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"IT WAS SOMETHING ABOUT ME": INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION, CONSCIENTIZATION, AND POST-ASSAULT PROCESSES AMONG SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS

A Dissertation:
by

Abril N. Harris, MSW

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“IT WAS SOMETHING ABOUT ME”: INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION, CONSCIENTIZATION, AND POST-ASSAULT PROCESSES AMONG SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS

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ABRIL N. HARRIS

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Abstract

Sexual violence remains one of the most pervasive and underreported crimes in modern society. Sexual violence largely impacts women and people with other marginalized identities and has historical origins as a tool for domination and control. Although, sexual assault and rape are common occurrences, survivors of sexual assault and rape do not report their crime, and many choose not to seek help. One reason offered in sexual violence literature as an explanation for low rates of reporting and resource-seeking is attributed to the “hidden rape” victim phenomenon. More than half of survivors do not acknowledge or label their experience as a sexual assault or rape, even though their experience meets the legal definition of rape. While many reasons may influence survivors to call their experience a rape or sexual assault, such as their relationship to the person who sexually assaulted them, substance use, or prior sexual encounters with the person who sexually assaulted them, there remains much to be explored about how survivors come to understand and label their assault. Especially, as research demonstrates that unacknowledged rape is directly correlated with non-reporting and resource-seeking decisions. This study examined the influences of internalized oppression and conscientization on how survivors label and understand their experience with sexual violence, and how those influences may affect post-assault resource-seeking decisions. This study is a

secondary qualitative analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews collected between the years of 2018-2019 in a Northeast region of the U.S that focused on the experience of adolescent sexual assault. I examined the process of labeling a sexual assault among survivors and how their interactions with others in the social world informs that labeling process. Boejie's constant comparative analytical method (CCM) for analyzing qualitative interviews, was used for code and category generation with the intent of theme identification. Findings from this study outlined types of oppressive and anti-oppressive messages that informs manifestations of internalized oppression and the conscientization process that attenuates it among sexual assault survivors. Additionally, as internalized oppression and conscientization are psychological states that necessitate cultivation this study highlights the reinforcing and disruptive experiences that allowed for its continued indoctrination. Finally, this study uplifts the multiplicative experiences among sexual assault survivors with marginalized identities. Insights from this study provide new understandings of how internalized oppression and conscientization manifest among sexual assault survivors. Furthermore, the study highlights the impact these intrapsychic phenomena have on post-assault processing and decision-making.

Keywords: sexual assault; rape; internalized oppression, conscientization

This dissertation is dedicated to survivors of sexual harm, especially those survivors who offered their stories and truths to inform this research.

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I am filled with so much joy and gratitude. In times of stillness, I often reflect on all the beautiful people in my life and feel so immensely blessed.

Ashè

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"If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it"

–*Their Eyes Were Watching God by* Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

Chapter 1. Introduction

Sexual assault and rape are not aberrations but are experiences embedded in the social fabric of the United States. The pervasiveness of sexual violence is apparent when considering that one in five women in the U.S. will experience rape in their lifetimes (Paul et al., 2014; Tsong & Ullman, 2018); and approximately 1-3% of men will experience sexual assault in their lifetimes (Dworkin et al., 2017). Sexual assault remains the least reported violent crime in the United States, with reporting rates to authorities remaining stagnated at around 5-20% for nearly 30 years (Lonsway & Archambault, 2012; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Historically sexual violence was used as a tool of social control and domination against feminized bodies (Deer, 2017; Hockett et al., 2009). Sexual violence is endemic globally and affects all socio-economic sections of society. However, it systematically oppresses women, transgender folx[1], and gender-expansive individuals who express their genders in ways that broaden and challenge cultural understandings outside of the heteronormative paradigm (Michl et al., 2019; Rosetto & Tollison, 2017).

Sexual violence is often problematized as an interpersonal phenomenon between men and women, but there is increasing recognition of sexual violence as a tool of white supremacy and patriarchy (Davis, 1981; Deer, 2017; Hockett et al., 2009). These and other forms of oppression exist as interlocking, reinforcing states where some groups have unequal access to power and resources. Oppression also exists as a process where dominant groups exert violence and use

[1] The term folx to refer to groups of people, is intentionally used to be inclusive of persons who operate outside of the binary gender paradigm.

other tools of domination to maintain a state of oppression (David et al., 2019). While violence is an effective tool in maintaining oppression, other apparatuses also uphold oppressive ideologies (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism) and structures (e.g., prison system, U.S. Immigration, and Customs Enforcement, law enforcement). When exercised against marginalized groups (i.e., women, ethnically minoritized populations), unabated violence is often coupled with ideologies or narratives that provide the necessary justification to enact such violence (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). As a result, the oppressed person can unknowingly and knowingly actively participate in their oppression and act outside of their self-interest (Pyke, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Internalized oppression— or a mechanism within oppressive systems that inculcates subservience into the minds of oppressed people and can influence oppressed persons to accept and internalize false beliefs of inferiority about their group— helps to facilitate cooperation with oppression (Pheterson, 1986). The internalization of oppressive ideas and beliefs by survivors of systemic violence can increase thoughts of self-blame, shame, and hopelessness (McLean & Syed, 2015).

Women who endure sexual assault may internalize socially constructed ideas and beliefs about their identity and sexuality (e.g., rape myths[2], sexual scripts[3]); this internalization then impacts how they conceptualize their assault, their self-image, and the expected treatment they will receive by informal and formal supports (Greeson et al., 2016; Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). Sexual assault survivors frequently blame themselves for their victimization and minimize the

[2] Rape myths are defined as a set of false beliefs that determine what constitutes as "real rape", who can be a victim of rape, and blames the victim for being raped and absolves the rapist of all responsibility (Shaw et al., 2017).
[3] Sexual scripts are available through cultural messages that allow us to define, identify, and predict behavior during sexual encounters. They determine who initiates sex, and what constitutes as sexual and nonsexual situations (Rosetto & Tollison, 2017).

actions taken by the person who caused sexual harm[4]; this in part can explain why approximately 42%-78% of survivors do not label what they have experienced as a sexual assault or rape (LeMaire et al., 2016). In contemplating post-assault decisions, survivors have shared their fears of judgment and thoughts of disbelief from people they disclose to. This fear is not unfounded, as research consistently shows that the risk for continued victimization through system interfacing is high (Campbell et al., 2001). Possible re-victimization by informal supports (e.g., friends, family) and formal supports (e.g., police, hospitals, rape crisis centers) is a significant deterrent among survivors (Greeson et al., 2016; Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). The dismal rates of reporting to police, accessing medical care, and utilizing other post-assault services allude to possible anticipation of re-victimization when seeking formal support or services (Greeson et al., 2016; Kaukinen & DeMaris, 2009). Scholars demonstrate a robust understanding of the challenges survivors face when labeling their assault and making post-assault resource-seeking decisions. However, it remains unclear what role internalized oppression plays in post-assault processes and to what extent internalized beliefs shape survivors' entire experience with sexual violence.

Previous literature documents internalized beliefs and their influence on meaning-making following a sexual assault (Huemmer et al., 2019). Additionally, the scholarship on sexual violence clarifies survivors' choices to disengage from post-assault services and resources. However, a limited amount of information is available that synthesizes the process of grappling with internalized beliefs, making sense of one's sexual assault, and how that impacts post-assault decision-making using qualitative data. There is also little research that explicitly discusses internalized oppression from the perspective of survivors with varying intersectional identities

[4] In a commitment to move toward person first language and being mindful of language that is used to justify dehumanization I will refrain from terms like perpetrator or rapist. I will instead use *person who caused sexual harm* or the person who raped/sexually assaulted another person.

such as their developmental age, racial identity, and gender identity and how they may influence post-assault processes.

The intention of this study is to uplift survivors' voices and stories in their own words, illuminate further understanding of how oppression is central to experiences of sexual assault and rape, show how complex oppression is internalized and impacts a survivor's understanding of their experience, which may influence their resource-seeking decisions, and ultimately how internalized oppression can attenuate or challenge the dominant narrative[5] about sexual violence. To this end, I conducted a secondary data analysis of 22 qualitative interviews completed with survivors of sexual assault. The aims of this study are as follows:

Aim 1: To further examine the effect of internalized oppression on survivors' perception of their assault. Determine to what extent internalized oppression impacts how sexual assault survivors perceive their experience with sexual assault and how survivors label their experiences based on their perceptions of their assault.

Aim 2: To explore how internalized oppression may impact the process of disclosure and resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors. Identify internalized (oppressive vs. anti-oppressive) messages possibly received by sexual assault survivors that may impact disclosure and resource-seeking decisions.

Aim 3: To understand how the effects of internalized oppression on perceptions of a sexual assault, disclosure, and subsequent resource-seeking decisions vary across the intersectional identities of sexual assault survivors. Explore possible variations in perceptions

[5] Dominant narratives are a set of belief, attitudes, and ideologies that determine socio-cultural life within a given society, but justify a social arrangement that is rooted in inequity with one dominant group in control and other subordinate groups with little to no control of power and resources (McLean & Syed, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)

of sexual assault and subsequent disclosure and resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors with differing intersectional identities.

Use of Sexual Assault Terminology

Sexual Assault is an inclusive term that describes various types of unwanted sexual experiences such as unwanted kissing or touching, verbally coercive sex, and includes rape (Tsong & Ullman, 2018). Scholars understand sexual assault as unwanted sexual experiences that involve unwanted physical contact that is sexual. *Rape* is defined as the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina and anus with any body part or object or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). *Sexual Violence* is sexual activity that is attempted or completed without consent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Sexual violence can include both sexual assault and rape. Therefore, sexual violence, sexual assault, and rape may be used interchangeably in this study. However, when the word rape is used, it is done intentionally to describe it as defined above. When the term sexual violence is used, it is generally referring to violence that is sexual and exists as a harmful social phenomenon.

Chapter 2. Study Significance and Relevant Literature

The research demonstrating the pervasiveness of sexual assault captures the certainty of sexual violence in the lives of women and gender-expansive folx in the U.S. today (DuMont et al., 2019). Unfortunately, since the inception of the anti-rape movement in the seventies, the rates of sexual assault have not drastically changed to indicate significant strides towards eradicating sexual violence in America (Spohn, 2020). A report generated from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) estimated that the lifetime prevalence of contact sexual violence has increased by 30 percent (Smith et al., 2017). Nevertheless, responses to sexual assault have shown some promise, with the creation and implementation of trained sexual assault nurses and specialized multi-disciplinary teams that provide holistic support to survivors in some U.S. states (Spohn & Tellis, 2012; Deer, 2017). However, sexual assault remains the least reported violent crime today (Spohn, 2020). Many scholars have identified various post-assault barriers to reporting and resource-seeking, such as fear of victim-blaming, shame, and limited access to resources. It is evident that survivors who struggle to understand their experience as sexual assault, coupled with the possible poor reactions from formal and informal supports, are reoccurring barriers identified in sexual violence scholarship (Campbell, 2013; Dworkin et al., 2017; Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Sabina et al., 2012; Ullman & Lorenz, 2020).

Sexual assault survivors who experience the legal definition of rape or sexual assault, but alternatively label their experience as a non-assault, is a phenomenon referred to as unacknowledged rape (Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018). There must be an increased understanding of unacknowledged rape among survivors because it has implications for reporting, resource-seeking decisions, and the healing process. Interestingly, the same reasons that prevent survivors

from officially labeling their assault (i.e., alcohol use, relationship to the person who caused sexual harm, lack of explicit non-consent) are why others blame survivors during post-assault interactions. (Campbell & Johnson, 1997). Survivors who engage in self-blame, and people who engage in victim-blaming, are strongly influenced by the cultural messages in society attached to experiences of rape and sexual assault. The internalization of cultural messaging and dominant social narratives can obscure the truth for survivors, as they attempt to make sense of a very traumatic experience. It can also encourage victim-blaming behaviors in post-assault encounters with those the survivor may lean on for support. Thus, it is vital to understand the historical, environmental, and structural contexts that create a world where sexual assault is framed as a self-inflicted wound prompted by the victim's choices, as opposed to the pernicious calculations of the person who chose to commit sexual assault.

Historically, sexual assault was used as a tool to aid in the oppression of marginalized persons with varying identities (Deer, 2017; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). The manifestations of rape and sexual assault within the context of U.S. history demonstrate the utility of rape to control, intimidate, and terrorize communities for the benefit of primarily wealthy white men (Davis, 1981; Deer, 2017). Much scholarship discusses the systematic rapes that Black slave women and Native women were subject to during attempts to terrorize their communities and solidify wealthy White America's economic domination (Davis, 1981; Deer, 2017). This legacy endures and becomes apparent when one studies the system responses to sexual assault and rape in the United States. Sexual assault and rape are often presented as interpersonal acts committed by someone without the consent of another. However, this interpersonal act seems perpetually condoned by systems and institutions, given their systemic negligent response to this widespread problem. It is well-documented that systems generally respond poorly to sexual assaults

(Campbell, 2013; Deer, 2017), and sexual assault continues to be the least likely violent crime to result in conviction (Deer, 2017). The gendered nature of sexual violence and its disproportionate impact on specific groups called scholars to consider the role of oppression in solidifying sexual violence as a fundamental part of American life. As discussed in the aims, this study centers on oppression, particularly internalized oppression, as a factor that may influence sexual assault identification and subsequent resource-seeking decisions.

Intersectional Identities and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is not bound by social categories (i.e., race, class, gender). It impacts everyone. As with most structural and interpersonal violence, the prevalence becomes augmented when accounting for varying intersectional identities. Women and gender-expansive folx are disproportionately affected by sexual violence; thus, the marginalization of femininized bodies must be centered and acknowledged. Of those individuals that self-identify as cisgender women, forty-three percent will experience some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). The rate of sexual victimization increases among individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Lesbian and bisexual women experience rape and sexual assault at higher rates than heterosexual women, and 100% of people who sexually assault lesbian and bisexual women are male (Langenderfer-Margruder et al., 2016). Transgender survivors also experience higher rates of sexual victimization, with 47% of transgender respondents in the U.S. Transgender Survey reporting that they experienced sexual assault at some point in their lifetimes (James et al., 2016). Transwomen in that sample, of more than 27,715 respondents, were more likely to be assaulted than transgender men and other non-binary people (James et al., 2016).

National data shows that Black (35.5%), Latine[6] (26.9%), and Asian (22.9%) women experience sexual violence at similar or less prevalent rates compared to White (38.9%) women (Smith et al., 2017). However, those that serve survivors in those cultural communities, state that underreporting may not accurately capture the true rates of sexual victimization among women of color (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Sabina et al., 2012; Tsong & Ullman, 2018). All survivors are subject to judgment and scrutiny based on social stereotypes; however, the organic racism in American society guarantees that those stereotypes are often insidiously applied to women of color (Pegram & Abbey, 2019). Black and Latine women are portrayed as hypersexualized and are often blamed for their victimization or the inadequate response from formal responders, like the police. (Hakimi et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2017) Upon further examination, it appears that there are disparities and variations in post-assault resource-seeking processes when the survivor is a person of color and identifies outside the binary gender paradigm (Bryant-Davis & Thompson, 2009; Sabina et al., 2012; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). The pervasiveness of sexual violence among Native American women has only recently been recognized by the U.S. government because now we know that Native women experience sexual assault at higher rates than any other group, apart from multicultural women (Smith et al., 2017) Additionally, 1 in 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime (Deer, 2017; Smith et al., 2017).

Discussions about race and gender frequently show the variation in the experiences of sexual violence across social groups in the United States. However, other oppressed identities impact how sexual violence and post-assault experiences can transpire. Survivors with

[6] I have elected to use the term Latine in this dissertation to represent the variety of cultures and peoples who have origins and ancestral ties to the lands referred to as Latin America. However, this author understands that appropriate terms towards gender inclusivity within the confines of the Spanish language are still in discussion within the Latine (Latino/Latina; Latinx) community.

disabilities are also subject to victim-blaming behavior and secondary victimization due to the beliefs about the sexuality of persons with disabilities (Odette, 2012). People with disabilities are socialized as asexual, undesirable, and not likely to be assaulted or inversely described as promiscuous (Odette, 2012). In reality, individuals with intellectual, psychological, and other disabilities are three times more likely to experience sexual assault than those without disabilities (Goodman et al., 1997; Odette, 2012). In a study conducted with women who have a severe mental illness, between 51 and 97 percent reported a form of physical or sexual assault (Goodman et al., 1997). Beliefs about sexual assault and people with disabilities are intertwined as survivors are often discounted as mentally unstable and unbelievable, which alludes to the belief that mental illness equates to people being liars and unable to understand their own lived experiences (Larson, 2018). The effects of race, gender, and disability are just some of the social categories (e.g., religious minorities) that influence the impact of sexual violence, and the effects can become especially harmful when those social identities are compounded (Crenshaw, 1994; Geronimus & Thompson, 2004; Odette, 2012).

Age is an intersectional identity not thoroughly discussed, specifically as it relates to ageist oppression. The developmental age of a sexual assault survivor will impact their post-assault experience due to their heightened identity formation and reality construction processes influenced by rapid physiological changes, the onset of formal operations, and desires to fit oneself into various social contexts (i.e., school, work, and family). Due to this, when adolescents encounter major life disruptions, it necessitates significant cognitive resources to make sense of new experiences, especially when that new experience is sexual trauma. (McLean, 2005). Adolescent girls are the most targeted population for acts of sexual violence (Greeson et al., 2016), in a time where adolescents are just beginning to incorporate sexuality into their

identity (Sanchez et al., 2017). Between 40-60% of all rape victims in the U.S. are under 18-years-old, with an estimated two-thirds of people experiencing sexual assault between 12-17 years of age (Banvard-Fox et al., 2020). Adolescents may have limited information to process sexual violence as their understanding of sexuality is still developing. In addition, they may have developmental constraints that make it difficult to simultaneously process the trauma associated with a rape or sexual assault. However, the neuroscience on adolescent development does not account for all aspects of adolescent processing and decision-making. It is essential to be cognizant of when conflation with adolescent capacities and authority to make decisions occurs (Salter, 2017). For example, Campbell and colleagues (2015) found in their qualitative study with adolescent sexual assault survivors that they could make decisions and exercise their agency during post-assault interactions with post-assault responders.

Sexual assault survivors may have difficulties making meaning of traumatic events while concurrently making decisions about how they will respond to their experiences with sexual assault. Meaning-making and decision-making processes can become more pronounced during the adolescent developmental period (McLean, 2005). Most adolescents and adult female-identified survivors disclose to someone, whether an immediate or delayed disclosure (Campbell et al., 2015). Beyond the disclosure process, when adolescent survivors tell an adult, they vary on how involved they would like a parent or other adult to be in helping them make resource-seeking decisions regarding formal service engagement (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013). Adolescents' power and agency are restricted in American society. They are subject to the authority of their parents and other adults who may have the ability to make decisions regarding medical care, criminal justice engagement, or involvement with child protection agencies depending on the nature of the relationship with the person who sexually assaulted them (Bailey

et al., 2021). The meaning-making and decision-making processes can intensify depending on social contexts and relationships adolescents prioritize during this developmental period (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013). While the evidence is inconclusive about adolescent capacities to make their own decisions, and we should honor their autonomy and ability to make decisions about their body. There should also be a consideration if adults can make the best decisions for the adolescents in their care (Salter, 2017). Overall, it is necessary to consider the developmental period in which a sexual assault or rape occurs because that will impact how survivors process and understand their assault. In addition, in recognition of the limitations placed on adolescent survivors, their decisions and voices should be honored and uplifted during post-assault processes.

