting with his friend, and although he agreed that what had happened to him was by definition a sexual assault, he requested that we refer to what happened as "the event."

Bridget felt that her boundaries had been crossed but suspected that if she had reported to the police, they likely would not have seen what happened as a sexual assault: "I still have trouble deciding to categorize it as sexual assault or not, but I still think it was in that grey area.… It was a very bizarre, jarring experience."

Both Julia and Skylar were close friends with their perpetrator, and this dynamic made it very hard for them to comprehend that their friend would do something to hurt them. The sentiment of having difficulty labelling the experience as a sexual assault is well captured through Skylar's comment:

> In my mind, I was thinking rape occurs to people from like a stranger in the bushes kind of thing—he would beat you, and it would be very clear that you were not consenting. But this is I guess a very blurry line; I mean in the context of the whole story I do not think it is blurry at all. But in the event, and how things occurred that night, it is not the way you envision it happening when people say "rape."

Julia's story illustrates another component that can make it difficult for a survivor to consider their experience to be a sexual assault. This occurred for Julia, whose perpetrator had been a close friend. Referring to a party on campus, she stated:

> I had trouble making sense of his actions. How could one of my really close friends do something to hurt me?… I thought to myself, "Okay, I'm not that drunk, so I will just still make sure that he at least gets back to his room all right, and then I'll process or whatever later."

Theme Two: Harmful Emotional Consequences

All four survivors experienced harmful emotional consequences following their individual sexual assaults. This included feeling that their sense of safety around others was impacted, having intrusive memories of the event, and experiencing difficulty sleeping. Blame and shame reactions were negative consequences for all the survivors. Another adverse consequence was the experience of extreme anxiety impacting their lives academically, socially, and financially. Julia shared that it was an emotional time for her. She attempted to cope with the painful experience by trying to repress thoughts of what had happened. She experienced fragmented memories:

> For the longest time, I could not remember the details. I just remembered bits and pieces about being in the car and vaguely something about talking to the other girls in the bathroom. When I started thinking about it again, the memories would come back.

Skylar recalled how "every second of the day I was just replaying the event and at that point it was so fresh I could still sort of feel it happening, so I wasn't really able to sleep at night." Both Skylar and Julia had difficulty comprehending how and why the assault had happened. They were confused and upset but also very anxious about the situation. Skylar stated that the perpetrator always made her feel that it had been her fault. In her follow-up interview, Skylar stated that although she had blamed herself following the sexual assault, she now held her lawyers, the university, her perpetrator, and his girlfriend accountable for the harm they had inflicted.

In contrast to Skylar, whose mind replayed her assault repeatedly, Julia discussed the stress of trying to deny that the event had happened:

> I would stop myself from thinking about it because it was easier to just push it way and not think about it and move on with my life.… But then I was still in the traumatic zone of staying in my head, spiralling, and thinking about it too much.

For Marcus, the aftermath of his sexual assault involved not being able to trust others or to be touched by others:

> I never really thought it bothered me until I started to notice that I was now very uncomfortable if guys touched me. If someone touched me anywhere, I would feel myself tense up. So I don't know if it is related to that. I assume it is. I feel pretty uncomfortable with sexual activity in general … sexual intimacy makes me really nervous, or I am really scared of it still.

Theme Three: A Hesitation to Report the Sexual Assault and Disclosure Experiences

The four survivors described their hesitation to report their sexual assault because they were unsure whether their experiences legitimately fit the definition of sexual assault. Their reasons for hesitating included a worry that they would not be believed, the anticipation of unsatisfying consequences, and a reluctance to cause harm to the perpetrator. The participants also spoke to a preconception of police dismissal and minimization, including a fear of being dismissed based on previous knowledge or given their perceived role in the experience. Bridget, Marcus, and Julia chose not to report their sexual assaults. Marcus and Bridget indicated they had been unsure if their experiences classified as instances that would be considered legitimate or reportable experiences of sexual assault according to law enforcement. As Bridget expressed,

> I know the really dismal statistics of people reporting to the police and about how that can be really traumatizing, and you often need so much evidence. I also know that many sexual assault cases are deemed unfounded, so those were all things I already knew. I think mostly I did not report because I thought nothing would come of it.