The trauma of rape and sexual assault can cause disarray in the lives of survivors, with many survivors experiencing severe lifetime effects on health and well-being (Deer, 2017; Pegram & Abbey, 2019; Wilson et al., 2016). The varying needs of sexual assault survivors require a multiple system response (Campbell, 2013). System responders can include the police, court actors, mental health professionals, medical professionals, and more informal sources like family and friends. However, accessing these resources can be precarious for sexual assault survivors, depending on previously raised issues.

Survivor Post-Assault Needs and Supporting Responders

Following a sexual assault or rape, survivors may present with an array of needs. Survivors of sexual violence incur psychological and physical injuries that could motivate some survivors to seek out support to address their mental and physical health needs (Logan et al., 2005). After a sexual assault, some survivors experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, genital injury, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and

increased suicidality (Campbell, 2013; Dworkin, 2017; Pegram & Abbey, 2019; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). In addition, some survivors may seek justice through the criminal justice system, which is one of the only legitimate methods of holding the person who sexually assaulted them accountable offered to victims of sexual violence (Lorenz et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2016). The pursuit of healing and justice requires tremendous support. Unfortunately, a significant number of sexual assault survivors have harmful interactions with formal (e.g., medical professionals, police officers) and informal support actors (e.g., friends, family). Many survivors elect not to engage with any supports, which allows the survivor to maintain control and explore other post-assault options.

Justice Related Needs

The commonly proposed pathways to justice for sexual assault survivors are the criminal justice and civil court systems. Justice is often presented as a linear process to survivors in which there is a beginning, middle, and end; or correspondingly, investigation, prosecution, and conviction (McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019; Shaw et al., 2017). Non-linear or alternative justice options like restorative and transformative justice modalities can validate the survivor and allow them to work outside of the legal system. Among survivors of various offenses, including sexual and gender-based violence, the main justice interests were participation, validation, and the authentic demonstration of accountability by the person who sexually assaulted them (McGlynn & Westermarland, 2019). In their desire to achieve justice, survivors may employ various methods to suit their justice-related needs.

Police are often a survivor's first encounter with the legal system, and they are responsible for initiating the investigation into an offense (Shaw et al., 2017). Survivors of sexual assault may choose to report to police not only in pursuit of justice but also to receive

assistance from police in addressing their safety concerns (Lorenz et al., 2019). In addition, reporting to police could give survivors access to knowledge about their rights, and some may receive service referrals (Lorenz et al., 2019). However, when sexual assault survivors report to police, they are often met with victim-blaming lines of questioning, poor follow-up on their cases, and disbelief in their stories (Campbell, 2013; Lorenz et al., 2019). Survivors generally describe interactions with police as traumatizing or unpleasant (Campbell, 2013; Maier, 2008). Survivors may choose to forgo reporting to avoid secondary victimization, they may choose to report on their own volition, or another party may report on their behalf with or without their consent depending on their age or circumstance (Campbell, 2013; Huemmer et al., 2019; Maier, 2008).

If a sexual assault case progresses past police investigation, the survivor may find themselves in a courtroom, where they can encounter prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, and jurors (Spohn, 2020). However, few cases result in arrest, even fewer reach the point of prosecution, and it is a rarity that a rape case ends in conviction (Spohn, 2020). When the prosecutor pursues a case, between 76 to 97 percent of those cases result in a guilty verdict or plea bargain, meaning cases that reach this point are likely to be successfully adjudicated (Campbell, 2013). However, so, few cases make it to this point in the judicial process. Prosecutors and police are integral to whether a case progresses through the criminal justice system to reach a conviction (Spohn, 2020). Prosecutors often rely on the contexts of the sexual assault to determine victim credibility, which can influence the outcome of sexual assault cases (Darwinkel et al., 2015). If the case is determined credible enough to move forward, the prosecutor may coach the victim to prepare for the grueling process of court proceedings (Campbell, 2013). Defense attorneys often use victim-blaming tactics in the courtroom that

dissuade jurors from evaluating the facts of the case and instead draw attention to biased slanderous characterizations of the survivor (Golding et al., 2016). In courtroom proceedings, survivors are highly attuned with reactions to courtroom actors, like judges. When survivors receive supportive responses from legal system professionals, they perceive their overall experiences as positive (Lorenz et al., 2019).

Civil litigation is another route that survivors may pursue recompense for their distress, with many stating that a favorable civil win transcends the financial gain. Instead, it becomes about what the money symbolizes (Lorenz et al., 2019). Civil torts are financial claims brought by survivors in civil court against the person who caused them sexual harm or negligent third party to redress the offenses committed against them (Bublick, 2009). This option may be more viable and appealing to survivors of sexual assault because the standard of proof is much less stringent, which makes a favorable outcome for the survivor more likely (Golding et al., 2016). Furthermore, these types of claims can proceed whether the person who caused sexual harm was convicted in criminal court or not (Bublick, 2009).

Additionally, survivors can pursue non-tort remedies to various justice needs following a sexual assault in multiple arenas like housing, education, employment, immigration, public benefits, and family law (Bublick, 2009). For example, in some states, if a survivor is raped in their apartment, they can request to break their lease without penalty in a civil court proceeding (Bublick, 2009). However, engagement in the civil court process does not insulate survivors from secondary victimization, as victim-blaming and negative interactions with court actors like defense attorneys, judges, and jurors remains prevalent (Golding et al., 2016).

Alternative Routes to Justice. For some time, there has been a movement to provide alternative possibilities of justice for survivors, particularly those who would prefer to operate

outside the legal system. In addition, there is a growing wave of support to challenge gender and sexual violence stakeholders to think about responses to these social problems that do not involve carceral solutions (Kim, 2020). The highly contentious topic of carceral feminism, or the reliance on criminal justice and incarceration responses to sexual and gender-based violence, invites different perspectives on justice and how society should respond to harm against marginalized groups (Terwiel, 2020).

Restorative justice has emerged as a more commonly used alternative to punitive carceral responses to harm. It instead focuses on restorative practices rooted in reconciliation and healing (Van Wormer, 2009). The practice of restorative justice in response to sexual assault typically involves people harmed by sexual violence, the one(s) who inflicted the harm, and community members who feel less safe due to the act of sexual violence or who may be contributing to an environment that fosters sexual violence (Koss & Achilles, 2008). Several models use restorative practices, but most center the voice of the one who was harmed (Koss & Achilles, 2008). Restorative justice models are increasingly being used, but some are troubled that restorative justice is practiced within the criminal justice system and can still result in carceral solutions (Koss & Achilles, 2008). Transformational justice practices are being explored as authentic anti-carceral approaches. They operate entirely outside the carceral and criminal justice systems and charge communities to respond to the harm inflicted by their members (Kim, 2020; Terwiel, 2020). Justice is in the eye of the beholder, and avenues available to survivors are now beginning to reflect the wishes of survivors.

Medical Care Needs

Survivors have an array of post-assault medical needs, including medical forensic evidence collection, sexually transmitted infection testing, treatment of injuries, or emergency

contraception (Campbell, 2013; Zinzow et al., 2012). More than half of survivors who seek post-assault medical care report receiving STI-related treatment, including necessary antibiotics (Campbell, 2013). Additionally, survivors who access medical services can gain further health information and treatment that may be integral in helping survivors identify their options in moving forward toward healing their bodies (Maier, 2008).

Service utilization in hospital settings among sexual assault survivors remains inconsistent. In a nationally representative study of U.S. adult women, 21% of rape victims sought medical care following their assault. Black women were three times more likely to seek medical care (Zinzow et al., 2012). In a study done with English-speaking female survivors who sought treatment (not specifically for a sexual assault) in an urban emergency department, nearly 60% reported not seeking medical care following their sexual assault (Feldhaus et al., 2000). Before the late 1970s, medical professionals were not expertly trained to perform sexual assault forensic exams (Campbell et al., 2009; Deer, 2017). As a result, some survivors may experience increased trauma symptoms following a hospital visit than those who do not go to the hospital (Campbell, 2013). Medical staff without training may resent or mistreat survivors because they do not deem forensic exams part of medical services (Campbell et al., 2005; Maier, 2008). While a medical forensic exam can assist the legal process, it does not guarantee the capture of the person who sexually assaulted the survivor or that the police will make an official report (Campbell et al., 2005). Due to some of the experiences with hospitals and police, survivors are more likely to confide in a friend or family member (Sabina et al., 2012).

Psychological Health and Recovery Needs

Following a sexual assault, survivors may seek help from mental health service providers and rape crisis centers (Ullman& Lorenz, 2020). Although many survivors experience

psychological distress after a sexual assault, few receive treatment (Parcesepe et al., 2015; Price et al., 2014). Mental health interventions have been shown to reduce symptoms (i.e., PTSD, anxiety, depression) and decrease psychological distress (Parcesepe et al., 2015). Survivors who report helpful interactions with mental health professionals also stated that they could manage other harmful interactions with other formal support systems (Campbell et al., 2009). Women of color are less likely to seek formal mental health care. However, culturally responsive care encourages formal participation in mental health services (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).

Some reported barriers to mental health access are the victim's age, marital status, and lack of health insurance (Price et al., 2014). Mental health clinicians and helping professionals who work predominantly with survivors may also experience secondary trauma or PTSD symptomology (Kirkner et al., 2018). White survivors of sexual assault are more likely to seek mental health services than women of other racial backgrounds (Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). The stigma around mental health services could influence women of color to choose not to seek formal mental health services. Lack of diversity in clinical staff has been shown to offer potential insight into limited engagement in mental health treatment among minoritized women. One study found that Black and Latine women were more likely to engage in treatment when matched with a mental health clinician of their ethnic background (Alvidrez et al., 2011). Black and Latine women tend to rely on informal supports such as close family and friends rather than engage with formalized mental health services (Sabina et al., 2012; Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). Survivors of color and those that identify as gender-expansive may also face additional barriers related to accessibility and availability. Some survivors may not be aware that certain services exist or believe that some services will not be available to them (Logan et al., 2005). Other survivors are treated poorly by formal supports due to their intersectional identities, which

constricts service access and availability (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Todahl et al., 2009)

Rape crisis centers are specifically designed to respond to and support sexual assault survivors and successfully assist survivors with their healing journeys. Rape crisis centers offer mental health services and assist survivors in post-assault legal and medical system navigation (Campbell et al., 2009). For example, a rape crisis advocate can be present at the hospital to support survivors through sexual assault evidence collection examination (Campbell et al., 2009). Moreover, survivors can receive short and long-term counseling provided by trained professionals (Shaw et al., 2011) and be referred to other community services (Dworkin et al., 2017). Rape crisis centers also participate in community organizing around issues of sexual assault and provide educational resources and materials to communities and institutions to bring awareness to the issues of sexual assault and available services (Shaw & Campbell, 2011).

Further Support and Healing Needs

Survivors overwhelmingly prefer to first seek support from informal sources (i.e., family, friends, romantic partners) following a sexual assault to meet their need for further support (Lindquest et al., 2016; Lorenz et al., 2019). Disclosure interactions between informal supports and survivors can positively affect both survivors and their support persons (Kirkner et al., 2018). Survivors who have positive interactions with informal support persons are less likely to experience feelings of shame and guilt and are more likely to engage in formal resource-seeking (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). Generally, survivors find their disclosures to family, friends, partners, and other informal supports helpful (Lindquist et al., 2016).

However, some informal supports are not equipped to handle the gravity of someone's experience with sexual violence (Kirkner et al., 2018). During encounters between survivors and

informal supports, the informal support can be overwhelmed by their feelings of emotional distress (e.g., sadness, anger, helplessness) after witnessing for their loved one (Kirkner et al., 2018). Survivors of sexual assault may also be apprehensive about sharing with informal supports and speculate about the ability of their supports to be trustworthy and safe (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013). If disclosure to informal supports does not result in a positive experience, the survivor could be influenced to limit or abandon efforts to access formal supports (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). A qualitative study with female sexual assault survivors found that nearly one-third of them reported feeling discouraged from accessing further supports after receiving a negative response from informal supports (DePrince et al., 2019).

Other informal sources of support not widely captured in the literature include church organizations, community leaders, and neighborhood elders (Bruns et al., 2005). Although the church may have a history of silencing sexual assault survivors, spirituality can be an important aspect in healing, and many survivors seek out those resources (Bruns et al., 2005; Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). In a study focusing on resource-seeking among sexual assault survivors, religious resources proved critical as 18% of the sample sought out some form of religious services following their assault (Logan et al., 2005). A new development in recovery is connection and healing through digital spaces. Many sexual assault survivors find informal support and information online and can engage anonymously to share stories and receive validation from fellow survivors (Nagy, 2018). Unfortunately, even with various support resources, some survivors elect not to seek out any support, which is not inconsequential. Survivors exercise their agency when they choose not to seek out support from others or tell anyone about their assault. Those choices can lessen the likelihood of harmful interactions with others that could negatively

impact the survivor (Huemmer et al., 2019).

Buffers for Secondary Victimization

Formal and informal secondary victimization is a common experience for survivors of sexual assault when attempting to access resources or support (Maier, 2008). Secondary victimization often referred to as the "second rape," characterizes experiences with post-sexual assault services that leave the survivor feeling further victimized (Campbell & Raja, 1999). However, others are making efforts to reduce the adverse outcomes for sexual assault survivors, following interactions with formal system actors and informal supports. For example, having rape advocates at the hospital during the survivors' visits is associated with decreased victim-blaming rhetoric among hospital staff and law enforcement actors (Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Maier, 2008). In addition, specialized nurses trained to attend to the needs of sexual assault survivors specifically are now a common practice in many hospitals across the United States. This compassionate medical program, referred to as the sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE) program, is comprised of nurses who receive specialized training on responding to sexual assault survivors (Maier, 2008). Overall, survivors receive more positive and comprehensive services from SANE staff like prophylactics, thorough examinations, and education (Campbell, 2013).

Sexual assault response teams (SART) are "comprehensive, multi-disciplinary responses to assault" (Deer, 2017, p. 781). They consist of partnerships between various responders (e.g., SANE, police, child welfare) with specialized training to respond to sexual assault that limits secondary victimization and decreases attrition in the criminal justice system (Spohn & Tellis, 2012). Sexual assault literature overwhelmingly supports services that accurately educate, empower, and affirm survivors; such services tend to be more successful in promoting healthy outcomes following a sexual assault. (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2009; Deer,

2017; Kirkner et al., 2018). Alas, while attentive responses to sexual assault are necessary, many survivors choose not to disclose their assault, nor do they seek out support services.

Unacknowledged Rape and Resource-Seeking Diversion

There are numerous reasons why survivors choose not to access supports following their assault. However, one reason thoroughly discussed in sexual violence literature is that many survivors do not label their experience as rape. For example, Koss (1985) defines sexual experiences that would legally be classified as rape but are not labeled as such by a survivor as unacknowledged rape. She identifies these survivors as "hidden victims" who are raped but do not perceive their assault as rape and subsequently are less likely to report or identify as a victim of rape (Koss, 1985). This realization becomes critical to discussing resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors. If someone experiences rape or sexual assault but does not label their experience as a sexual assault or rape, that may impact their post-assault resource-seeking decisions.

Rape that goes unacknowledged can become problematic for responders to sexual assaults and the survivors themselves. While monitoring the prevalence of unacknowledged rape is difficult (Koss, 1985), research shows it may be a common phenomenon. Most current prevalence rates estimate that between 42%-78% of women do not label their victimization as rape (LeMaire et al., 2016; Wilson & Miller, 2016). A meta-analysis conducted to estimate the prevalence of unacknowledged rape found that of the twenty-eight studies analyzed, the weighted mean rate of unacknowledged rape was 60.4% among a final sample of 5,917 female rape survivors (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Furthermore, those identified as unacknowledged rape victims were likely to characterize their assault in stereotypical ways that distance the violation from being labeled as rape or lay the burden of responsibility on themselves than those who

acknowledge their experience as rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004).

Most of the extant literature on unacknowledged rape focuses on the experiences of cisgender women. However, the limited number of studies conducted with sexually minoritized populations demonstrate that sexually minoritized survivors also have low rates of rape acknowledgment; but are more likely to acknowledge their rape than heterosexual survivors (Wilson & Newins, 2019). Those who identify as gender-expansive are also more likely to reject stereotypical and false beliefs about sexual assault, which scholars believe could be attributed to gender-expansive folx having less restrictive understandings of masculinity and femininity (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016; Wilson & Newins, 2019). Discourse about rape and sexual assault invokes notions of personal responsibility, which aligns with American values of individualism that often describe pain experienced by those outside of the White, cis-male, and able-bodied paradigm as self-inflicted (Larson, 2018). These discourses can operate in ways that encourage confusion and self-blame among survivors, acting as intrapsychic barriers to obscure the truth of their experiences.

Factors Influencing Propensities Towards Unacknowledged Rape

Many people experience what is legally defined as rape but choose not to label it as such. Legally rape is defined as "penetration no matter how slight, of the vagina, or anus, with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim (Basile et al., 2014). Rape is defined explicitly, but how survivors come to define their experience is influenced by many internal and external factors. Sexual violence research has attempted to identify what contributes to survivors' ability to identify their victimization as rape.

One of the most influential factors that contribute to how a survivor labels their assault is the characteristics of the assault itself. For example, familiarity or established relationship with

the person who caused them sexual harm or the level of force exhibited in the assault was minimal. In that case, it is more likely that the survivor will minimize the severity of their assault (Wilson et al., 2017). In addition, Levy and Eckhaus (2020) found that whether someone embraces the survivor identity is mediated by their faith and the use of the word "rape." Those that had a strong spiritual faith or used the word "rape" or "sexual assault" in the re-telling of their experience were more likely to identify as a sexual assault survivor, which is an identity that has been shown to facilitate healing and recovery (Levy & Eckhaus, 2020).

Others will conclude that their rape was an uncomfortable sexual encounter or say there was unclear communication between them and the person who assaulted them. (Wilson et al., 2017). Some survivors will insist that their use of alcohol, previous sexual encounters with the person who sexually assaulted them, or their inability to say the word "no" during their assault distinctly were contributing to factors that led to sexual violence (Huemmer et al., 2019; LeMaire et al., 2016). Survivors appear to struggle with the word "rape" because of the connotations and social ascriptions attributed to that word. The constant sexual socialization that occurs throughout human development informs human behavior and the conceptualization of sex and sexuality (Estep et al., 1977). Sexual socialization is how youth learn about human sexuality (Fletcher et al., 2015). Sexual socialization messages internalized by survivors may be distorted by societal messages that limit perceptions of agency and constrain one's ability to be an agentic social actor (Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). Beliefs about how rape transpires or what rises to the level of rape seem to be highly influential in making sense of an unwanted sexual encounter among sexual assault survivors (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Understanding the process of labeling an assault as rape is paramount to identifying possible interventions to redress the possible adverse outcomes in the health and well-being of survivors

of rape.

Health Outcomes of Unacknowledged Rape

Unacknowledged rape is associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Boyle & Clay-Warner, 2018; Wilson & Miller, 2020). This phenomenon is of particular interest to those who respond to sexual violence. Survivors who are raped but choose not to label their experience as rape makes them less likely to report their crime, utilize mental health services, access medical care, and disclose to trusted supporters (Wilson et al., 2018). Women who self-label as survivors of rape tend to focus on healing and move forward and engage in fewer self-blaming behaviors (Levy & Eckhaus, 2020). The evidence shows differential outcomes for those who acknowledge their rape and those who do not (LeMaire et al., 2016).