Marcus was hesitant to report his assault. As he stated,

> I didn't really publicize it, like I did not do that #MeToo thing that was happening then. I guess reporting to the police just seemed like it was too much. I had such a large part in it. It was not like I didn't know him. It was not like a rape scenario, coming out of nowhere. It is tricky.

Julia decided not to report the sexual assault because she did not want to ruin her perpetrator's life—he would be expelled and she didn't want to hurt her friend. She explained:

> I did not know if I should tell someone. I did not know what any repercussions would be on his part. I knew that if I did try to take things to real action, that I did not want to sit in a courtroom.… I did not want to report it. I could not see what good would come of it for me, except for maybe something bad for him.… I did not want to ruin someone's entire reputation or life just because he got drunk or [did something] stupid. At the time, I was so torn apart and conflicted about him being my friend, and not wanting to screw him over.

Bridget appreciated the role of residence advisors while she was living on campus. She found that the campus effectively communicated that the advisors were

there to be supportive and she generally found that the advisors were helpful. With regards to Julia's advisor that she disclosed to, Julia said,

> I knew that I could just talk to her and trust her not to go directly to the system. Then I could make the choice to report, and if I wanted to [do] that she could be the person to help me with those steps.

Skylar was the only participant who had reported her sexual assault, and she had done so both to the police and to campus authorities. She said, "Before I even made the police report, I had very little faith that it would go anywhere, because statistically speaking, people find it more traumatic than it is helpful." When Skylar did report, she said that experience was even more traumatic than the sexual assault itself. She spoke of how an officer asked her, "Why didn't you push him off of you?" She also addressed the complex emotions that reporting elicits since she wanted her perpetrator to face consequences, yet she did not want to go to trial and continue to deal with the traumatic event.

Theme Four: A Placating or Freeze Response

During the sexual assault, three of the survivors experienced a freeze response, and in one case, a placating response in hopes of saving the friendship with the perpetrator. Julia felt mentally trapped and frozen in her body. She described not being able to remember the details of the attack: "I just remembered bits and pieces about being in the car and vaguely something about talking to the other girls in the bathroom."

Marcus also described his response to his sexual assault as a freeze response:

> I wanted to say "no," to stop, but I was too drunk to get the words out. Like I was just too groggy and tired … like there was a lump in my throat, and I couldn't get the words out.

Skylar remembered that during all of the occasions where her perpetrator had crossed the line leading up to the sexual assault, she did not say anything to him because she did not want to seem rude in assuming the worst of his intentions. Skylar described her experience during the sexual assault: "I did not have the energy to move. I remember literally just staring at the ceiling.… I'm not sure if my eyes were open or closed."

Theme Five: A Desire to Reconnect the Friendship With the Perpetrator

Three out of the four survivors had been friends with their perpetrators before the assault. These three survivors shared a desire to reconnect their friendship with the perpetrator. Marcus spoke about how he remained friends with his perpetrator. He mentioned how his other friends reacted to this negatively, but he did

not consider it to be a problem. Julia spoke about how she and her perpetrator had previously been very close as friends. As she describes below, Julia hoped that he had learned the error of his ways and that they could rekindle the friendship:

> A part of me was hopeful that we could repair the friendship. I wondered how bad someone's actions had to be to discount months of perfectly good friendship. When we met up, he reassured me that he would be "good" and would never do that to me again.

She eventually realized that she could no longer pretend to be his friend. She ended up telling him, "I tried to get over what you did, but I cannot," and their friendship ended.

Similarly, Skylar described how she wished she could have pretended it hadn't happened:

> I think that given how bad my anxiety got in the first few months when I was away abroad—not hearing from him, not understanding why he didn't have anything to say.… If I wasn't abroad, if I was not sort of forced to be away from him, I think maybe I would have … for the sake of not having to accept that this experience was something that I've had … I think I might have found a way to sort of sweep it under the rug.

Theme Six: A Need for Education, Resources, and Policy Changes on Campus

All participants provided feedback on the university's approach to addressing sexual assault and to supporting survivors. Marcus, Julia, and Bridget referred to a consent campaign on campus in which emoji images had been used to outline the definition of consent. The consensus was that they appreciated this campaign as a starting point to build awareness. Marcus, who was born in the United States, acknowledged that the conversation about consent was more prominent in Canada compared to where he had grown up. Julia shared: "It was something that I had not thought about before, but yes, people need to know that consent needs to be freely given."

Bridget valued that her university had both a university-funded department as well as a student-led, grassroots initiative to support survivors. She explained that the grassroots initiative could make more radical changes and help survivors feel more comfortable seeking support since it was a separate entity from the university. This is particularly important if the survivor has felt harmed by the institution—for example, if the perpetrator was a university staff member.

In terms of policy changes, some of the survivors commented on the university's support services. Both Bridget and Julia were unhappy with the triage model employed at the university counselling services. They found that it created

unnecessary barriers to accessing care and created an unwelcoming and uncaring environment. Also, Bridget reported that the university should clarify the role of the sexual assault student resources on campus so that students are better able to access these resources: "I don't think that the university has done a very good job at explaining what they do and where students should go for different kinds of support."

Julia, Bridget, and Marcus emphasized the need for more education on sexual assault and an expanded understanding of the concept of consent. As Bridget stated, "I mean, there is consent education on campus, but I am sure many people who commit sexual assault understand consent on a conceptual level, but not in practice." Julia thought it would be helpful to have workshops designed to help women feel more comfortable and empowered to say "no" to sexual activities they do not want to engage in. She spoke about how she finds it difficult to speak up in a moment of unwanted sexual activity, out of fear of hurting the other person's feelings. Another workshop that the survivors suggested involved learning how to respond to sexual assault disclosures. Marcus thought that this would allow survivors to feel more comfortable disclosing their experience to first responders, counsellors, or sexual assault centre staff who should be trained in how to respond sensitively.

The survivors also discussed how more education is needed for those who perpetrate sexual assault so that they can change their behaviour in the future. Both Julia and Bridget remarked that expelling perpetrators from school does not get to the root of the problem: it does not re-educate perpetrators about what consent is or about what they had done wrong. As a result, the survivors worried that the perpetrator could go on to assault someone else. Finally, Bridget also captured the sentiment of many of the survivors when she stated:

> I don't know how to make people pay attention—you know what I mean? I mean, we could put on workshops about consent, or do some education in residences, but how do you get people to actually *show up* and learn these things?

Discussion

When investigating narratives constructed by survivors about their experiences of sexual assault on campus, it is important to recognize and highlight that each story is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant and is representative of a particular point in time. The following discussion of the research findings does not assert any essential truths about the experiences of sexual assault on campus. Instead, it offers further subjective meaning-making, with the goal of providing knowledge to clinicians, university policy-makers, and researchers who aim to improve supports for sexual assault survivors. Most importantly, the findings have relevance for other survivors of sexual assault on university campuses.

Relationship of Findings to Extant Literature

Many of the characteristics of the survivors' narratives about sexual assault fit within what the research claims to be characteristic of sexual assault experiences on campus. One common factor is the survivor's age at the time of their experiences of assault, with the highest rates of sexual assault occurring between the ages of 15 and 24 years (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Three of the four participants had been under the age of 21 years at the time they had been assaulted. Another common factor found by Flowers (2009) confirmed that the majority of sexual assaults on campus occurred in the survivor's dorm room or apartment. In the current study, three of the four survivors' sexual assault experiences had happened in a dorm room on campus.

All of the participants' stories included the presence of alcohol. Alcohol consumption by victims and by perpetrators has been correlated with the occurrence of sexual assault (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Three of the four survivors reported that they had consumed alcohol at the time of the sexual assault. All of the survivors described their perpetrator as having consumed alcohol—three were described as drunk, one "sober enough to drive." It is interesting to note that drug use has previously been linked with the occurrence of sexual assault (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004) but was not mentioned as an element in the survivors' narratives in this study.