People who experience rape but do not acknowledge their experience as rape have been shown to experience higher levels of psychological distress (Wilson et al., 2017). Unacknowledged rape is linked to increased alcohol use (Littleton et al., 2017). One study saw that during the 6-month follow-up period, survivors who had not labeled their initial assault as rape were more likely to report being re-victimized (LeMaire et al., 2016). Findings investigating the effects of unacknowledged rape on well-being have produced conflicting conclusions. For example, Littleton and Henderson (2009) found that those who self-label their assault as rape reported more significant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms before controlling for other environmental factors. After controlling for environmental factors like characteristics of the assault, that finding did not maintain significance. Other studies have also found that those who acknowledge their experience as rape report higher levels of PTSD symptoms (Wilson & Scarpa, 2017), while other research findings show that unacknowledged rape may minimize detrimental psychological difficulties (Wilson et al., 2017). Conflicting results in studies investigating

unacknowledged and acknowledged rape indicate that there may be underlying factors that influence how survivors label their assault, and subsequently, how it impacts their recovery process (Wilson et al., 2017).

Sexual assault is a traumatic and immensely harmful experience that a significant amount of the American population will die from or survive through no fault of their own. Fortunately, service providers and supports can help mitigate some of the harmful outcomes associated with sexual assault. However, research consistently shows that formal support services are underutilized, and many survivors cannot take advantage of resources that may be available to them. We now understand that survivors who refrain from labeling their experiences as acts of sexual assault or rape are least likely to report their assault. Some survivors may see themselves as culpable in the assault and fear scrutiny and judgment from others (i.e., police, doctors, family, friends). With an increased understanding of unacknowledged rape and its correlations to resource-seeking decisions and health outcomes, additional explorations into the etiology of reluctance in labeling an assault or rape among survivors are essential to changing the current patterns of post-assault service delivery and utilization. Further, we can identify the belief systems that foster thoughts about deservingness related to service utilization and what leads survivors to anticipate poor treatment in post-assault interactions with service providers.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

Sexual violence often forces those who experience it to confront their perceptions of the world. Survivors' perceptions of their assault guides options and courses of action to manage the trauma following an obtrusive violation (McGuffey, 2013). Three theories will be included in a theoretical framework to provide further knowledge and contextual nuance to the manifestations of perceptual conclusions that sexual assault survivors arrive at following their assault. Sexual violence is a systemic problem that disproportionately impacts women (Mardorossian, 2002). Because of this truth, it is crucial to highlight sexual violence as not an irregularity but a part of social life in the United States. It is also imperative to frame sexual violence in a way that acknowledges the intersectionality of sexual violence and how it occurs in a hierarchy-based social system.

A synthesis of internalized oppression theory, social dominance theory, and critical race feminist theory provides a proper framing for this study that will support robust comprehension of the structures and cultural ideologies that create environments that foster the perpetuation of sexual violence. The synthesized framework also uncovers the influence of such environments on the internal processes that inform the appraisal of a sexual assault and accompanying expectations of societal judgments among survivors. First, I examined the role of internalized oppression in the meaning-making and resource-seeking processes that sexual assault survivors engage in post-assault. Second, I used critical race feminist and social dominance theories for contextual framing. Critical race feminist theory serves as the epistemological framework for this

study as it focuses on presenting holistic experiences of social issues, whereas social dominance theory is as an explanatory theory of how sexual violence is used as a tool for domination (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Wing, 2003).

Internalized Oppression

Historically, the United States has operated within a social system plagued by the legacy of colonization and oppression (Gale et al., 2020). American culture is heavily predicated on delineating socially constructed groups (i.e., race, gender, class). This delineation along social constructs creates an oppressive system that bestows some groups with excessive power and control. Oppression can be defined as "both a state and process, with the state of oppression being unequal group access to power and privilege, and the process of oppression being how inequality between groups is maintained (David & Derthick, 2014, p. 3). Within an oppressive system, marginalized groups are deemed less valuable to preserve resources and power at the top of the social hierarchy solidifying an oppressive state. The process to maintain an oppressive societal system requires several tactics, namely force and devaluation (Davis, 1981). While an oppressive system is maintained by force, which is the foundation for sexual violence, oppressed groups also uphold it through internalized thoughts and beliefs.

Manifestations of oppression operate at different societal levels: institutional, interpersonal, and internalized (David & Derthick, 2014). A large majority of oppression literature focuses on the manifestation at the institutional and interpersonal level, but the insidiousness of internalized oppression necessitates further investigation (Pyke, 2010). Internalized oppression is defined as "the devaluation or inferiorization of one's self and one's group" (David & Derthick, 2014). This internal process has been documented and discussed among social science theorists for numerous years. In their seminal works, Fanon (1963) and

Freire (2000) discuss the profound effects of colonization and oppression on the minds of subalterns who exist within an oppressive society. While oppression can vary among oppressed groups, the essential goal of oppression is to centralize power and control among the oppressors (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 2000). Both scholars identify internalized oppression as a necessary component in the intricate web of systems that maintain an oppressive society. Internalized oppression is an activated desire in the psyche of individuals in an attempt to reclaim a perceived sense of power that has been stripped from them by their oppressors (Duran & Duran, 1995; Fanon, 1963; Freire, 2000). Only the oppressors model the conceptualization of power and control; thus, the behaviors and beliefs that oppressed people internalize never culminate in liberation (Duran & Duran, 1995, Freire, 2000).

Detrimental Impact of Internalized Oppression

In reviewing the literature on internalized oppression, it becomes evident that the internalization of beliefs about one's group rooted in the ideologies of domination is not beneficial to oppressed people (Aosved & Long, 2020; David et al., 2019; Gale et al., 2020; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Internalized oppression has been associated with psychological distress (i.e., Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, suicide), which negatively impacts the mental health of oppressed groups (David & Derthick, 2014; Duran & Duran, 1995; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). Internalized oppression is an intra-psychic phenomenon that influences internal thoughts and beliefs, but harmful thoughts can directly affect other forms (e.g., emotional, physical) of well-being (David & Derthick, 2014; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Research shows that oppression can increase negative psychological reactions to a hostile environment, leading to a compromised quality of life (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). These adverse effects can become increasingly more substantial when factoring in

multiple oppressions.

Depending on the intersections of various social categories, individuals are exposed to different privileges and barriers. The intersection of multiple oppressed identities can compound the effects of each marginalized identity that one is assigned (Syzmanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Oppression exists in many forms; some of the most discussed forms of oppression include racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism (David & Derthick, 2014). Based on a specific identity, there can be differential ideologies associated with that identity that provides nuance to the experience of oppression of that particular social experience. However, the subservience of oppressed groups and the absolute status of the oppressors is inevitable in an oppressive society. However, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the nuances and variation among oppressed peoples.

Intersectional Identities and Internalized Oppression. Highlighting the ubiquity of oppression is essential, as is identifying the commonalities within experiences of internalized oppression. However, before synthesizing experiences of sexual violence, attention must be given to the impacts sexual violence has on different groups. Additionally, recognizing the common mechanisms and uses of internalized oppression as a tool for domination is essential. The critical analysis of how oppression exists at all levels (i.e., interpersonal, institutional, and internalized) and materializes depending on the social identities of reference is necessary (Carbado, 2013; Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). Further, it is important to understand how intersecting identities can reveal the multiplicities of oppression at each level of impact. Originating in Black Feminism and Critical Legal Studies, intersectionality, championed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, recognizes that Black women's experiences are often excluded from feminist, anti-racist, and political discourses (Carbado, 2013).

Intersectionality quickly became a lens or approach to many social issues, including the violence against women (Crenshaw, 1994). Intersectionality theory invites us to see that "all human beings live within the matrix of power inequities, but also that specific intersections of multiple oppressions affect each and every one of us" (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013, p. 316). Of course, how people perceive sexual assault survivors will be influenced by beliefs attached to other identities the survivor may have outside of being a woman (Crenshaw, 1994; Davis, 1981). For example, Black women who experience rape must also contend with other tropes or beliefs (e.g., "Jezebel"; "Sapphire") about Black womanhood and sexuality that only further justify their victimization in the eyes of others (Collins, 2000). To eventually eradicate sexual violence, it will be necessary to find common ground while affirming the unique experiences of survivors. For example, the term "Jezebel" is tied historically to slavery, where Black women were characterized as "wanton and libidinous" to justify the sexual exploitation of Black female slaves (Austin, 2003, p. 305).

Sexual assault research and subsequent interventions have historically been tailored to the experiences of White women who have been sexually victimized (Crenshaw, 1994; Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). The experiences of White sexual assault survivors have been used to generalize and theorize about the experiences of other sexual assault survivors of differing identities, particularly women of color (Crenshaw, 1994). Most scholarship on sexual violence is told from the perspective of White women (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). While it is important to recognize the gendered-based nature of sexual violence, it is also imperative that the experiences of other survivors outside of the White female paradigm be recognized and affirmed. Thus, how internalized oppression impacts sexual assault survivors of differing social identities remains pertinent to deeper understanding.

Internalized Oppression Among Sexual Assault Survivors. It can appear that sexual violence literature does not explicitly name internalized oppression as a significant influence in the experience of sexual assault among survivors. However, upon further investigation, internalized oppression surfaces frequently in sexual violence research and literature. Due to the gender-based nature of sexual violence, the most common occurrence of oppression highlighted in sexual violence literature is sexism. As a form of oppression, sexism manifests at the interpersonal, institutional, and internalized levels of social life (Bearman & Amrhein, 2014). It is "characterized by negative attitudes toward women, their social roles, and their traditional gender roles" (Aosved & Long, 2006). Sexist beliefs have been documented among men and women, and those who ascribe to the assumptions of sexism are more likely to victim blame, excuse the person who caused sexual harm, and minimize the severity of rape or sexual assault (Jeffery & Barata 2019; Wilson et al., 2017).

Internalized oppression also appears in sexual violence literature through investigation of rape myth acceptance among sexual assault survivors (Aosved & long, 2006; Elmore et al., 2020; LeMaire et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). Rape myths are a set of false attitudes and beliefs about rape, rape victims, and people who rape that foster victim-blaming while excusing the behavior of the person who raped someone, thus rendering the rape inconsequential (LeMaire et al., 2016; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Wilson et al., 2018). Sidanius and Pratto (1999) have also demonstrated that the degree to which women and men disagree on sexist beliefs is small compared to the degree they do agree (p. 111). Much of the literature on rape myths focus on cisgender folx, and findings show that while men tend to accept rape myths more than women, both men and women believe rape myths (LeMaire et al., 2016). Notably, myths about rape determine who can rape and be raped, ultimately making it more

difficult for survivors to be believed (Davis, 1981; Shaw et al., 2016).

Research overwhelmingly shows that adherence to rape myths impacts how survivors view their assaults and influences the treatment they receive upon disclosure (Elmore et al., 2020; LeMaire et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2018). The myths created about rape enable people who commit rape to discount survivor experiences because rape is situated within an objective reality (Freire, 1970). Additionally, people who rape are empowered by our social structures that perpetuate rape myths to the masses via the media and by system responses to sexual assault and rape. Sexual assault survivors live in such an environment and are subject to internalized rape myths that distort their lived realities. Therefore, survivors of sexual assault benefit from the disruption of rape myths and the revelation of truths about how society legitimizes male agency and power through their exertion of violence, specifically against feminized identities (Crenshaw, 1994).

Sexual scripts are used in sexual violence literature to discuss internalized oppression. Sexual scripts are socially constructed expectations and beliefs about "normal" sexual behavior (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017); they determine who initiates sex, what constitutes consent, and even where sex should take place (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Sexual scripts inherently ascribe expectations to sexual encounters based on patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Any deviation from what is deemed as "normal" sexual behavior is scrutinized and judged. Rape scripts outline what transpires during a typical rape; the symbiotic relationship between rape scripts and rape myths allows both concepts to flourish and function as apparatuses to justify or deny sexual violence (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). A frequently held rape script constrains what qualifies as "real rape" or what is referred to as a blitz rape script (Wilson et al., 2017). The blitz rape script characterizes "real rape" as a violent forced sexual

encounter enacted by a male stranger on a woman, usually involving a weapon or excessive force (Wilson et al., 2017). Most rapes violate the assumptions of this script as most rapes are committed by a known person and often do not involve weapons or physical violence resulting in bodily injury (Elmore et al., 2020; Rosetto & Tollison, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). Rape myths and sexual scripts are the products of systemic sexism endemic to societies worldwide, including the United States. In her work on creating new theories around rape, Mardossian (2002) describes rape scripts as problematic because they see rape as a "scripted interaction in which one person auditions for the role of the rapist and strives to maneuver another person into the role of victim." (p. 752). What rape myths and scripts demonstrate are the internalized sexist beliefs infused in America's cultural fabric (Bearman et al., 2009).

Socialization as a Conduit of Internalized Oppression

The internalization of rape myths and sexual scripts is essential to identifying internalized oppression within the experience of rape and sexual assaults. However, it is also important to know how those ideas and beliefs are transmitted. For example, socialization processes that instill messages about sexual experiences are influenced by the gender of the person receiving the message (Fletcher et al., 2015). In addition, socialization about sex and rape can change depending on cultural background (Fletcher et al., 2015, Kim, 2009). The sources of socialization can also color the types of messages transmitted.

Gendered Nature of Socialization on Sex. As sexual violence skews along gender lines, with feminized folx being the predominant receptacles of male rage and violence, internalizing oppressive messages related to sexual violence overwhelmingly serves male dominance (Davis, 1981; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Gender role expectations as it pertains to sexual expression often encourage women to be submissive, demure, and beholden to the desires of men. During

sexual encounters, women are seen as gatekeepers, granting access to men who are viewed as the initiators of all sexual interests (Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). Internalized ideas about sex and sexuality often burden women with the responsibility of communicating appropriate sexual behavior, as men are believed to be driven by instinctual desires that they cannot control. The myth of men being unable to control their desires (Vangeel et al., 2020), of course, leaves women in quite a precarious position during sex, especially when their demands or requests go unacknowledged or honored. Studies show that even when women show protestation, those cues are often ignored or misinterpreted by male sexual partners, especially since men's pleasure is prioritized (Jeffery & Barata, 2019). Sadly, because internalized sexist beliefs affect everyone, women who are sexually assaulted will often be evaluated by their choices before their assault, during the assault, and after the assault. Sexual behavior outside the heteronormative paradigm has historically been labeled as deviant, and sexual scripts and role expectations will differ among people who exist outside of this paradigm (Kelly, 2015). Moreover, individuals who identify as other than heterosexual or do not conform to the male/female gender constructs may be socialized in ways that do not prepare them for their sexual experiences (Katz-Wise et al., 2018).

Socialization of sexual identity and sexuality is a developmental process and occurs across the lifespan. The content of socialization messages may differ in childhood compared to messages received during adulthood (Estep et al., 1977). Familial actors are a primary source of socialization for children and adolescents during development (Raffaeli & Ontai, 2001). Parents play a significant role in socializing youth about sexual behavior, both implicitly and explicitly. American parents tend to focus on prevention when discussing sex with topics including contraception, reducing risk for pregnancy, and consequences of sexual intercourse like sexually

transmitted infections (Fletcher et al., 2015). Socialization content related to sexual education for girls typically focuses on encouraging girls to remain chaste and possible risks in starting sexual activity with young boys because they are driven by uncontrollable sexual desires (Fletcher et al., 2015; Jeffery & Barata, 2019). Many young women are not receiving any socialization on sexuality, even though youth are likely to appreciate candid and informational talks about sex with their parents (Pariera & Brody, 2018).

Cultural Considerations for Socialization on Sex. American culture surrounding sexual behavior is in contention with the cultural values of different ethnic groups within the United States (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Gender role and collective family expectations may determine the kind of socialization others receive within their environments. For example, Asian and Latine American women are socialized to uphold and preserve familial honor and reputation. Thus, the collective family experience often overshadows the individual experience (Kim, 2009; Sabina et al., 2012). In addition, religious beliefs can heavily influence socialization that encourages chastity; in a sexual assault, the loss of "virginity" could be a source of shame (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Asian American youth also tend to hold more conservative values, have lower STI infection rates, and report receiving less sexual education (Kim, 2009).

The historical treatment of women from Black and Native cultural groups in the United States may also impact how those women are socialized about sex. Sexual violence has long been a tool used to assert dominance over Black and Native groups in America (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981; Duran & Duran, 1995). Black and Native communities culturally transmit messages related to their histories through oral tradition. Black and Native families often use history as context to prepare their children for the Black or Native experience in the U.S. (Hughes et al., 2006; Yasui et al., 2015). The terror of rape wielded against Black and Native groups over

hundreds of years has a real-life translation to how Black and Native women may be socialized (Amnesty International, 2007; Collins, 2009, Crenshaw, 1994). The historical legacy of sexual violence against Black and Native women translates to a current reality; Black and Native women are at higher risk of rape and sexual assault when compared to White women (Duran & Duran, 1995). They are also less likely to see their cases progress through the criminal justice system (Collins, 2000). Native women are less likely to have their cases reach a conviction, and 86% of rapes committed against Native women are by non-Native men (Amnesty International, 2007). The remnants of colonization and slavery are embedded within the milieu of Black and Native life in the United States. That historical trauma continues to make Black and Native women targets of sexual harm today. Thus, socialization about issues of sexual violence that historically and presently impact Black and Native communities, particularly feminized folx, may be occurring within Black and Native communities. This researcher was not aware of the literature on the socialization of Black or Native youth around issues of historical and current trauma related to sexual violence at the time of writing this dissertation.

Sources of Socialization about Sexual Violence. Socialization messages can be emitted from a wide array of sources. Bleakley (2009) and colleagues found that peers, teachers, mothers, media, and medical providers were the primary sources of information about sexual activity. Interestingly, along with friends, cousins significantly influenced normative and behavioral beliefs about sexual encounters. Much of the information learned about sex is often gathered from informal sources like family and friends (Wyatt et al., 1988a, b). As a child develops, their sources of information expand as they navigate other environments like school and digital platforms (Estep et al., 1977; Vangeel et al., 2020).

While sources of socialization can show commonalities across groups, there is some

differentiation between the extent specific sources have on sexual beliefs and behaviors (Wyatt et al., 1988a, b). Wyatt and colleagues replicated a Kinsey study to investigate sexual socialization and sexual behavior among White and Black women. They found that White and Black women differed significantly between what sources of information influenced their sexual knowledge and behaviors (Wyatt et al., 1988a, b). Approximately 40% of White women in their sample reported receiving most of their information from their peers. In contrast, Black women receive information from more varied sources, including parents, peers, media, and school (Wyatt et al. 1988a, b). Multiple sources of information increase human sexuality aptitude and awareness about resources, specifically on college campuses (McMahon & Stapleton, 2018). Socialization plays an integral role in transmitting internalized oppressive messages to the masses. Beliefs about sexual assault rape are rooted in oppressive ideologies (e.g., sexism, heteronormativity, white supremacy, ableism) and are deeply engrained in American culture. Thus, many survivors and people they encounter are exposed to these untruths (Larson, 2018; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). However, it can be challenging to identify and confront those ideas and beliefs due to the often implicit and incessant messages about rape and sexual assault. Internalized oppression then becomes a silent mechanism that manifests among sexual assault survivors that can impact how they conceptualize their victimization and can influence subsequent resource-seeking decisions. It is the hope that this theoretical framework will beholden this research to remain vigilant and authentic in shepherding the stories of sexual assault survivors in this study. Internalized oppression as a theoretical construct will illuminate the underlying assumptions and ideas in many of the socialization messages received in society that foster oppressive environments for marginalized sexed bodies to be violated (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). This theory centers the power of socially constructed ideas in justifying violence

and maintaining an oppressive hierarchical structure.

Social Dominance Theory

Social dominance theory (SDT) focuses on the individual and structural forces contributing to group-based oppression (Sidanius et al., 2004). Social dominance theory seeks to explain the maintenance of inequality by accounting for how systems at different levels play a role in prejudice and discrimination (Pratto et al., 2006). Sidanius et al. (2004) postulate that every society has hierarchies created based on socially constructed criteria (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) used to maintain separation of groups, with one group obtaining most of the resources. The *dominant group* has access to all positive social values or resources like wealth, power, and agency in society. On the other hand, negative social values such as subpar housing, lack of education and political power are left for *subordinate groups* (Sidanius et al., 2004). As the dominant group has much of the power, they have mechanisms in place to maintain their dominance. SDT allows us to look at mechanisms that explain how group-based hierarchies are upheld in society. In this study, SDT will highlight the mechanisms used to subordinate women and gender-expansive folx and justify and normalize sexual violence. Next, the specific elements of SDT: legitimizing myths, terror, and behavioral asymmetry are discussed.

Legitimizing Myths

Group-based hierarchies utilize an array of tools to uphold the dominant group's status at the top of the social hierarchy. In SDT, legitimizing myths are wielded as tools for social control and defined as "attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies that provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value within the social system" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 45). SDT states that the power in manipulating beliefs and ideologies is not predicated on truth but on the degree to which those beliefs are internalized and

accepted by both the dominant and subordinate groups within a society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In alignment with assumptions about the power of internalized oppression posed by Fanon (1963) and Freire (2000), SDT also recognizes the danger of ideas, beliefs, and values internalized by both the dominant and subordinate groups. Shared beliefs between dominant and subordinate groups, even those that obscure the promise of liberation for subordinates, can be instrumental in hierarchy enhancement. Carter G. Woodson (1933) captures the use of legitimizing myths so profoundly in his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro* when he says, "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it." The concept of legitimizing myths is similar to other concepts used in sexual violence literature. Rape myths and antiquated beliefs about people who are raped, specifically women, show the power of legitimizing myths as a tool for social control. Legitimizing myths about sexual violence depict rape as a natural consequence for women who dress "provocatively" and act "promiscuously." The mere fact that victims of rape must prove that they did not contribute to their own victimization, lie, or even enjoy their rape shows how beliefs about rape can disenfranchise and relegate women to their place beneath men in society (Wing, 1990).

Terror

In 1980, a young girl was dragged into the rice fields of her village in India. She was raped and beaten repeatedly and left for dead, and four days later, she attempted to take her own life (Diwan, 1980). The year prior, a young girl was found by police in Indianapolis, and she was half-naked lying on a soiled mattress with the words 'I am a prostitute and proud of it' etched into her stomach with a needle (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). Both young women lived worlds apart but were still subjected to the same terror of sexual violence while simply trying to live

their lives. The terror of rape and sexual assault remains ever-present today. In 2016, Chanel Miller was sexually assaulted behind a dumpster at a college party. The case garnered much media attention, and the person who raped Chanel, Brock Turner, was only sentenced to six months in jail and ultimately served three months (de Leòn, 2019). During the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that erupted following the egregious murder of George Floyd, a young BLM activist named Oluwatoyin Salau was found dead after she reported being sexually assaulted by a man, only days before she went missing (Nieto del Rio, 2020). She was found dead with a 75-year-old woman, Victoria Sims. The notoriety of these very public incidents of sexual violence is only a minute portion of the sexual assaults and related deaths that do not receive any attention.

While rape manifests in variations of physical, emotional, and mental violence, some scholars maintain that intimate violence is a form of terror that produces individual and collective traumas (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). Social dominance theory identifies three types of terror used to maintain hierarchy-based societies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). First, official terror is "legally sanctioned and publicly displayed violence and the threat of violence perpetrated by the state's security forces and the justice system" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 206). An example of this would be the state-sanctioned violence by the Japanese government and their use of Filipino, Korean and Chinese women as sexual slaves during World War II and referred to them as "comfort women" (Wing & Merchan, 1993). This historical reference shows how describing rape in endearing terms masks the terror created by the Japanese government for nearly 200,000 women.

Semi-official terror is like official terror, except it lacks official and publicized support from the state (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Internal security forces like the police usually enforce

it. There have been instances where police officers solicit people for sex in exchange for leniency or exert their power and rape others at whimsy (Pearce, 2015). Sidanius and Pratto (1999) describe unofficial terror as violence or threat of violence committed by members of the dominant group against members of the subordinated group. This type of violence seemingly lacks support from the state but can be rather pervasive in its implementation. The gang-rape of Recy Taylor in 1944, on her way home from church by six White men, is a prime example of unofficial terror (Nguyen, 2020). Recy, a young mother, was raped and left blindfolded on the side of the road (Lopez, 2018). Recy Taylor tried to report her crime in pursuit of justice but was denied by the state of Alabama, even with the power of the NAACP and civil rights activist Rosa Parks advocating for justice on Mrs. Taylor's behalf (Nguyen, 2020). The judge refused to prosecute the men who raped her, even after one of them confessed (Lopez, 2018). Sidanius and Pratto (1999) believe that semi-official and unofficial terror are far less common than official terror and receive no implicit or explicit support from the state. The case of Recy Taylor indicates that those circumstances may not necessarily be true in the United States.

The rape of Recy Taylor demonstrates that while the state does not sanction unofficial terror, its effects can still be effective in maintaining systems of oppression (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Other Black women may have observed the response to the sexual violence enacted against Recy Taylor and determined that there would be no retribution or justice for them if they experienced rape. Recy Taylor, Chanel Miller, and Oluwatoyin Salau's real-life stories demonstrate the terror of sexual violence. One can be walking home, attending a party with your sister, exhibiting power and strength as an activist, and sexual terror is there waiting. SDT recognizes that rape as it occurs interpersonally in society is not official or semi-official terror. However, undermining the agential, social, and economic power of people who are targets of

sexual violence and the responses to that violence aligns with SDT's definition of other forms of terror (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015).

Behavioral Asymmetry

The last concept from social dominance theory relevant to this study is behavioral asymmetry. Other social theories outline how commonly held beliefs strengthen in-group favoritism among members of the same group, and collectively held beliefs about out-group members only further reinforce in-group favoritism (Sidanius et al., 2004). As defined in SDT, behavioral symmetry is the "coordinated differences in the behavioral repertoires of dominants and subordinates that produce better outcomes for dominants than for subordinates" (Pratto et al., 2006). The behavioral asymmetry hypothesis sees dominant and subordinate groups as active agents in "coordinated and collaborative activities" that maintain the group-based social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDT provides three types of behavioral symmetry: asymmetrical in-group bias, self-debilitation, and ideological asymmetry.

Asymmetrical in-group bias speaks to the idea that people tend to favor members within their own group. However, SDT shows that this premise holds but depends on the degree to which groups have power and control, particularly over legitimizing myths (Pratto et al., 2006). Asymmetrical in-group bias demonstrates that within the psyche of subordinates is the desire for positive regard and belonging and the reflection of their inferior social locale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Self-debilitation is another type of behavioral asymmetry that induces increased self-destructive behavior among the subordinate group compared to the dominant group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Self-debilitation becomes significant because it can inform behavioral scripts and schemas among subordinate groups that may cause behavior that damages overall well-being (Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Ideological symmetry adds to behavioral

asymmetry understanding. It recognizes that beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in group-based hierarchies facilitate dominance among the dominant group than subordinate groups (Pratto et al., 2006). Dominant groups create and reify legitimizing myths about themselves to support and enhance their status within the social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Behavioral asymmetry recognizes that subordinates are not passive agents in their own oppression but may unknowingly or knowingly collaborate with the dominant group to maintain the status quo (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Behavioral asymmetry highlights how sexual assault survivors, through non-disclosure of the crime committed against their body, ultimately work in favor of the dominant group. However, it also calls attention to the ways structures and systems are created to manipulate power and resources to allow dominant groups (i.e., wealthy white cisgender men) to assault racialized, classed, and gendered persons with impunity (Zalewski & Runyan, 2015). Suppose one is consistently exposed to the tools and mechanisms that mainly benefit the dominant group, like legitimizing myths. What recourse does an oppressed person have in making a truly autonomous choice? (Charles, 2010). Thus, the behavioral asymmetry hypothesis provides some framing and explanation on how internalized oppression results from a highly intentional and complex web of systems and ideas that maintain group-based hierarchies.

Critical Race Feminist Theory

Critical race feminism (CRF) is an extension of critical legal studies and critical race theory and was first coined as a term by Richard Delgado. He is a founding scholar of critical race theory (Wing, 2003). Taking inspiration from critical race theory and Black feminist teachings from other renowned scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Angela Harris, the development of critical race feminist theory was spawned (Few, 2007; Wing, 1990). Like critical race theory, CRF agrees that race is not an aberration but endemic to American society (Wing,

1999). CRF also accepts that race is a social construction that marginalizes people of color and rejects color-blind ideologies (Wing, 1999). Informed by Black feminist theory, CRF also contends that there is no universal experience and sees variations of identity and social location within groups as worthy of acknowledgment and affirmation (Collins, 2000; Few, 2007).

Its premier author, Dr. Adrien Wing, defines CRF as "an embryonic effort in legal academics that emerged at the end of the twentieth century to emphasize the legal concerns of a significant group of people——those who are both women and members of today' racial/ethnic minorities, as well as the disproportionately poor" (Wing, 2003). However, the CRF framework has been applied to the experiences of other disadvantaged groups with oppressed identities (Wing, 1999) and in various disciplines outside the law. Some of the key components of CRF are anti-essentialism, multiplicative identity, and spirit murder, all of which makes this theory unique, as the terms are not novel but are generally not discussed theoretically in unison.

Anti-Essentialism

Essentialism is the idea that there is not a singular voice that captures the experience of a particular group. For example, CRF rejects the common notion in early feminist theory that there is an authentic female voice because it presumes that being assigned female at birth automatically generalizes the female experience in the world (Wing, 2003). Anti-essentialism highlights ways in which previous feminist scholars absorbed the experiences of women of color into the White middle-upper class experience (Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003). Essentialism misrecognizes the indelible histories and experiences of women of color that do not necessarily reflect the experiences of White women. Further, it recognizes that among anti-racism scholarship, the experiences of Black men often get essentialized, which may overlook the gendered experiences of Black women (Wing, 2003). There is no one monolithic experience of a

racial group, nor is one experience based solely on gender identity (Harris, 2003). Operating from an essentialist perspective subsumes the experience of other marginalized voices and their unique experiences. Essentialism operates from a top-down approach where the most privileged voices are considered first, and those who are less privileged must hope that some of the spoils of resistance trickle down (Crenshaw, 2003).

Anti-essentialism rejects the notion of one monolithic experience, particularly among women. Anti-essentialism demands that we consider the intersectional identities and varied experiences of women. This perspective necessitates the uplifting of voices that have been pushed to the margins and provides a pathway to remedies for gendered oppression that includes the other identities that will undoubtedly affect how sexual violence impacts survivors (Crenshaw, 2003). Anti-essentialism in sexual violence research would require that we move away from centering the voice of cisgender White women and look to other voices with various racial, gender, and differently-abled identities to share their stories. In CRF, the concept of multiplicative identities lends itself to additional considerations of intersectionality.

Multiplicative Identities

Several scholars in legal studies, such as Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judy Scales-Trent, and Angela Harris, have discussed multiple levels of consciousness and oppression based on the intersections of several identities that women carry with them every day (Wing, 1990). The fragmentation of personhood alluded to in the discussion of anti-essentialism puts women of color in perilous positions, as the denial of certain aspects of the struggles related to a part of one's identity can ultimately eclipse the empowerment that feminism and anti-racism elevate (Crenshaw, 1994). Within CRF, the compounding of identity is referred to as the multiplier effect. The multiplier effect states that a person is indivisible with multiple identities

that require multiple levels of consciousness (Wing, 1990). It is critical to understand because attempting to divide a person's identities into fragments can make it challenging to identify and implement strategies that a person with multiple oppressed identities may need. For example, rape survivors do not have a monolithic experience, and sexual violence depending on a survivor's identities will be very distinctive from other survivors (Collins, 2000). Therefore, CRF requires that we see identities as multiplicative, not additive. For example, a cisgender female sexual assault survivor of Latine descent from a low-income household could not be assessed by their identities separately. A holistic approach that considers the multiplicities of their combined identities must be employed to effectively support that survivor (Crenshaw, 1994; Wing, 2003).

Spirit Murder

Finally, the concept of spirit murder is discussed in CRF to document the continuous implicit and explicit spiritual injuries that oppressed individuals are exposed to in their daily life (Wing, 1990). Spirit-murder in CRF consists of the "cumulative effect of which is the slow death of the psyche, the soul and the persona" (Wing, 1990). Other similar concepts have been discussed in racism literature, for example, the "weathering hypothesis," which states that Black folx experience health deterioration due to the stressors associated with socio-political marginalization (Geronimus & Thompson, 2004). CRF posits that an accumulation of "spirit injuries" throughout a life can have detrimental and perhaps fatal consequences for those who endure a barrage of these types of injuries, which is why the term spirit murder is used (Wing & Merchant, 1993). While this researcher does not adhere to notions that a spirit can be murdered but can be egregiously violated, there is an intense recognition that psychic and spirit injuries can translate to health complications and even death. The act of rape conjures visceral feelings and

connotations that survivors can find it hard to identify with that experience. The accumulation of "spirit injuries" before, during, or after a rape can be just as devastating as the rape itself. This kind of phenomenon is also discussed adjacently in sexual violence literature as secondary victimization. As Wing notes, what makes spirit murder so elusive is that these injuries cannot always be documented and often manifest over time, making it difficult to ascertain causality if such "cuts" result in death (Wing & Merchant, 1993).

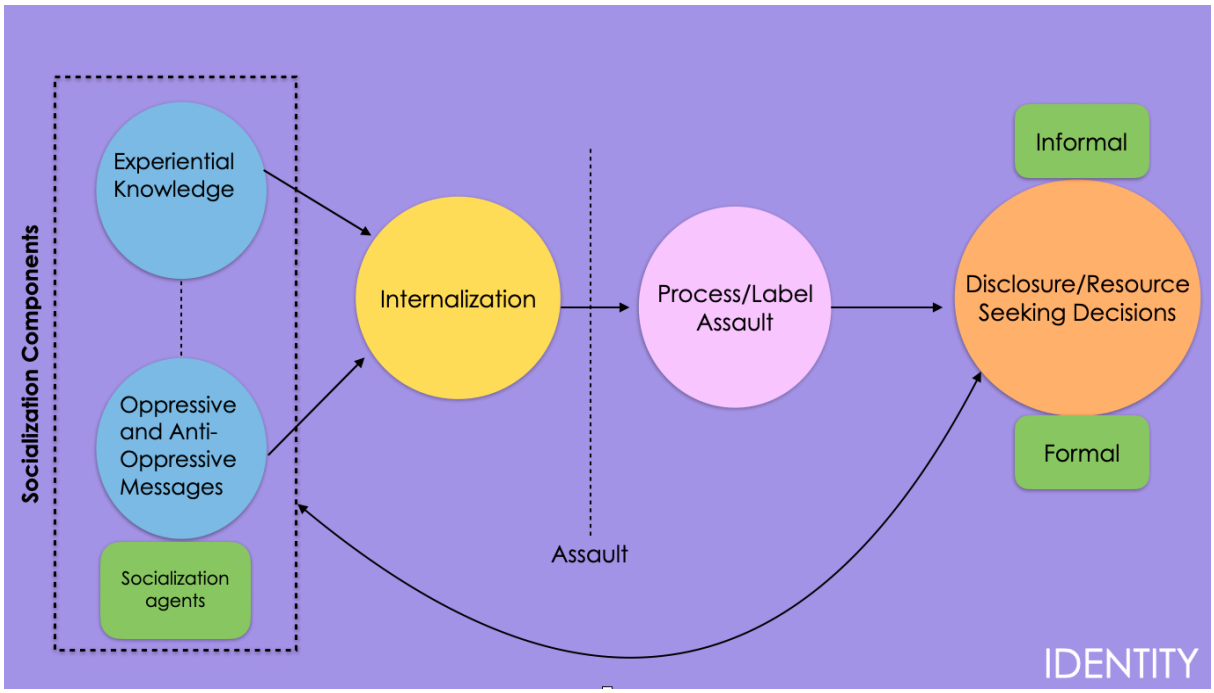
Critical race feminism and social dominance theory provide a frame for discussing how internalized oppression creates quagmires for survivors as they try to make sense of their experiences with sexual assault. The synthesis of these three theories provided the concepts and language to explore my research aims. Utilizing the stories of sexual assault survivors, I investigated how internalized oppression may influence survivors as they process their assault and post-assault resource-seeking decisions. While also acknowledging and understanding how intersectional identities and position in a group-based hierarchical system sways post-assault decision making.

Conceptual Framework

Integration of critical race feminist, social dominance, and internalized oppression theories is presented in this conceptual framework to allow for the examination of the possible influence of internalized oppression on survivors' understanding of their assault and subsequent resource-seeking decisions. A temporality to processes highlighted in this model explains possible sequential and influential factors in how survivors come to label their assault and the effect of their chosen label on resource-seeking decisions. First, the model shows the processes and factors that occur before an experience of sexual assault and provides the survivor with information to inform decisions made post-assault.

Figure 1

Internalized Oppression and Resource-Seeking Processes Conceptual Framework



Then, the model identifies two key processes that occur post-assault that each survivor of sexual assault will experience: making sense of what has happened to them and deciding what to do after arriving at their conclusions. This is a fluid and regenerative process of events in which new experiences and understandings influence possible sexual re-victimization that may occur throughout someone's lifetime. The key elements of this framework are socialization components (experiential knowledge and oppressive/anti-oppressive messages), internalization, labeling of the assault, with all finally culminating in a resource-seeking decision, with everything attenuated by aspects of intersecting identities. The theoretical underpinnings of this study inform each element in this conceptual framework and allow us to follow a sequence of events that could guide others in better supporting survivors throughout their post-assault processes.

Socialization Components

It is a well-regarded truth that socialization received in early childhood and adolescence directly influences adult behavior and beliefs (Charles, 2010; Estep et al., 1977). Socialization is an undeniable part of social life. Some would argue that socialization is coercive in that it influences others to act according to the cultural values, norms, and ideologies from the socialization source (Charles, 2010). However, while coercive, socialization can be a protective factor that can help prepare one for the realities of the social world (McLean & Syed, 2016). The socialization components of interest in this study are the oppressive and anti-oppressive messages that may be transmitted to people prior to a sexual assault occurring. Additionally, the sources or socialization agents of those messages are identified in the model. Another component of interest in the socialization process is the experiential knowledge of the survivor that acts as a direct source of information. In this model, these two elements present as bi-directional as they are presumed to interact with each other.