The survivors' experiences clearly reflect the scarcity of reporting sexual assaults that are shown in the literature before the #MeToo movement (Benoit et al., 2015; Conroy & Cotter, 2017; Fisher et al., 2003; "#MeToo," 2021; Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018). Only one out of the four survivors considered reporting her experience, and when she did report, she described the reporting process as very upsetting and traumatic. Skylar's experience of reporting her assault underscores how turning to the police can carry an emotional risk for survivors. Negative reactions to sexual assault disclosures are so common that the literature has termed this event a "second assault" or a "second rape," and the negative effects of reporting may fall within the phenomenon of "secondary victimization" (Ahrens, 2006, 2010). Sadly, this also reflects the extant research since negative responses from first responders and professional support providers are widespread and often have very harmful impacts on survivors (Sit & Stermac, 2017).

One common experience of survivors proposed in the literature was the fact that the perpetrator was known to them (Starkman, 2013). The largest percentage of sexual assaults is carried out by an acquaintance (77%, according to Starkman, 2013). Sexual assault victims usually know their perpetrator (Conroy & Cotter, 2017; Cotter & Savage, 2019; Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018). Three of the four participant stories in the current study reflected this dynamic. When an acquaintance perpetrates a sexual assault, it is often more difficult for the survivor to understand their experience to be an assault (Bondurant, 2001). This difficulty is due to the media typically portraying sexual assault as an act perpetrated by a violent stranger.

Therefore, the more an experience deviates from this portrayal, the more likely it is to be discounted. For example, women who are sexually assaulted by their partners without a large amount of force are less likely to consider their experience as rape (Kahn, 2004).

The literature highlights how often survivors whose experiences fit the definition of sexual assault have difficulty considering their experience as such (Kahn, 2004). This phenomenon has been called "hidden" or "unacknowledged" rape victims. This occurrence was supported among the participants in the present study. All of the survivors struggled at various points in their experiences with how to conceptualize what had happened to them as sexual assault. The factors that some of these participants shared that were consistent with Kahn's (2004) findings included (a) the consumption of alcohol, (b) the assault occurring without the use of much force, (c) non-penetrative sexual advances, (d) a perpetrator who is an acquaintance, (e) belief in the script of violent stranger rape, and (f) the experience of less intense emotional reactions afterwards. All of these factors are empirically linked to survivors' feelings of confusion about their experiences and are more likely to lead to self-blame (Kahn, 2004).

The findings also confirm what we know from the literature to be true: when experiencing a sexual assault, many survivors experience a freeze response and are not able to express verbal or physical resistance (Moor et al., 2013). As with the participants in this study, survivors may have had difficulty remembering the details of the events as they happened (van der Kolk, 2014). Some, like Julia, remember details in bits and pieces but have difficulty putting their memories into narrative form, whereas others, like Skylar, "people please" in an attempt to keep their relationships intact.

Despite the empirical evidence regarding the connections of sexual assault to fraternities, campus societies, or athletic groups, most of the participants' experiences of sexual assault showed no connection to societies or athletic groups on campus. None of the survivors reported belonging to one of these groups. However, Julia's perpetrator was a member of a fraternity on campus, and her sexual assault took place the night of the fraternity's formal event.

The decision of whether or not to disclose a sexual assault is a large part of the survivor's experience. Two out of three survivors decide to communicate their experience to a minimum of one person, which is a typical response according to the literature (Fisher et al., 2003). In the present study, all four survivors disclosed the event to at least one person in their social support network. The current research on the topic of social support finds that adverse reactions are common and can have harmful impacts on the survivor's healing.

Implications for University Policies and Procedures

Moylan and Javorka (2020) argue that, rather than focus on individual factors impacting support seeking by survivors, research should focus on the ways

in which institutional factors and university culture impact how support seeking is experienced (including fraternities, athletics, alcohol and party culture, and government policies). The survivors' stories highlighted how interwoven these institutional factors are into their help-seeking experiences. Some challenges for existing campus sexual assault support workers and women's centres is that they depend on volunteers and connections with off-campus organizations for the provision of support (Quinlan et al., 2016). This means that issues with funding can be a significant barrier to the provision of services (Quinlan, et al., 2016). It is important for universities to work to remove unnecessary barriers to accessing support and care in order to ensure that services are easily accessible, visible, welcoming, and sensitive to students' needs.