Oppressive and Anti-Oppressive Messages

The cultural messages received by socialization agents are highly effective and influential in driving the beliefs and thoughts that allow others to interpret their social surroundings and experiences (Charles, 2010; Pariera & Brody, 2018). As previously discussed, American society is situated within a group-based hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, multiple systems of oppression sustain and uphold the dominance of certain groups over others. Oppressive messages are defined as any transmission of knowledge that ultimately justifies the hierarchical structure. These messages can include beliefs about men's rights to women's bodies, that some bodies are more valuable than others, and that devalued bodies do not suffer sexual violence. Anti-Oppressive messages directly contend with the knowledge that serves as mechanisms of oppression. Anti-Oppressive messages will be rooted in anti-essentialism and disrupt the process

of internalization of oppressive myths and ideology. For example, anti-oppressive messages would include those that grant agency and ownership to women over their bodies and would value and affirm that all bodies deserve to exist in a world void of sexual violence.

> **Oppressive Message Example:** "She was wearing a short skirt; what did she expect he would do?
>
> **Anti-Oppressive Message Example:** "It never matters what someone is wearing. No one deserves to be raped."

The specific socialization messages that are highly influential in labeling a sexual assault and subsequent resource-seeking decisions are the cultural messages about sexuality and sex roles. The oppressive and anti-oppressive messages are reminiscent of legitimizing myths in SDT that attenuate or enhance the hierarchy structure. Sexual socialization is the process where people receive knowledge and values about sex and sexuality (Bleakley et al., 2009). Sexual socialization can include sexual scripts that delineate sexual roles that are often dependent on gender or sex and can shape attitudes and beliefs about sex and role expectations in sexual encounters (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017). While sexual socialization is natural, and some would say, a necessary part of human development, some of the messages about sex and gender role expectations are oppressive in nature and can limit agency (Charles; 2010; Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). At the time of this study, and even presently, there has been a growing movement and noticeable change in culture around rape and sexual assault. With increased attention highlighting the pervasiveness of sexual assault via the #MeToo movement (Huemmer et al., 2019) and other anti-rape organizing. Recently, there has been an increase in access to alternative messages related to sexual violence. Due to the changing socio-political landscape, I expect that there will be anti-oppressive messages among survivors that will challenge some of the oppressive messages on sex and gender roles.

Socialization Agents. Additionally, it is essential to identify the sources of these messages as they can become significant when developing interventions that disrupt the perpetuation of oppressive socialization. Parents are a primary source of socialization for young people, with mothers being one of the principal socialization agents for their daughters, particularly on sex and sex roles (Townsend, 2008). Peers are also vital sources of socialization and can transmit sexist messages to other peers, influencing the internalization of sexism in peer-to-peer interactions (Bearman et al., 2009). The infusion of sexual imagery and messaging in the media has also been shown to impact beliefs about sex (Bleakley et al., 2009). As the media functions as an amplifier for the biases and misinformation in society, this becomes a major socialization source.

Experiential Knowledge

Experiential knowledge is made distinctive in this model because it can be a source of reinforcement. Information received via sources of socialization can then be compared to the actual experiences that transpire. For example, if a person believes that "sexy" clothes invite sexual violence, and subsequently that person is then sexually assaulted, then it can reinforce that belief about clothing being a cause of a sexual violation. However, if one dresses demurely and one is still sexually assaulted, that can create a cognitive dissonance that can be an opportunity to shift a previously held belief. Our experiences and our beliefs cannot be disentangled and operate synonymously, so the model reflects this.

Internalization

The exposure to messages (oppressive and anti-oppressive) coupled with actual experiences are then internalized by the survivor. This model operates on the assumption that the survivor internalizes the messages and experiences. The process of internalization is viewed as

taking the information received and used for evaluation of behavior and actions observed or enacted in the social world (Tappan, 2006). This model views survivors as agential beings and recognizes extenuating limitations on agency in systemically oppressive environments (Charles, 2010; Rosetto & Tollision, 2017). However, a CRF perspective allows for the acknowledgment of that limitation but recognizes that those limitations can be challenged and ultimately eradicated (Crenshaw, 1994; Wing, 2003).

Based on these assumptions, survivors may or may not consciously evaluate the information they internalize as oppressive or anti-oppressive. Nonetheless, the internalized messages will be essential to helping the survivor in processing and labeling their assault. Moreover, the internalization process is noteworthy as the messages emanating from various sources within oppressive structures can "constrain and confine interpretive activities where the subject of interpretation" can be swayed by the factual or biased information (Mclean & Syed, 2016, p. 336). Thus, the intersubjectivity of the internalization process becomes the foundation that I believe can influence what the survivor thinks about their experience with sexual violence and what they call that experience.

Labeling of Assault

The process that survivors engage in to make sense of their experience with sexual violence is the catalyst in the model. Many of the post-assault decisions made by survivors precipitate from the survivor's meaning of their assault (LeMaire, 2016). Survivors are more likely to understand their assault as something other than rape or sexual assault (Wilson & Miller, 2020) and this process precludes the ability to label an experience as rape or sexual assault. This model posits that the survivor takes the messages received from others, internalizes them as truth or untruth, which they then use to determine if what happened to them was sexual

assault or not.

Understanding internalized oppression, and SDT concepts of behavioral asymmetry (ideological symmetry and self-debilitation) can offer insight into why a survivor can minimize or excuse the experience of rape or sexual assault. If influenced by the oppressive messages, the survivor may internalize oppressive ideologies that place them at fault or relinquish the person who commits sexual harm from any blame, thus choosing not to acknowledge their experience as rape or sexual assault. Self-debilitation assumes that this can negatively impact the well-being of the group or person. However, we know that unacknowledged rape or sexual assault does not necessarily produce adverse outcomes for well-being (Wilson & Scarpa, 2017). Consequentially though, that choice may ultimately serve to uphold the dominance of groups that benefit from sexual violence. Therefore, it becomes vital for those who label their assault as rape or sexual assault to identify what helped them arrive at that decision and possible messages and experiences that influenced it. More specifically, what messages did they refute during the internalization process that empowered them to conclude that they were raped or sexually assaulted?

Resource-seeking Decisions

While unacknowledged rape is prevalent among sexual assault survivors and makes a survivor less likely to reach out for help (Wilson et al., 2017), some survivors understand that what they experienced was sexual assault. The process of labeling or meaning-making of a sexual assault and subsequent resource-seeking decisions is not predicated on labeling an experience as a rape or non-rape. It also involves predictions of how one will be treated and perceived by both informal and formal supports. Studies show that survivors believe they will be subjected to scrutiny or judgment when seeking support from others, particularly formal supports

(Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Sabina et al., 2012; Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). Those beliefs are not necessarily unfounded as instances of secondary victimization are quite common in post-assault resource-seeking experiences (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Maier, 2008). Additionally, survivors who experience sexual assault as minors (e.g., every person in this sample) may be influenced or forced by adults in their lives to make certain decisions regarding resources following their assault (Campbell et al., 2015)

This model incorporates prior socialization and internalized beliefs that ultimately could impact what survivors think about their assault but also accounts for the judgments of others. The inclusion of these different factors provides clarity in trying to understand how survivors come to their decisions not only about labeling their experience with sexual assault but also whether to seek out post-assault resources or not. Using this conceptual framework, I hope to understand the extent of the influence of internalized oppression on survivor understandings of sexual assault and how those understandings contribute to their resource-seeking decisions.

As depicted in the conceptual framework, a feedback loop captures the recursive nature of this proposed framework. Meaning, if a survivor decides to engage with service providers and has a pleasant experience, it could align with or challenge their previously held beliefs about treatment post-assault. If the survivor has a negative experience, it could similarly cause a shift in perceptions. Subsequently, if a survivor chooses not to access services, that decision could essentially maintain their previous perceptions and beliefs about post-assault experiences. The decision-making process and accompanying interaction with formal and informal supports are additions to their socialization components. In interactions with formal and informal supports, there will be additional experiences and messages that the survivor will then incorporate and use in future interpretative processes should another assault occur.

Identity

CRF demands that the solutions to any problem be inclusive of the multiplicative identities of those who experience the problem (Wing, 2003). Orienting this model in the CRF perspective requires that the proposed model consider the intersectional identities of each survivor, as each survivor will have a unique experience of the world, and we cannot synthesize the experiences of survivors and create standardized responses to sexual violence. There are diverse cultural, physical, and mental expressions of identity among survivors that must be incorporated into understanding the manifestations of sexual violence and post-assault resource-seeking.

Bryant-Davis and colleagues (2009) found that among Black, Asian, Latine, and Native American female sexual assault survivors, there were considerable variations in the incidences of sexual assault between groups. In addition, following the assault, there were significant cultural differences in resource-seeking. Other scholars have also discussed the differences in the experience of sexual assault and post-assault resource-seeking based on racial identity, particularly the influences of family and cultural dynamics (Kim, 2009; Sabina et al., 2012; Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). Research also may suggest that survivors of color utilize racial appraisals to understand their experiences of sexual assault. More explicitly, the racial appraisal perspective argues that individuals use their understandings of their racialized identities in society to interpret experiences of an event, in this case, sexual violence (McGuffey, 2013). Further, scholars also call us to recognize how the history of sexual violence committed against the bodies of Black and Native women has real-life impacts on system responses and individual understandings of sexual violence (Crenshaw, 1994; Collins, 2000; Davis, 1980; Deer, 2017).

The majority of sexual violence literature and responses are generally fixated on the

experiences of cis-heteronormative White women. The essentialism of sexual violence scholarship and responses, coupled with the narratives of who can be raped, or more aptly, who society shows us matters when raped, excludes a lot of survivors. Research shows that responses to the needs of survivors from the LGBTQ community have consistently been lacking (Du Mont et al., 2019; Szymanksi & Henrichs-Beck, 2014). Internalized heterosexism and other oppressions have been shown to influence self-esteem and psychological distress levels among Black LGBTQ persons (Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009).

Critical disability scholars have also examined how those with physical and mental disabilities have been left out of the discussion on sexual violence, as disabled bodies have historically been characterized as undesirable, thus not vulnerable to sexual violence (Balderston, 2013; Hughes et al., 2020). However, survivors with disabilities are more likely to be assaulted and face ridicule or apathy when seeking post-assault care (McGilloway et al., 2020). Some scholars have drawn correlations between how having a disability makes survivors less likely to be believed and how survivors who speak out are labeled "crazy" or inferred to be mentally ill to limit their credibility (Larson, 2018).

Additional layers of identity that have been a point of contention in sexual violence literature is the movement from the "victim" label to the "survivor" label following an experience of sexual assault. Some argue that labeling people who experience sexual assault as survivors warrant compulsory survivorship or requires people to embrace an identity-driven by societal values of overcoming tragedy and make the experience of sexual assault more palatable to the masses (Larson, 2018). Conversely, the victim identity focuses on the pain of sexual violation and is rooted in the condemnation of the person's actions who caused the sexual harm (Larson, 2018). CRF allows me to consider the different aspects of multiple identities, and SDT

highlights the importance of group-identity membership, making it more likely to experience sexual violence. In addition, because survivors hold several identities at once, identity salience across varying experiences and interactions will determine how they process their experiences and how they choose to respond (Stryker, 2008). Therefore, identity cannot be disregarded and remains a central thread in the approach to this study.

Research Questions

The following, informed by the literature and theoretical underpinnings outlined previously, are driving this inquiry into survivor experiences and stories:

1. Does internalized oppression affect how survivors perceive their assault?
2. How does internalized oppression impact the process of disclosure and resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors?
3. How do the effects of internalized oppression on perceptions of a sexual assault, disclosure, and subsequent resource-seeking decisions vary across the intersectional identities of sexual assault survivors?

Chapter 4. Methods

Positionality

Qualitative research acknowledges the researcher as a tool and a conduit of the knowledge shared in the interaction between researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before approaching a social phenomenon to study and understand, I believe someone has to reflect and engage in reflective inquiry about one's relationship to the topic of interest. Sexual violence is a topic of interest that is part of my reality as a cisgender Black and Mexican woman. I chose the theories in my theoretical framework because they are relevant frames for this study and because they require that I acknowledge my identities and social locations in the world. As a woman with varying experiences and knowledge of sexual violence, I must know how I will show up in this work. It is imperative that I also stay vigilant in knowing that I am a person who lives in a world where I am subject to oppression, but that does not negate the fact that I can also be in close proximity to privilege. As a Black and Latine researcher who is a social change agent, I also operate within institutions that continue to uphold white supremacist, capitalistic, and oppressive structures. There is some complicity in that reality.

My worldviews informed by my intersectional identities will also influence how I approach this work and will most certainly impact how I interpret the stories included in this study. However, I will make an exceptional effort to honor the authenticity of the survivor stories and remain true to what is being offered by survivors. Critical race feminism will require that I remain cognizant that sexual violence is a common phenomenon among people. It also impacts people differently across social categories and social circumstances. That means that while I may highlight certain aspects of identity during analysis, I will remain dedicated to recognizing the holistic identities of the survivors in this study. As a cisgender woman focusing on sexual

assault, my understanding of the experiences of gender-expansive folx is limited. However, the survivors who identified as non-binary or Trans believed their stories were being silenced or sidelined. To honor those survivors, I would like to continue to uplift their stories and use this dissertation to uplift their experiences and the things they called forth in their interviews. As a researcher who operates from an anti-oppressive and anti-racist orientation, I will always speak to the systemic and interpersonal effects of being forced to live in a society riddled with oppressive and racist ideologies and practices. With my epistemological leanings, I hope to offer new insight into the phenomena of sexual violence, with the ultimate intent being the liberation of mind, body, and spirit.

Research Design

This study was a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected over a nearly two-year period between the years 2018-2019 (Shaw et al., in prep.). The type of qualitative data that served as the primary source of analysis were 22 semi-structured qualitative interviews with sexual assault survivors. The primary research study utilized a partially mixed concurrent equal status mixed-method design, which is a mixed-methods design where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously. The purpose of the primary study was to evaluate the impact of the mandated reporting response on adolescent sexual assault survivors in one jurisdiction in a Northeastern state. Qualitative data collected from this study focused on the expectations and experiences specific to accessing post-assault services following a sexual assault(s) occurring during adolescence.

As a member of the original study research team, I had continual access to the principal investigator of the original study and consulted with her when needed. Outside of consultation, I had access to all study materials created for the original study. Primary research members were

sufficiently trained and spent several months in preparation before the implementation of the study; I was a participant in all aspects of training to conduct the original study. As the primary qualitative data collector who completed 19 of the 22 interviews in the original study, I can attest to the completeness of the data set, as I also reviewed transcripts and software study instruments. A significant concern with any secondary qualitative analysis is data fit; however, being present for the interviews and reading the transcripts during transcription provides confidence that there is data to fit the new proposed research questions. Being present for nearly every aspect of this study design and implementation equips me to determine that this secondary qualitative data set was primed for this analysis.

This secondary data analysis includes the analysis of qualitative interviews collected for the primary study to investigate the role of internalized oppression in the experiences of sexual assault survivors in making sense of their assault. One limitation to this secondary data analysis is that I could not ask participants directly about their conceptions or understandings about internalized oppression. However, I believe this was a potential strength in the study, as some internalized beliefs arose spontaneously in the data without provocation from the interviewer. The internalized beliefs shared in the interview from the survivor that are rooted in oppressive ideologies (i.e., sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) were noted as evidence of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression was observed through the adherence to rape myths, rape culture, and sexual scripts. Outside of gendered oppression, I highlighted the spontaneous discussion of dominant narratives about race, class, and other marginalized social categories relevant to participants' experiences with sexual violence.

Secondary data analysis of qualitative data has many benefits, despite its controversial use. However, some scientists and data archivists have reservations about the fit of the data to

new research questions. Additional concerns are that the new researcher may not be a primary data collector, and participants cannot verify results (Heaton, 2008). This analysis was conducted to generate new knowledge (Hinds et al., 1997) about internalized oppression and its identified under-researched influences that determined resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors. This researcher deems it necessary to honor the contributions gifted by the participants in this study by uplifting their voices and sharing the wealth of information that extended beyond the original research questions.

Most of the secondary data analyses performed using archived qualitative data are done by researchers who collected data for the primary study (Heaton, 2008; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). The informal sharing and use of qualitative data allow the analyst for the secondary study to have more in-depth knowledge of the data collected, familiarity with the participants, and understanding of the primary research process initiated to collect the primary data (Heaton, 2008). One of the essential steps in conducting secondary data analysis of qualitative data is to ensure that the quality of the data is rigorous and appropriate for secondary analysis (Heaton, 2008). Hinds and colleagues offer an assessment tool with criteria that identifies whether a qualitative data set makes a secondary analysis feasible. In assessing the quality of data in secondary analysis, some listed criteria to consider are: the access to study data and team members for consultation, degree of training members had to conduct the study, completeness of the data set, ability to assess the quality of interviewing and sampling plan, fit of research questions to the data, and overall impression of feasibility (Hinds et al., 1997). As a member of the research team for the primary study, conducting a secondary analysis becomes much easier as I have adequate knowledge about all the steps taken to acquire the primary source of data.

Sample

The final sample for this study included 22 interviews with sexual assault survivors who provided reflections on their salient assaults that occurred predominantly during their adolescent development—much of the sample identified as cisgender female, with 16 participants self-identifying with this gender identity. A significant portion of the sample (n= 5) identified as gender-expansive or with a gender identity outside of the male/female paradigm. There was only one self-identified cisgender male in the sample. The participants in the study self-identified as White (n=15), Black (n=5), Latine (n=1), and Asian (n=1). Participants ranged in between 15 and 55 years of age, with the average age being 26 years old.

Table 1

Descriptive Information for Study Participants (N=22)

Descriptor	**Categories**	**Number of Participants**
Age Range	15-55 years old (*M*=26 years)	
Gender Expression	Female	16
	Male	1
	Gender-Expansive	5
Racial Identity	Black	5
	Latine	1
	White	15
	Asian	1
Educational Attainment	No High School	4
	High School	1
	Diploma/GED	7
	Some College	1
	Associate Degree	6
	Bachelor's Degree	3
	Post-Secondary Degree	
Familiarity with Person who Sexually Harmed	Known	21
	Unknown	1

The educational attainment level in this sample was fairly high. The participants in this sample had no high school diploma (n=4), high school diploma/GED (n=1), some college (n=7),

associate degree (n=1), bachelor's degree (n=6), post-secondary degree (n=3). It is important to note that some participants were minors, so their age influenced their educational attainment. Nearly all the participants were raped or assaulted by someone they knew to some extent (n=21). Only one participant indicated that they did not know the persons who sexually assaulted them.

Human Subjects Procedures

This section highlights the procedural steps taken during the primary study. The Institutional Review Board at Boston College reviewed the primary study and approved it for implementation. The inclusion criteria for the original study required that the participant must have experienced sexual assault between the ages of 12-17 years of age, was assaulted during their adolescence in a specific Northeast State, and be English speaking. The original study utilized two recruitment strategies that combined both prospective and retrospective recruitment of potential participants. The first strategy prospectively recruited potential participants from a metropolitan hospital in the Northeast. Patients treated at the hospital following a sexual assault and who met the study inclusion criteria were presented with a one-page document describing the study. In addition, each patient had the opportunity to indicate if they agreed to a researcher contacting them to share more information about the study at a later time. The second strategy recruited participants retrospectively through several partnerships, including a rape crisis center, mental health organizations, and sexual education organizations. Staff at these organizations introduced the study to their clientele who they felt would meet the inclusion criteria. In addition, research team members posted flyers in the buildings of these facilities, and community partners shared the flyer on the organization's social media platforms; participants were also able to share flyers with their networks if they chose to.

Data Collection for Primary Study

The in-depth interviews were held in a rape crisis center to offer any participants additional supports during or following the completion of the interview if they deemed it necessary. All participants were consented/assented at the time of the interview. Parental consent, required for all minor participants, was obtained either at the time of the interview or before the interview by phone. The interview was a semi-structured and lasted approximately 2 hours, and each participant received a $40 cash stipend for their time. With the participant's consent, each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol focused on five areas of interest 1) what happened in the assault; 2) post-assault disclosure and pathways to post-assault medical care; 3) expectations during the post-assault resource-seeking process, especially as it relates to reporting the assault; 4) their experiences with post-assault system personnel such as hospital staff, police, and rape crisis center staff with attention given to the alignment of expectations and actual experiences with identified post-assault system personnel; and finally 5) what was it like to participate in the research interview, recommendations for future research interviews, and recommendations for system personnel.

Sample questions from the interview protocol included: *In as little or as much detail can you begin by telling me about what happened when you were assaulted as a teen? Who was the first person to find out what happened? Thinking back to your experiences, what do you think is important for people to know when they are responding to teen sexual assault survivors?* There were no direct questions about internalized oppression or related topics about the marginalization of specific identities. Any indication of internalized oppression in the participants' narratives in this study spontaneously arose in the participant's re-telling of their experiences.

Data Analysis Plan

Guiding Analytical Methodology

The analytic process of this study was guided by a symbolic interactionism approach to qualitative methodology. Symbolic interactionism operates under these tenets, 1) people strive and act towards what represents meaning for them, 2) meaning is derived from social interaction, and 3) finally, meaning is constructed and managed through the interpretive process (Handberg et al., 2015). Symbolic interactionism is both a theory and method and understands individuals as agentic beings that are active participants in creating their social world. Society is but a collective imagination of meaningful interactions between individuals and their surroundings (Carter & Alvarado, 2018). While symbolic interactionism is commonly used to understand micro-level phenomena (Carter & Alvarado, 2018), scholars recognize that it is obligatory to understand individual processes within the contexts of social structures. This includes the aspects of human experience filtered through socially constructed categories like race and gender (Denzin, 2004). Thus, symbolic interactionism is a complementary theory and methodology to examine the meaning that survivors make of their sexual assault; while also accounting for the meanings and interpretations of socially constructed categories (i.e., race, gender, etc.) and symbols (i.e., rape) that may influence their meaning-making processes.

Qualitative Rigor

As rigor in qualitative research is a highly debated issue and even more so when conducting secondary analysis of qualitative data, I employed additional strategies to add to the rigor and accuracy of this analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) provide features indicative of a rigorous qualitative study. Some of those features include: framing the study using fundamental characteristics of a qualitative study like evolving design and presentation of multiple realities, conducting an ethical study, incorporating rigorous data collection methods, using a qualitative approach in the research design, starting from a single focus or concept of exploration, as well as

contemplating one's positionality (pp. 49-50). To align with rigorous qualitative research, as posed by Creswell and Poth, I committed to doing the following listed below.

This study is a secondary analysis; however, I infused this data analysis with some aspects from the qualitative framework of symbolic interactionism. This methodology inherently requires recognition of multiple realities and focus on participant experiences. As an acting research team member on the original study, I can speak to the ethical considerations of the researchers who collected the data. The honoring and amplification of survivor stories are of paramount importance. Adherence to rigorous strategies was employed to ensure a thorough secondary analysis process and align with the rigorous study design of the primary study. Data triangulation was accomplished as I reviewed and analyzed transcripts, memos, and jottings that I created while interviewing the participants. I also kept an analytic journal consisting of my memos to track my analytic process and document how I arrived at my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inter-rater reliability is a standard method for adding "rigor" to a study. However, due to the increasing criticism on measuring validity and reliability in qualitative research, inter-rater reliability will not be pursued (Sandelowski, 1993). However, I was fortunate to have the head investigator of the primary study as a co-chair for this study. She and my other co-chair will have access to my memos to inform their feedback and consultations. I also met consistently with the head investigator of the primary study to ensure that analysis was reflective of the data. She reviewed and discussed codes and themes drawn from the data with me and assisted in operationalizing and applying identified codes and categories.

Analytic Plan

This study utilized Hennie Boeije's (2002) constant comparative method (CCM) to analyze qualitative interviews. CCM is a qualitative analytical technique used for code and category

development (Miles et al., 2018; Tie et al., 2019). Boeije's framework provides a step-by-step process that provides guidance in analyzing qualitative interviews using the CCM method. The model consists of a five-step process; however, if there are lesser data resources, that will necessitate a modification of the number of steps employed. The available data dictate that only three steps of the analysis be used (Boejie, 2002). The present study will utilize a modified version of Boeije's CCM analytical model that consists of a three-step process: comparison within a single interview, comparison between interviews within the same group, and comparisons between interviews from different groups. The proposed conceptual model will serve as a guide that will allow me to code for oppressive messages, anti-oppressive messages, and manifestations of internalized oppression.

Comparison within a single interview. I used an open coding process to develop categories that created an initial understanding to inform a provisional coding tree. Next, I compared fragments of the interview to find out what they have in common, how they differ, and in what context the fragments or remarks appear. In this stage, the intention was to ensure that passages in the data are labeled most appropriately and allow for more accurate development of categories. In using the CCM within a single interview, it was important to try and understand the core message conveyed by the survivor, but still, be vigilant and identify parts in the story where there are inconsistencies and where those inconsistencies emerge. As I engaged in data fragmentation and attempted to identify categories, I compared fragments to see where commonalities lie and ensured each fragment or code belonged in developed categories. After this initial analysis of the first interview was completed, I summarized the survivor's story regarding internalized oppression and their understanding of the assault and post-assault experience.

Additionally, survivor story summaries included experiences with conscientization. It provided me with a provisional set of codes that could or could not be applied to subsequent interviews that I analyzed. This initial process also produced memos that documented my analytic process for category development. This analysis framework is non-linear and was done within interview comparison for all available interviews in this data set. Due to the flexibility of this framework, I could do within interview comparisons and simultaneously do within-group analysis as well. However, I completed all within interview comparisons for each survivor story while identifying holistic codes and making annotations to indicate differences I noticed as I progressed through the interviews. Holistic coding allowed me to flag data passages that I returned to in the second step and then analyzed them in more specificity and detail (Saldaña, 2016).

Comparison between interviews within the same group. As my codes and categories started to form, they provided provisional codes and categories to begin comparing within the same group; in this study, survivors of sexual assault from the same state-level geographical location. Provisional codes that emerged from the first step in the analysis were modified, revised, deleted, or expanded to accommodate the codes identified during the analysis of the other interviews of the same experience (Saldaña, 2016). As this step focused on further developing study conceptualization, I used axial coding to refine the codes that emerged during the open coding or within the interview process (Boejie, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This step was especially helpful in determining how complex concepts like internalized oppression manifest and under what contextual circumstances. During this analysis phase, the concept of conscientization arose, as similar experiences among survivors emerged that demonstrated their opposition to the continued development of their internalized oppression. After this stage, I had

copious codes that extended to all relevant themes in the interviews or provided insight for my research questions (Boejie, 2002). Comparisons of the interviews allowed me to effectively describe the main concepts of my research questions and define the relevant characteristics of those concepts (Boejie, 2002). Next, I identified differences between interviews. Then, I formed specific clusters or types that may exist, in this case, how survivors are influenced by internalized oppression, conscientization, and its effects on meaning-making and post-assault decisions. I expected there to be variations within the phenomenon of study, and this step allowed me to highlight those differences, be vigilant in recognizing relevant concepts, and create a better understanding of the survivor stories within the context of this investigation.

Comparison of interviews from different groups. To triangulate data sources, I compared identified groups to provide a variation in perspectives and create a clearer picture. CCM allowed me to find consistencies and differences among survivors of sexual assault, and I continually refined the relevant concepts and theoretical categories pertaining to internalized oppression and its impact on the process of labeling a sexual assault (Tie et al., 2019). The interviews were viewed as the survivors' accounts in trying to understand their experiences with sexual violence, their re-negotiation of their identities, and management of post-assault processes (Sandelowski, 2011). Intersectional identities are central components of my research questions because I am interested in the experiences of sexual assault survivors with varying intersectional identities. There were variances in experience, manifestations of internalized oppression, and other identified phenomena influenced by aspects of a survivor's identity. Using critical race feminist theory as a guiding framework requires that I try to capture that variance by different identities and be dedicated to a holistic approach to identity and not just a combination of multiple identities. In accordance with critical race feminist theory, I took what I learned from

within-group analysis and identified possible differences in experiences pertaining to race and gender. The majority of the sample consists of predominantly White and cisgender females, and that perspective may be overrepresented in code and category development. To ensure that I uplifted minoritized voices, I analyzed how themes appeared differently or became irrelevant among survivors of different racial and gender backgrounds. This approach does not mean that I looked at race or gender solely, but that those aspects of identity will be the central identity component to identify nuances to survivor experiences related to the research questions.

Another component that I looked at in this step of the analysis is how experiences may vary by the developmental age of survivors. This was done by comparing survivors who were adolescents at the time of the interview with survivors who were adults at the time of the interview. This study focused on retrospective recollection and required that I consider how much time had passed between the interview and assault. Survivors had different understandings of their assault when they were adolescents, compared to their thoughts and reflections during adulthood. Some survivors were still adolescents at the time of the interview, and I included their experiences with the retrospective experiences of adult survivors. The lapse in time for adult survivors allowed for additional life experience, reflection, and education that can impact how survivors understand their experiences. This could be seen as attending to age. Still, age is not necessarily commensurate with knowledge and experience, so I believe the elapse of time prior to the interview would be a better attenuating factor. Upon completing this stage of analysis, it allowed for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of the previously identified codes. The themes and codes highlighted how survivors' multiplicative identities influenced the manifestation of internalized oppression and other findings.

Human Subject Review

As previously mentioned, the data used in this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Boston College in 2018. For a secondary analysis, it is recommended that participants be asked for consent to have their stories included in a new investigation. This study is not a new investigation but rather a more detailed analysis and interpretation of already collected data; however, the secondary analysis was also approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board in 2020.

Chapter 5. Results

My goal with this dissertation was to investigate the possible influences of internalized oppression on survivor's perceptions of their assault and post-assault experiences with disclosure and resource-seeking. Specifically, this dissertation sought to answer or provide insight into the following research questions: 1) does internalized oppression impact survivors' perception of their assault? 2) how does internalized oppression impact the process of disclosure and resource-seeking decisions among sexual assault survivors? 3) and finally, how does internalized oppression and its effects on a perception of sexual assault, disclosure, and subsequent resource-seeking decisions vary across the intersectional identities of sexual assault survivors? To this end, I analyzed data from 22 sexual assault survivors.

Table 2

Descriptive Characteristics of Assault, Post-Assault Experiences, and Disclosure (N=22)

Descriptor	Categories	Number of Participants
Age at time of interview	15-55 years old (*M*=26 years)	
Age at time of focal assault	12-17 years old (*M*=15 years)	
Time between assault and interview	1 month-41 years (*M*=11 years)	
# of People who caused sexual harm in the focal assault	One	19
	Two or More	3
# of Survivors who sustained injuries during the focal assault	No Injuries	13
	Had Injuries	9
Survivor substance use	Yes	13
	No	9
# of Survivors who reported their assault to police	Yes	9
	No	13

# of survivors who reported use of a weapon during the focal assault	Yes	11
	No	11

Following a secondary data analysis of 22 survivor stories, three central themes emerged and provided insight and clarity into internalized oppression as 22 sexual assault survivors experienced it. It also illuminated further understanding into processes of conscientization. Additionally, the final theme draws upon intersectional experiences of the survivors in this study to gain a deeper understanding of other findings and sexual violence as a phenomenon. The three themes that arose from this analysis were:

1. Oppressive and Anti-Oppressive Socialization
2. Internalized Oppression and Conscientization as Influential Factors in Survivors' Processing and
3. Multiplicative Identities and Post-Assault Considerations

The following section provides the qualitative results after a secondary data analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts from 22 survivors of sexual assault. The research questions that guided this study resulted in a more nuanced and complex understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Each theme provided a deeper insight into the processes raised in the research questions, and I will discuss them in detail below. The revised conceptual model is also provided below and reflects new constructs related to previously identified constructs and relationships (see Figure 2, pg. 150). While internalized oppression was the main topic of interest in this study, the complexities of oppression and sexual violence called for a more extensive analysis that remains relevant to the guiding research questions.

"If you get women drunk they'll do things": Oppressive and Anti-Oppressive Socialization

Socialization is the process by which people (particularly in childhood and adolescence) come to "internalize, identify with and conform to the norms values, and ideals of American

society" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 2). Socialization is a very effective mechanism that can foster the internalization of oppressive and anti-oppressive messages (i.e., beliefs, values, and ideologies). Survivors' stories about their assaults and post-assault experiences revealed an array of internalized oppressive and anti-oppressive messages that survivors were initially exposed to before, during, or after their assault. Oppressive and anti-oppressive messages clustered into several categories of messages that each served a different purpose.

Oppressive Messages

Oppressive messages fell into five categories: (1) You Don't Matter, (2) Victim Blaming, (3) Shaming, (4) Normalizing, and (5) Gaslighting. These messages were categorized as oppressive because they sought to diminish the survivor's humanity, value, and dignity, which are key to justifying the poor treatment and violence concentrated among oppressed groups. Every survivor mentioned at least one form of oppressive messaging in this study.

You Don't Matter Messages. Eighteen survivors described instances where they received messages that conveyed that their experiences, feelings, and personhood did not matter. Through these messages, survivors understood that their experience was a (1) inconvenience to others, (2) not a priority, (3) not that serious, and (4) making it about themselve*s* [the informal or formal support person].

The most common *you don't matter* messages indicated to the survivor that their assault was an inconvenience and caused disruption; thirteen survivors mentioned these messages. "You don't matter" messages were often accompanied by a general sense of resentment or indignation as others saw the survivor's assault as something they must now be forced to engage with. For example, Heather, a 25-year-old White cisgender woman, was assaulted by her boyfriend multiple times when she was 16 years old. When she told her father that she wanted to report her

rape, her father was less than enthused. His response sends the message, you don't matter. Heather shares:

> "And he just, kind of, was like, 'I don't understand why— I-I-I still don't understand why you would report this,' and stuff like that. And he was like, 'You do realize that they can like— you know, you could self-incriminate yourself or something like that. And they, like, could sue you,' or whatever. And I was— and sai— and he was like— and I said, 'Yeah, like, I know that can happen.' He's like, 'Well, I'm not paying for it.'… And that just really took me back 'cause my dad doesn't say stuff like that. Like, my dad doesn't show emotions, he doesn't— and he's always— almost always on my side about everything."

Heather was tremendously impacted by her father's response, especially since it directly conflicted with how she experienced her father before discussing the plan to report her rape. Although Heather's experience was not uncommon, other survivors also saw a change in demeanor among their friends and family once they disclosed a sexual assault.

Fourteen survivors also experienced "you don't matter" messages that the survivor describes as times where they felt they were not a priority. Specifically, what the survivor wanted and needed was not as important as the wants and needs of others. One manifestation of this is during the actual sexual assault, was when the person causing the sexual harm said that they need to rape or sexually assault the survivor because their sexual desires outweigh what the survivor wants. For example, Wynona, a 29-year-old White cisgender woman, talks about how her boyfriend at the time proceeded to rape her despite her protest when she was 13 years old. Wynona was raped in the car while her mother was inside the store, and she shares:

> "Um, but then, he asked to take it further and I said no. And then, he said, 'But I need to. I need this.' Um, and I was like, 'No, no.' Like— and I don't remember if it was in the playful tone, or if it was in the no-protection tone, um, I just can't access those memories."

Ten survivors experienced "you don't matter" messages that minimized their experience. Messages that minimized the survivor's sexual assault appeared when others described the assault as desirable, inconsequential, or not severe enough to warrant an "extreme"[7] reaction. Laura, a 21-year-old White cisgender woman who was sexually assaulted by a casual friend in her campus dorm at 17 years old, recalls coming down to the laundry room to process what had just happened to her. When Laura comes to her friend to try and process the assault, her friend congratulates her on having a wonderful college experience, where she gets to "hook-up" with a guy in the dorm. Laura was confused because the experience did not feel "awesome," but was instead quite traumatic as Laura incurred a cut lip from the person who harmed her due to him biting down hard as he forcefully kissed her. Yet her friend in this interaction interprets Laura's experience as one that should be commended and enjoyed. This created some confusion for Laura, as she did not see what she had just experienced the way her friend did. Laura recounts:

> "Um, and I mentioned it to my roommate who, um— we had been really good friends. Like, we had talked all leading up to college and we were so excited to live together and I thought she was, like, my best friend. Um, and I was like, I-I was like, 'This happened.' She's like, 'Oh, like, that's awesome!' 'Like, yeah but

[7] The use of quotation marks in the results chapter and subsequent discussion and implication chapters of this dissertation generally indicate the direct words or quotes that came from survivors. I try to highlight survivor' words by making it clear when they said something. However, there may be the use of quotation marks in this dissertation that are meant to demonstrate irony or draw attention to a word of phrase. The author entrusts you to use your judgement.

it was weird. Like, I-I-I was— I don't know this kid and he was choking me. And I-I-I don't like that and I-I don't— I, like— you know.' And she was like, 'I don't know, like, maybe he just likes it rough and, sort of, like that.' And I-and I was like, 'No, but, like, this was weird.'"

Less common in the "you don't matter" category were messages where survivors confided in someone about their sexual assault and the person made it about themselves. In these instances, a confidante becomes unraveled and draws attention to their feelings and thoughts to the point where the attention and care shifts from the survivor to the confidante. Seven survivors experienced such messages that communicated to them that their feelings and experiences did not matter. Faith, a 16-year-old Black and Latine cisgender woman, confessed that she wanted to talk to her boyfriend about the assault, but he refused to discuss the assault with her because he was "disturbed." Faith was sexually assaulted by approximately three people at a nightclub after she was drugged (i.e., someone put something in her drink), with numerous people in a crowd watching, and some of them videotaping the sexual assault.

Victim-Blaming Messages. Victim-blaming messages communicated to the survivor that their rape or sexual assault was their fault. In other words, who the survivor is, what they did, or what they believe is what led to their rape or sexual assault. Victim-blaming has been shown to make survivors feel violated, depressed, or anxious (Shaw et al., 2017). In this study, fourteen survivors spoke of times they were exposed to messaging that directly blamed them for their assault. In addition, some survivors mentioned witnessing family or friends victim-blaming sexual assault survivors who had their experiences publicized because the person who sexually harmed them was a public figure. For example, Erica, a 26-year-old White cisgender woman

assaulted at 14 years old by her boyfriend, witnessed her father blame survivors whom Donald Trump allegedly assaulted. Erica shares:

> "But, he was, kind of, just, like…honestly, I think it had to do with, like, something on the news about, like, all the sexual assaults with Trump and everything. And, like, for some reason that's what sticks out to me. But, like, it definitely had to do with something, like, on the news and some celebrity or someone said that they were assaulted, or raped. And, my dad was like, 'Oh everyone fucking says they're raped now.' And I'm like, 'Oh well, like—' And he's like, 'Oh, well, like, was she drinking? Was she this?' And, like, kind of, went on a tangent. And I was like, 'Uh, you need to shut the fuck up because I was raped and I've been sexually assaulted.' And…yeah. That's when he's like, 'Well, were you drinking?'