In addition to the use of volunteers at campus support centres, there is a need to incorporate trained and experienced advocates and support personnel to provide consistent, up-to-date, evidence-based programs to address sexual assault on campus.

In order to begin to reduce the high rate of campus sexual assault, it is necessary to target institutional factors that perpetuate sexual violence. There needs to be a change in the culture, which can be partially impacted through increased education. One consideration is knowledge mobilization through ongoing educational campaigns to address issues such as prevalence rates, consent education, and media campaigns (such as the "emoji" consent campaigns mentioned by the participants) to make the issues and supports more visible. Experiential practice is also an important piece to help students integrate more deeply their understanding of how sexual assault and consent are defined.

Since the province of British Columbia implemented Bill 23 in May 2016 (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2016), post-secondary schools in that province have been required to create their own stand-alone sexual assault policies. In April 2017, for instance, the University of British Columbia created Policy 131, named the "Sexual Assault and Other Sexual Misconduct" policy. Policy 131 has been criticized for its lack of clarity and for failing to raise student awareness about the policy's implications (McCabe, 2018). In addition, since the policy's implementation there has been little follow-up or information about the impacts of the policy. While this is just one university's example, it is true that there is a general need for more information about these policies and other institutional factors and about how university culture can impact support for help-seeking from survivors.

Implications for Counselling

It is clear from these narrative accounts regarding the emotional consequences of sexual assault that survivors need counselling support and psychoeducation about how to cope in the aftermath of sexual assault. This study will be beneficial for counsellors and psychologists from a range of theoretical orientations because

it highlights a broad stroke of themes related to individual experiences of sexual assault. The findings also hold relevance not only for counsellors but also for first responders and other workers who provide counselling assistance and support. In this section, we will address this collective group of service providers as counsellors and support workers. Sexual assault is a common experience that frequently leaves a devastating emotional impact on the survivor (Campbell et al., 2009). Counsellors will almost certainly see clients who have experienced sexual violence. Despite the far-reaching impacts of sexual assault, it is possible for a counsellor never to receive specific training on supporting individuals who have been sexually assaulted (Ullman, 2014).

It is imperative that counsellors learn about the specific impacts of sexual assault on their clients' lives in addition to receiving general trauma training to inform their practice. Sexual assault is the only crime for which victims are up against societal pressures to explain why they are not to blame (Pollard, 1992). This is reflective of rape culture, the concept that explains the greater societal factors that are at play and that allow the perpetuation of rape at such a high rate (Buchwald et al., 2005). The conditions for rape culture are evident in acts and speech that normalize and perpetuate violence against women and minority groups. The presence of rape culture is also what allows for the frequent victim-blaming that many survivors experience from others or internalize themselves. If counsellors do not understand the typical experiences of sexual assault, they may miss supporting survivors in some key areas that are essential to healing (Ullman, 2014). The following are recommended best practices for counsellors working with sexual assault survivors that emerged from the participant experiences.

First, counsellors and support workers need to believe that a survivor's experience is valid and that they did their best to cope at the time. The pervasive victim-blaming that occurs in society can often lead the person receiving a sexual assault disclosure to question the survivor. For example, the support worker to whom Skylar reported her assault asked, "Why didn't you push him off of you?" This remark is steeped in blame and demonstrates a lack of understanding about the power dynamics of rape as well as typical trauma responses. Counsellors need to be aware of rape culture to avoid causing survivors to feel interrogated or judged. It is essential that the therapeutic setting be a safe space and that the counsellor provide a supportive, accepting, non-blaming attitude toward the client who reports having been sexually assaulted.

As everyone does, survivors live in a rape culture, and so many survivors internalize these beliefs and blame themselves for these experiences. For that reason, it can be valuable for therapists to remind survivors that it was not their fault they were sexually assaulted. A client's self-blame can show up in subtle ways, such as offhand comments about what they "should" or "should not" have done (Kline et al., 2021). Marcus exemplifies this sentiment when he said he had difficulty considering his experience sexual assault because he had been intoxicated, had

not been clear on what he wanted, and had flirted with his perpetrator. Because sexual assault survivors can often be entrenched in self-blame, it can be very powerful for a formal support person such as a lawyer, a doctor, a police officer, or a counsellor to offer the language to describe their experience as an assault and to articulate that the assault was not their fault.