Another participant, Parker, talks about how friends, too, tend to engage in victim-blaming as they question if the assault occurred or if the person did something to invite rape or sexual assault. Parker is a 32-year-old White non-binary survivor assaulted by their stepfather at 12 years old until they were about 14 years old. They point out these forms of victim-blaming messages in their recount when they shared:

> "Even among friends and even— you know, when you're talking about that, people, kind of, almost, initially doubt. And almost initially doubt, you know, 'Well, why didn't you use your agency? Why didn't you use your free will? You know, you had a choice.'"

In Parker's interactions, it is apparent that others doubt their ability to prevent sexual assault. Questioning the validity of the survivor's assault is a form of victim-blaming and can serve as a barrier to further disclosure (Thema-Bryant et al., 2009). While Parker's friends did not directly

say ‘we blame you for your assault,’ they do so indirectly by asking Parker why they did not simply get away from the sexual assault.

This implicit messaging is relatively common. When Yelena, a 23-year-old White cisgender woman, was 15 years old she was raped by her father and subsequently became pregnant. Yelena did not want to carry the pregnancy to term and elected to terminate the pregnancy. However, because Yelena was a minor, she was forced to undergo a judicial bypass process that would require a judge give her permission to get an abortion without parental consent. Fortunately for Yelena, she was able to secure the judicial bypass, but not before the judge said something that caused harm to Yelena. She shares:

> “Mhm, yeah. I, um— also, when I did see the judge, I felt a little disempowered. I was really happy to get to the point of the judicial bypass process, but when I was sitting in front of him, I was like, this older dude gets to make this decision about whether or not I become a parent, you know? It was like— and he knows nothing about me. And so that— in that moment, I was like, what is going on? And leaving that, he, um— I remember the last thing he said to me was like, ‘I would just encourage you to think harder next time before you have sex.’ And I was like, hmm, [laughter-expressing frustration] like, okay. I remember my attorney looking at me like, yikes, that was not good.”

Yelena elucidated on how this experience impacted her in the interview. She discussed how it was confusing and frustrating because the judge was aware that her father raped her. He insinuated that it was consensual sex that Yelena was engaging in with her father. The comment made by the judge felt especially impactful for Yelena because this message was coming from a court judge, who is an institutional representative with power.

Shaming Messages. Shaming messages were meant to foster feelings of shame within the survivor for some aspect of their experience. These messages said to the survivor that certain aspects of their life experiences pertaining to sexual expression, sexual history, or social identities were socially unacceptable or undesirable. These types of messages encouraged feelings of shame among the survivors in this study. Shaming messages were the most prevalent form of oppressive messaging, with 19 out of 22 survivors sharing experiences where shaming messages were present in their stories. One of the most common shaming methods was the *culture of silence* around topics related to sexual assault or rape. The majority of survivors in this study shared that they witnessed people being reluctant in talking about sexual assault or rape, not acknowledging that the survivor was sexually assaulted, or telling them not to speak about their assault. Shaming messages included messages that (1) slut-shamed the survivor and (2) fostered a culture of silence or the collective agreement to avoid dialogue that allows for the amplification of marginalized voices (Freire, 2000) around issues of sexual assault or rape.

As the primary study focused on adolescent assault, the survivors initially reflected on their experiences with sexual assault during adolescence. For example, Corinne is a 35-year-old White cisgender woman who was gang-raped by at least three of her classmates in a basement during what was supposed to be a hangout with friends. Corrine experienced *slut-shaming* which is the tendency of others to shame or criticize feminized folx for engaging in sexual activity, be it consensual or not. Corinne's story is evident of slut-shaming as she reflects on being impacted by rumors and exclusion at school. Corinne was 17 years old at the time, and she talks about how social exclusion harmed her. As Corrine reveals, having her friend reject her and then shame her was a traumatizing experience:

“Um… [pause 9 seconds] probably just-just her [Corinne’s friend] not believing that it wasn’t consensual. Um… I think at that point, like [sigh], there were weird rumors coming out. Um…and, as you— I think the way she reacted was just, kinda, like… like, no you’re just a slut, kinda, stuff. Um… [sniffles] I think because the rumors were out there swirling, um… she felt, like, social pressure, to, like, hop on that bandwagon. Um… yeah, teen years are so [laughter-expressing discomfort]— we’re so fickle at that age. Um… ‘cause I remember being pretty traumatized to lose her.”

Similarly, Kai also experienced shaming from his birth father, specifically for having sex. Kai, a 20-year-old, transmasculine man who identifies as a biracial (Asian and White), was 13 years old when his middle-school girlfriend assaulted him. Kai has been assaulted multiple times since, and when he considered telling his birth father about his other assaults, he decided against it. During his recount of his decision to do this, it becomes apparent why Kai arrived at this decision:

> “Um, especially because— eve— like, even when the immediate reaction was, kind of, different. After that, there was, like, a lot of, like, weird slut shaming, of, like— I don’t know. Like, um, my birth dad would, you know, call me a slut or a whore or whatever, for having had sex. Um, even if it was against my will. And so, I didn’t really want to tell him that it happened again.”

What is also important to acknowledge is that even though Kai’s birth father initially expressed some concern, that initial reaction was quickly overshadowed by Kai’s birth father shaming him. This speaks to the power in oppressive messages that even benign or perhaps positive experiences can be altered by messaging rooted in shaming another person. Barbara, a 55-year-

old White cisgender woman, was raped by three adult men in their 20s and 30s when she was 14 years old. Barbara describes the culture of silence when she says:

> "That's the easy part. The hard part is when you go back to your life and nobody wants to talk about it. And, you hav— don't feel like you have any support, you have any place to go, you-you feel alone. I felt alone. I was in AA for decades and felt like I was the only one with trauma, I was the only one that these things happen to. And even coming back, coming back to the program, I'm still doing a lot of trauma work. I'm dealing with what was happening with my daughter. Um, it felt isolating again, 'cause it's not something people talk about, and if they talk about it, they'll talk about it once."

Barbara talks about wanting to discuss her experiences with support persons. However, based on her interactions with people, she presumed that it was not a topic that others wanted to engage in, even in spaces rooted in recovery. She shares that this made her feel isolated as she struggled to move forward in her healing journey. Corrine also talked about this, as she reported that in seeking support at the hospital, she noticed the staff were reluctant to refer to her experience as an assault. Her priest directly told her mother," 'Don't you cause trouble in this town; you bury that.'".

Normalizing Messages: Normalization messages communicated to the survivor that their experience with sexual violence was a "normal part" of the human experience or societal culture. Normalization messages were the least common form of oppressive messaging in this study, with eight survivors describing experiences where sexual violence and other forms of violence, especially violence toward those with feminized identities, were seen as a societal norm and to some extent acceptable. These types of messages were particularly harmful because

they made it difficult for survivors to call out harmful behavior, as it was considered typical or natural behavior.

Zora's story demonstrated the most profound expressions of normalizing oppressive messaging as she discussed the culture in her neighborhood around sexual assault. Zora is a 37-year-old, Black cisgender woman who was raped by an acquaintance after being drugged when she was 14 years old. Zora describes how, in her neighborhood, sexual violence was a common occurrence and seen as normal. As a result, she explains that her assault had minimal impact on her:

> "So, that incident… I could not say had a profound impact on me because it was something that happened to everyone in my neighborhood, literally. Every female from my neighborhood has been touched. Until that happened to me, I actually felt like an outsider."

She goes on to say:

> "Yeah, yeah. 'Cause then— 'cause when that happened to other girls, they were called demos. And then other boys would think that they could go and have sex with them. So, a lot of girls became prostitutes in that way, in my neighborhood. And wasn't nobody running up at me, you were gonna lose something. Cut a few niggas who thought they could."

For Zora, sexual assault was so normalized that it became part of her neighborhood culture, even seen as some sort of insidious rite of passage. Zora describes feeling like an "outsider" until she was raped. Zora goes on to share that girls in her neighborhood who were sexually assaulted or raped were labeled "demos," as they were not seen as victims of sexual violence but as "prostitutes" or simply girls people could just "go and have sex with."

The normalization of tactics and methods to exploit the bodies of feminized folx show up in Erica's story as well. Erica states:

> "Um, something else… like, this wasn't an assault, um, but when I was, like, 16, I remember very specifically, like, a friend of mine who was older, like buying alcohol because he like, wanted to have sex with me. And, like, straight up told one of our friends like, 'Oh yeah, if I get [Erica] drunk, like, then she'll have sex with me.' And so, it, like…also too, unfortunately, like, there's this awful culture around, like, oh like, if you get women drunk, like, they'll do things. And, like, it's less bad, or, like, it's less assault-y."

In her re-telling, Erica's story demonstrates that it was not only customary to "get women drunk" but also acceptable to admit this in an open forum without any consequence. Three of the survivors in this study were raped by people who utilized substances to facilitate rape or sexual assault.

Gaslighting Messages. The concept of gaslighting originated in psychology to describe the interpersonal relationships in which one person creates a toxic environment by using tactics to convince another person that what they are experiencing is inaccurate or not happening as they recall it. It is defined by Sweet (2019) as the attempt "to create a 'surreal' social environment by making others…seem or feel 'crazy'" (pg. 852). It becomes more effective when the gaslighter enlists the interpersonal, structural, and cultural inequalities that require an unequal power dynamic (Sweet, 2019). It renders that person's "perceptions, beliefs, or memories as groundless" (Stark, 2019, p. 221). Those messages that subverted the survivor's understanding of their own experience were key to identifying gaslighting messages. In this study, thirteen

survivors reported these types of messages. These messages emerged in three categories: (1) survivor is lying, (2) denied that the assault occurred, (3) and excusing the "one who harms".

The most recurring form of gaslighting in survivor stories was when others tried to say the survivor was lying about some aspect of their experience or refused to acknowledge that a sexual assault even occurred. Amari, a 15-year-old Black cisgender young woman, was sexually assaulted for several years between the ages of 9 and 13 by her grandmother's live-in boyfriend. When she was thirteen, her parents became aware of the years of sexual abuse occurring in their household. That first day of revelation, Amari's parents continually questioned whether what Amari said was true. As she shared the sequence of events, Amari describes the interaction with her parents and how they kept asking if she was sure about what happened:

> "And then what I didn't like was that my parents kept asking me, they were like, 'Are you sure? Are you sure?' I'm like...'Okay, I am sure, why would I be lying?' I put that on my life, like, I put that and I believe that, you know, God only knows, like, what happened, so, like, why would I be lying about that?"

Amari's parents continued with this line of questioning that implied that Amari was mistaken or unsure about the reality of her experience. This was frustrating for Amari:

> "We're going to the police. This is what's going to happen.' And then asked me again, 'Are you sure this is what happened?' I said, 'Yes'. I don't know how many times I could say yes."

Glen, the only cisgender male in the study, was sexually assaulted by his stepfather from fifteen until his early thirties. At the time of the interview, Glen was 39 years old and talked about how his mother's initial acknowledgment of the harm committed then subsequent denial of Glen's sexual assaults were especially painful. Glen did not consent to be tape-recorded for his

interview. However, his story offerings were documented in the interview notes I wrote during the interview and directly following the interview. Glen shares that his mother made him feel "like crap" because she called him a "liar, and this and that." His mother chose to believe Glen's stepfather and later denied that his assaults occurred.

Inclusive of Glen's story, five survivors shared that others tried to deny or minimize their sexual assault by trying to convince the survivor or others that the person who caused the sexual harm was, in fact, a "good person," or was not a fault for some extenuating circumstances. For example, Yelena was called to testify against her father in court because he was accused of assaulting another child. During the court process, her father's defense lawyer demonstrates gaslighting pointedly, Yelena reports:

> "Oh, we were talking earlier about how, like, peop— when victims are using substances, people are a little less likely to be empathetic. It felt, kinda, like that with my dad, like, 'Oh, but wasn't he drunk?' You know? 'Don't you think he couldn't've made a—' you know? And, it was like, 'What does this even have to do with [laughter] what we're talking about here today?'"

The lawyer tactfully attempted to gaslight Yelena and incept ideas of doubt about what she remembered of her rape. The lawyer attempted to create another narrative to discredit Yelena's account of what happened, even saying," 'Well, don't you feel like, if he was sober, he wouldn't have made those same decisions?'". As with Amari's example, the intent is to create doubt in the survivor's mind and in the minds of others.

Table 3

Oppressive and Anti-Oppressive Messages (N=22)

Type of Message	**Number of Participants**	**Racial Identity**			
		Black	White	Latine	Asian

Oppressive Messages	**22**				
You Don't Matter	18	4	13	0	1
Victim Blaming	14	2	10	1	1
Shaming	16	4	11	0	1
Normalizing	8	2	5	0	1
Gaslighting	13	3	9	0	1
Anti-Oppressive Messages	**20**				
You Matter	18	5	11	1	1
You Have Agency and Power	5	0	5	0	0
No Blaming/Shaming	18	5	11	1	1

Anti-Oppressive Messages

Messages that were discernable as anti-oppressive within survivor stories were those messages that disrupted oppressive messages. Anti-oppressive messages provide alternative socialization messages not meant to oppress others but uplift them (Harro, 2000). These messages fall into three major categories: (1) you matter messages, (2) you have agency and power, and (3) no blaming/shaming messages. Anti-oppressive messages were not as frequent as oppressive messages but were present in twenty of the survivor stories.

You Matter Messages. Eighteen survivors discussed times when others would make them feel like they mattered. *You matter* messages promoted inclusion and demonstrated interest in the well-being of the survivor. The content of these messages showed the survivor that (1) their needs and desires were a priority, (2) their feelings and experiences were affirmed, and they were (3) told that it was okay to reach out and find support. The most common manifestation of "you matter" messages was when survivors felt like they were being prioritized. These messages showed the survivor that their needs and wants, and their experiences were important. When

Yelena first learned she was pregnant after being raped by her father, she went to a local reproductive health center to get an abortion. Yelena describes how the staff members prioritized her health:

> "They just needed to know that there was for sure an assault. And that it was… that it was enough to justify that I could not go to my mom. So, I didn't have to tell them much, and that was really nice. Um, but there was just a basic— and it's probably 'cause they're all, like, reproductive justice people, but there was, like, a very basic, like, 'Okay, no more. That's all we need,' you know? And they gave me resources, and they were really awesome. But, [laughter] they weren't so preoccupied with the assault, so much as they were with helping me get my abortion. And I think that's what made me mask what-what had happened, 'cause I had something greater to focus on at the time."

The nurse interacting with Yelena let her know that the priority was Yelena's health through both words and actions. The nurse did not "preoccupy" herself with the particulars of Yelena's assault; she focused on Yelena's desire not to be pregnant anymore. They then gave her the necessary information to get a judicial bypass to receive an abortion without parental consent. The messages transmitted during this interaction even assisted Yelena with focusing on her health, which ultimately allowed her to take the necessary steps to get her needs met.

Another survivor, Erica, describes how her friends made her feel like she mattered. Erica was coerced and raped orally, and the person who raped her expressed annoyance at her crying during the rape. When Erica told her friends what happened, they immediately said that crying during oral sex was not a typical response following a consensual sexual experience. Erica talks about their discussion below:

> "And one of my friends was like, 'Oh yeah. Like, I never do it.' And I was like, 'Yeah. Like the first time I did it I, kind of, cried 'cause I didn't really want to do it.' And it was, kind of, like, an off-hand remark, uh, and they're like, 'Wait, what?' And I was like, 'Yeah.' And they were like, 'That's, like, not o—' like, they literally were like, 'No, you shouldn't cry. Like, that's not normal.' Um, and so, it's just like, 'Oh yeah, like, but, like—' I was like, 'It was fine. I was just, like, nervous 'cause it was my first time.' They were like, 'But still, like, that shouldn't happen.'
>
> "So, um yeah. It was like, they were like, 'Don't ever do— like, don't ever cry and if you feel like you're gonna cry, just tell the person no.' And I was like, 'Okay, I will.'"

When Erica described what happened to her friends they affirmed and validated her emotional response. She shares:

> "Um, so, I think, in that moment, like, it definitely, like, just reaffirmed, like, no, you weren't wrong to feel like that was bad. Like, the ou— like there's nothing wrong with sex. But, like, what he did and how he coerced me, and just, kind of, was like, 'Oh, you're crying? Whatever.' Um, that was wrong."

Erica first received an oppressive message from the person who raped her but then her friends' reactions showed he positive influence of an anti-oppressive message even after such a traumatic experience. The impact and influence of anti-oppressive messages emerge elsewhere in this study.

In alignment with prioritizing the survivor, others encouraged survivors to prioritize their health and healing. Oppressive messages were centered on de-prioritizing the survivor and encouraging them to stay silent in their suffering. Anti-oppressive messages informed survivors that it was okay to tell someone or seek out support. Several survivors were encouraged to go to

the hospital for treatment; some were told they could report to police, some were encouraged to access resources to promote healing. Corinne was encouraged by her friend to seek out reproductive services and even offered to assist her. She describes that day:

> "And one of them was, like, super religious. She's-she's, like, a Reverend in Ohio now, like, she took— she kept going, was super religious. And I remember, like, I took the pregnancy test in her mom's bathroom and she was like, 'Do you want me to google [local reproductive health center] for you?' Like…[sigh] those are the people that I could trust. Where I could… all the stuff I felt guilty for, I could talk about and-and, like, let it into the world. And they wouldn't point it back at me, and they wouldn't weaponize it against me."

Corinne's story also captured when survivors were made to feel like they mattered when they were supported and encouraged to tell their story and use their voice. Previously, Corinne had experienced poor interactions with former friends. This interaction was rooted in anti-oppressive messaging that prioritized her but let her know that getting assistance and resources is okay served as a contrast to other oppressive messaging she experienced.

You Have Agency and Power Messages. *You have agency and power* messages relayed to the survivor that they had (1) agency and power to make decisions that best suited them (2) encouraged and supported survivors in using the power of their voice. "You have agency and power" messages were the least common form of anti-oppressive messaging, coming up for five survivors. Though less common, these messages were integral for survivors, especially as they contemplated interaction with formal support services. Mary-Beth, a 21-year-old White cisgender woman, who was sexually assaulted by her boyfriend several times at 17 years old, was a survivor who interacted with various informal and formal supports. She reiterated many

times how important it was to have her agency and power honored by others. Mary-Beth recounts an interaction she had with the prosecuting attorney:

> "So, yeah. And they were good about it too 'cause he was like, 'You know, it's totally up to you.' He was like, 'You could say right now that you want to go to court and, like, in two seconds, like, take it back.' He's like, 'It's completely your decision, 100 percent.' So— and he, like, kept, like, telling me that. So, he was like, 'This is whatever you're comfortable with. If you want to, I will put all my effort into pursuing this, but if you don't, that's completely fine.' So, that was very— yeah. Definitely not what I expected."

The prosecuting attorney ensured that Mary-Beth understood that her decisions would be honored and that they would pursue prosecution if she had a desire to. This was not what Mary-Beth expected in her interactions with criminal justice system responders. Mary-Beth thought they would not hear her story, but she was pleasantly surprised to have experiences like this where she felt that they would listen to her and do what she wanted to do.