It is helpful for counsellors to be familiar with the definition of consent and to be able to offer it to their client. The campus consent campaign that was referenced by most of the survivors defines consent as follows: "Consent is clear. You always need a 'yes!' for sex (making out or touching). Consent is enthusiastic, freely given, and can be revoked at any time." The legal definition of consent in Canada is "the voluntary agreement of the complainant to engage in the sexual activity in question" (Criminal Code, 1985). Consent is not present if the person is unconscious or intoxicated. Julia said she appreciated that there was a consent campaign on campus that highlighted that consent should be given freely and voluntarily. It is helpful to define consent for clients so that they have a better understanding of when consent was not present and their boundaries were violated. With that said, it is also important to follow the survivor's choice of language to describe their experience as a way to be respectful and to trust their manner of making sense of their experience. For example, Marcus agreed that his experience fit the legal definition of a sexual assault, but he preferred to call it "the event" rather than a sexual assault. It would be important for a potential counsellor working with someone like Marcus to honour his choice of words and likewise to refer to his experience as "the event."

Counsellors working with survivors should be careful about the use of touch with their clients. The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's (2021) standards of practice for counsellors include the following questions regarding the use of touch: "Do I understand the client's personal history sufficiently to risk touching at this time? Touching, at least at an early stage in counselling, is contraindicated for clients who have been sexually abused or who have experienced inappropriate uses of power through touch" (p. 20). An example of a survivor's sensitivity to touch can be seen in how Marcus reported feeling extremely uncomfortable following his sexual assault if a fellow male touched him casually anywhere.

It is important for counsellors to understand that there can be harmful consequences to a survivor should they choose to report their sexual assault (Khan et al., 2018), and as such it is important for counsellors to respect and support a survivor's decision. The positive impact of allowing survivors to make their own decisions is reflected in Julia's experience. She appreciated the role of her residence advisors while she was living on campus. She found the campus effectively communicated that the advisors were there to be supportive, and she generally found that the advisors were helpful.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations worth noting in this study. Since the four survivors freely chose to participate in the study, this research design bears a selection bias. As such, sexual assault survivors who chose to participate may differ in their experiences than those who did not choose to participate. The sample size was also small, and the results are by no means representative of all sexual assault survivors on university campuses. The goal of this study was not to reflect the experiences of all survivors but to gain detailed individual accounts of sexual assault. Although the findings cannot be generalized, the meaning of these narratives and the teaching tales within them are relevant to emergent work in this field.

Although it is never the intention of narrative research to generalize the results to an entire population, there are still many intersectional identities—such as ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities—that were not included in this study. The participants' ages ranged between 19 to 22 years of age, with one participant identifying as male and three identifying as female. Three of the participants were Caucasian, and one participant was of mixed Caucasian and Asian background. It would be beneficial for future research to examine a wider range of participant experiences of campus sexual assault. Particular groups that would be valuable to include in future research are Indigenous peoples and people of colour, LGBTQ+ people (includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Two Spirit, queer, and questioning), individuals who are disabled, and immigrants as well as international students on campus.

Conclusion

In recent years, the alarmingly high rate of sexual assaults on campus is more widely known. We have witnessed through the media the impact on survivors sharing their stories as a result of the #MeToo movement, in which people are using the hashtag started by Tarana Burke to proclaim over social media that they have been sexually harassed or assaulted (#MeToo, 2019). It is our opinion that part of what made this movement so impactful was that it went beyond research statistics. Perhaps for the first time, people could see that friends, family members, and public figures they admired had experienced sexual violence. It gave voice to the survivors' lived experiences. This is the goal of narrative research: to learn from the survivors themselves what happened, what the impact was, what they needed and did not receive, and perhaps how they developed resilience. The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of sexual assault survivors whose assault had occurred on a Canadian university campus. The discussion and examination of sexual assault on campus has only just begun. This research hopes to serve as another layer to the existing literature that aims to support survivors and to work towards the societal changes necessary to help end sexual violence.

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