Another survivor, Yelena, was raped by her father and went to a reproductive health clinic to get access to medical care that would perform an abortion for her. The clinic staff treated Yelena as an agential being with the power to make her own decisions. They simply presented her with her options and supported her choices. She describes what happened that day:

> "But the whole time before it, when they were talking to me, there was never, like, a-a conversation as if I was somebody's kid. It was more like, 'You're a young adult who came in here and you're coming as a-as a body with your own decisions.' And once I, you know, tested positive with the pregnancy test, it was like, 'Okay, and here are all of your options. which one would you like?' [Laughter] Kind of, like, you know, picking an ice cream flavor. And I was like, that's great, they didn't sway me towards any and then,

once I said, 'I definitely want this one.' They were like, 'Great. This is how we'll support you with that decision that you made.' Not like, 'Are you sure?'"

Yelena appreciated that even though she was a minor at the time, the staff at the clinic recognized her body autonomy and ability to reflect and make the decision that was best for her. Although they informed her of all her options, they did not try to sway her toward a specific option. Yelena also noted they didn't question her decision, demonstrating their belief that they respected her agency and power.

Corinne was assaulted by three of her schoolmates and reported her rapes to the police several months after they occurred. The cases against two of the people who raped her went forward to trial. The first trial did not allow the survivor to tell her story authentically. During the second trial, Corinne was able to read her victim impact statement and tell the story of her rape and how it impacted her. Corinne was nervous, as this was a highly publicized case, and she was called to do this in front of the people who harmed her and her community. She describes what happened that day:

"Um… when he took the plea deal, there were a lot of— at this point, like, it— there had been articles about it in the local newspaper. Some journalist somewhere had, like, picked this up. And… in that courtroom was, like, half the {Municipal Police Agency 4}. They'd just showed up, and they, like— when they, like, asked me to, like, stand and give my statement, they all stood up behind me [participant becomes tearful] and I felt, like, finally [laughter-expressing relief] [sniffles]. 'Cause I still feel guilty for it happening, and to have that support… meant a lot. Um, given all the slights—I felt, like, I dealt within the process and the lack of support, and lack of compassion, to have… those guys just there was-was really meaningful."

Corrine using her voice to call out and name the harm others caused her was a powerful use of her voice. Initially, other court actors dismissed Corinne and her experience, but she took control in a highly stressful environment during the second trial and told her truth. The police are a very powerful institution and are often documented to blame and dismiss survivors. Their demonstration of support when Corinne tells her story communicated to everyone in that courtroom that survivor stories are powerful and should not be ignored.

No Blame/Shame Messages. Survivors of sexual assault often experience messages that blame or shame them for their victimization. *No blame/Shame messages* evolved into three categories (1) survivor believed, (2) no shame, (3) gave encouragement, and they were messages that were instrumental in establishing blame and shame-free interactions when others swiftly let survivors know they believed what happened to them. Of the survivors in this study, eighteen survivors reported "no blame/shame" messages. Jordan, a 22-year-old fem-presenting person working through their gender identity, discusses how important it was to hear that the assault was not their fault.

> "Um, just, like, stressing that it wasn't my fault and, like, that I didn't do anything wrong. And, like, in every single case where someone does something like that, it's never ever, like, your fault. And just, like, really like, hammering that in because, like, at the time, like, I thought it was my fault."

Jordan, who was assaulted by a causal friend while visiting another friend at their university, talks about the importance of consistently communicating that the assault was not their fault. Jordan raises a critical qualifier, and that is consistent messaging. The content of the message is important in anti-oppressive messaging, but consistency is also imperative.

In addition to making it known that the survivor was not at fault, several survivors discussed how important it was for others to clarify that it was not okay for a person to rape or assault the survivor. The crucial impact that this messaging can have is present in Sade's story. Sade is a 35-year-old Black cisgender woman who was raped by her boyfriend when she was 15 years old. She shares that "no blame/shame" messages were instrumental in her healing. Sade recalls a vital moment with her friend:

> "And she was like, 'That was absolutely rape. It was not your fault, like, you—' She was- was just, like, very kind about, like— 'I understand why you're feeling this way, but I need you to know that it was not your fault.' And that was, like, huge for me, because, like, I— you know, I mean, the fact that I had— that alcohol was involved and, like, all of this— all of these other factors. Just having someone tell me that it wasn't my fault was, like— it was crazy, like, I just did— I-I— there was, like, no—even if it was rape, I felt like it was still my fault. So, like, you know, having someone say like, 'That was rape and it wasn't your fault,' was like really, really huge for me."

Again, Sade reiterates the importance of messaging that solidifies that the person does not blame the survivor and encourages the survivor to relinquish self-blame. Sade's story demonstrates the power of that message and how it helped to re-orient her when she began to waiver in her own beliefs.

Not all messaging comes in a direct message to the survivor. Some messages were modeled and communicated through others by how they behaved. This was true for Noel, a 22-year-old White gender fluid person who was assaulted by their close friend when they were 15 years old. Noel was inspired by the confidence and certainty that her friend exuded when

discussing her assault. Noel references their friend's behavior that influenced them to disclose their assault:

> "Um, she was— this person was very strong and, um, we're still friends to this day actually. She was very strong and she was very open and loud. And she was like 'This happened to me. I don't care what everyone thinks of it. I'm going to own it and I'm going to take my life back.' And, um, that inspired me, so that's why I told her."

It is important to note that in Noel's story, messages can be transmitted through modeling behavior and a sense of self. Noel's friend was unapologetically refuting messages that blame and shame survivors and exclaimed that they would not be beholden to those oppressive ideas. Their friend's response made Noel feel safe enough to share their own experiences.

'You Still Have the Committee in your Head': Internalized Oppression and Conscientization as Influential Factors in Survivor Processing

The oppressive and anti-oppressive message categories are all presented in second person (i.e., you) as these are messages that are presented to the survivor. However, some of the following manifestations are presented in the first person because the survivors internalize the messages and then incorporate them into their psyche. Thus, this section shows the impact of those messages by exhibiting how survivors perceive themselves in the context of their assault and how they determine how they will name or identify their experience and how that identification influences their post-assault decisions (see Figure 2). Oppressive messages mapped onto internalized oppression, while anti-oppressive messages contributed to conscientization. Thus, while every survivor in this study experienced some form of internalized oppression (N= 22), every survivor also experienced some form of conscientization.

Manifestations of Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression takes the oppressive messages that disparage and dehumanize oneself and group memberships as truth (David, 2014). Manifestations of internalized oppression fell into three distinct categories: (1) I have limited agency and power, (2) self-gaslighting (3) SVU-Raped. Like oppressive messages, every survivor mentioned at least one manifestation of internalized oppression.

I have limited agency and power. This manifestation of internalized oppression captures the instances where survivors believed they had no agency, power, or control before, during, or after their assault. This manifestation emerged as (1) mediated apathy, (2) having limited access to information, (3) silencing and censorship, and (4) feeling trapped in power plays or seeing themselves as sexual objects. Twenty survivors reported feeling like their agency and power were limited when re-telling their story. One of the key interests of this study was how survivors processed their assault, specifically what hindered them from acknowledging their rape or sexual assault.

Mediated apathy captured the helplessness, apathy, and perceived lack of power and control during the decision-making process. Out of all the survivors in this study, 20 of them believed that there was no reason to report or disclose because it was essentially pointless. Noel succinctly states why she chose not to disclose to others, “It’s like-it’s like eventually, people saw, but at the time no one believed. Like, if I told people that he assaulted me, no one would have believed me. People would have believed that I was just being bitter or something.” This was one of the most consistent sentences spoken by most of the survivors in the study– “no one will believe me.” Noel’s experience was not surprising, mainly because this study investigates socialization and internalized oppression, but Parker provides excellent context and insight into why many survivors arrived at the same conclusion. Parker explains:

> "That was a big part of also why I felt like it didn't matter if I told anybody. 'Cause, like, at the time, there was not this culture around believing survivors and believing people who don't have physical evidence especially. You know, um, so at the time, it didn't even feel like talking about it was an option because it didn't feel like it would matter. 'Cause it's just me telling someone who's already forced everyone in my-already—forced everyone in my entire life to see me as someone who's unreliable and who can't be believed. So, like, what would it matter other than putting myself through the extra trauma of going to the hospital [hollow laughter]."

Survivors thought that they would have no voice in how they wanted to handle their own post-assault experience. Survivors who talked about forms of mediated apathy eliminated specific resource-seeking options because of their internalized beliefs about themselves and sexual assault survivors as a group. It is important to note that most of the survivors in this study did not anticipate being treated with care and had a general apathetic view towards disclosure and resource-seeking processes.

Seventeen survivors in this study reported having a lack of information that did not allow them to act in specific ways following their rape or sexual assault. Barbara was brutally raped by three men at 14 years old; she did not believe what happened to her was an assault. She shares:

> "You don't know it's a crime. You don't know that law enforcement is something you're supposed to be arrested for. I didn't know that that would have been considered kidnapping and, um, assault and all the things that the law would have seen it. I just thought I was stupid and wrong."

Barbara was gang-raped and beaten by three adult men, and she didn't know that her experience could be categorized as a crime. Several survivors mentioned that at the time of their assault,

they simply did not have the necessary information that would help them make sense of their assault. Or they had misinformation that brought them to incorrect conclusions, such as determining that their assault did not rise to the level of a crime. Due to survivors still processing their assault and having limited information to do so at the time of their assault, this often included not knowing they could seek help or being unaware of the effects of trauma after a rape or sexual assault.

Another manifestation of you have limited agency and power was when survivors silenced or censored themselves. Fifteen survivors reported that they felt unable to talk about their experience or were uncomfortable labeling their rape or sexual assault. Internalized oppression created fear and shame in naming what happened to them. Reluctance to label an assault ultimately led to survivors silencing themselves because they could not reconcile what they experienced with the gravity of saying "I was raped" or "I was sexually assaulted." Amari describes what the word rape evokes for her and why she does not like using the word rape. Amari shares:

> **Amari:** Um, so they changed the charge from sexual assault to rape. And um, obviously I don't like that word at all. Like I call it the 'R' word 'cause I don't like saying that. But, um, just the fact that it went to a, a charge, like so high. Like, um, that, that was like… that was kind of a good and a bad thing. A bad thing because I realized, like, there was more that happened to me. Like there's, there's sexual assault, but then when you hear about rape… like you just like, you just, you just pause for a minute. Let me think, like that word has a lot of power to that word.
>
> **Interviewer 2:** That's true.

> **Amari:** So, like when I hear that I was raped, I was like, 'Wow.' I just thought it was like, sexual. First, I just thought it was, like, sexual harassment. But I'm like all these years he would just harass me every day, like that doesn't make sense. So it was rape. I was like…and then when he, when he…she asked him like, more specific questions like, 'two fingers,' you know, all this type of stuff. I was like, 'Yeah.' I was like, 'Oh my goodness.' But it was a good thing because that means, that means he's just gonna get more time. So, yeah.

Amari says there is a lot of power in the word rape, and she is correct. However, Amari also introduces the reality that using the word rape is directly related to the perception of severity in the harm committed. The man who raped her was charged with rape so that the lawyers could pursue harsher punishments, so indeed, the word rape is related to power in so many ways. And for many survivors coming to terms with being raped was overwhelming. Still, the discomfort in labeling a rape or sexual assault accomplishes what internalized oppression seeks to…and that is to silence the oppressed and influence them to accept the harms committed against them.

The most blatant form of perceptions of limited agency and power was when survivors felt they could not exercise their power and agency when navigating consent. Nine survivors talked about struggling to assert themselves and being coerced or harassed until they "agreed" to have sex with the person. Coercion is a controversial topic because there is a lot of significance given to receiving consent. Still, there needs to be more discussion about what methods others use to coerce someone's consent. For example, Laura talks about being stalked and harassed until she gave in to having sex. She describes this very thing in her story when she shares:

> "And, um…we…I don't know, like, the party— like, the-the group kinda dies down and he comes, um, in to my room with me. Um… and yeah, just, like, gets in to my bed.

> And…I, kind of, didn't know what to do. Um… and he was, like— he just kept telling me to go get a condom and I said 'No,' over and over again. And then finally I was like, he's not gonna-he's not gonna give up until I-until I say yes, um, and so I did. And I, um, was coerced into having sex with him."

This person followed her into her room, then got into her bed, continually asked her to get a condom after she said no. Laura finally relents. But what we must understand here is Laura was 17 years old in her first year of college and reports that she was unsure of what was an appropriate sexual interaction and what was not. Not to mention this person had already forcibly kissed Laura and bit her lip to the point that Laura began to bleed. There cannot be consent when, at each step, a person shows disinterest or resistance to engaging in sexual activity.

Survivors also described internalized sexual objectification that influenced how they processed their assault and post-assault experiences. *Sexual objectification* dehumanizes a person and defines them in a way that places excessive value on a person's ability to be used for sexual gratification. In this study, eight survivors reported internalizing sexually objective messages and how those messages influenced how they processed their assault and viewed their place in society. Two survivors specifically discussed the disconnection from their bodies and how it can be utilized or manipulated to please others. Erica shares that she internalized sexually objective messages and thought of her body as a tool to get affection and approval from men. Erica explains:

> "Um, yeah. But, like— yeah— I don't know. It also makes me sad though, because it's, like, I used sex and sexuality, like, so much to get male approval. And then, I wonder— it's, like— and, again, like, I'm in therapy so I've, kind of, processed and talked about this. But, it's, like, what was I, like, wishing I could get from my parents, that I then used

> sex and sexuality. And, like, so many times, like, victims of domestic violence, like, turn to sex as a form of love and affection and, like, good touching and what not."

Erica talked about feeling empowered by her family to own her body and embrace her sexuality but realized that because she witnessed domestic violence in her household, she could not discern what love and affection looked like. Thus, when she shared, "I definitely used my body for a tool to get men to like me," she saw that her body could be used as a tool and when her boyfriend used her body for his pleasure, she perceived it as a sacrifice. Therefore, she sacrificed her body to get the love and attention she desired. The internalization of sexually objective messages came up in the stories of two survivors who talked about the idea of virginity. Virginity is also a social construct used to regulate the sexuality of feminized folx and create a narrative that virginity is something to be given to a man. Zora's story shows how boys and men in her neighborhood used virginity to control or dehumanize feminized folx. Zora discussed how virginity, or lack thereof, was used as a method to shame and devalue to her. She describes this here:

> **"**Um, the person who did it, decided to start bragging about it to other people. And, um, I got a phone call from a person that I liked in the past, but we never went out. But, he was upset because everyone knew I was a virgin. So he was like, 'How you gonna give it up to somebody else and dadadadada, you got this nigga bragging on you and dadada.' And I'm like, 'What are you talking about?'

Then when she decided to confront the person who raped her, and he used the construct of virginity as a method to discredit the survivor's experience. Zora talks about this as she describes the incident:

> "So then he's all like, 'Oh, oh, why you acting funny? What you're scared and dadada.' Trying to put it off 'cause my boyfriend was there and whatever. You know what I'm sayin'— or 'What? You mad 'cause I got your va— got your v before your man,' and all of this shit. And it's like, nigga, it was not given to you nigga, this is not no credit on your pot, you know what I'm saying? And, I punched him in his face and you know what I mean?"

In Zora's community, people were tracking what girls were virgins, and men were upset that they were not the ones to "take her virginity." Then when an acquaintance raped her and began bragging about "taking" Zora's virginity to augment his reputation and disparage Zora's, the person who raped Zora claimed she simply regretted "losing her virginity" to him as opposed to her boyfriend.

Self-Gaslighting. As demonstrated in the prior theme, gaslighting is a tactic used to reconstruct a reality that overwhelmingly benefits one person or entity. This new version of events creates a desired outcome where others who are a part of that real event or situation feel disoriented and unsure of their experienced reality. *Self-gaslighting* is a prime example of how systems of oppression get reproduced in our relationships with ourselves and manifest as internalized oppression. When survivors engaged in self-gaslighting, they took on the role of the gaslighter and dismissed their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Their self-knowledge was deemed illegitimate and untrustworthy, and this practice had damaging effects on the survivor and perception of their experiences with sexual violence and post-assault processes. Every single survivor story had at least one form of self-gaslighting emerge. Self-gaslighting was the manifestation of internalized oppression with the most variation in expression. Different

forms of self-gaslighting included: (1) Blame/Shame of Self (2) Questioning (3) Minimization, (4) Normalization (5) and Emotional Dissonance.

The most common form of self-gaslighting in this study occurred was *Blame/Shame of Self.* Twenty survivors talked about blaming themselves for their own victimization or feeling ashamed because they were sexually assaulted. One of the instances of survivors engaging in self-blame was predicated on their belief that their behavior or choices led to their rape or sexual assault. Of those survivors who engaged in self-blame, five mentioned their behavior as a cause for their sexual assault. Engaging in alcohol consumption was a common reason for self-blame. Demi, a 25-year-old, White cisgender female, highlights self-blame as she describes her thoughts:

> "That's why it took me a long time to call it sexual assault. Because in my mind it was just…I mean, I can say it for anyone else, that it, like— if I were to think of any of my friends, or when I talk about it, I am like very un— I'm like, oh it doesn't matter. But when I think about it with my own self, I was like well that's the same thing. I was, like, well I should not have been drinking that much then. Which I know is not the right answer to it, it's just, like, how I internalized it."

Self-blame is associated with unacknowledged rape, and Demi blamed herself because she deemed her alcohol consumption a key factor in why she was raped. Not only this, but she also recognizes that if her same story occurred with any of her friends, she would immediately validate and let them know it is not their fault. Yet, because of her internalized oppression rooted in blame, she could not grant herself that benefit of the doubt. Demi also says this internalized belief that her drinking caused her rape influenced her to refrain from telling others.

Veronica[8], a 22-year-old, Latine woman also engaged in self-blame because she believed had she not entered back into a relationship with her boyfriend, she would not have been raped. She shares:

> "I didn't want people to think that I was, like, different or, like, weaker because of that. And I also— I don't know, like I've gone back and forth because like we broke up that summer and then I went back and I was like, ugh, this is, like, my fault because I went back to that relationship knowing, like, it wasn't great. And I've like learned, like, no it's not. But it still like popped in my head every so often, like, if I didn't go back this wouldn't have happened.

Shame also emerged in survivors' stories when they believed that they were to blame for their assault. Kai shares that he felt shame and that shame influenced his decision to go to the hospital:

> "Um, also, just because, like— a lot of times, like, when I'm thinking about, like, my other, um, assaults, like, it would happen and I would just feel a lot of shame about letting it happen again. And, that shame would be, like, an 'I don't deserve to go to the hospital because I let it happen again and it's my fault,' type thing. Um— yeah. And I just, like— I don't know. I just didn't feel like I deserved to go to the hospital."

Internalized oppression creates an internal environment where someone suffering from shame will self-eliminate and be convinced that they are undeserving of care and attention (Zinzow et al., 2014). Kai's shame extended to feelings of unworthiness which made him feel like he did not deserve medical care. His engagement in self-blame influenced him to forgo medical treatment

[8] Veronica at the time of the interview was still processing her gender identity but reported that she predominantly identifies as female.

because it was not what he deserved, which shows how internalized oppression can impact resource-seeking decisions.

Table 4

Manifestations of Internalized Oppression (N=22)

Type of Manifestation	Number of Participants	Racial Identity of Survivors			
		Black	White	Latine	Asian
Internalized Oppression	**22**				
I Have Limited Agency and Power	*20*				
Mediated apathy	20	4	14	1	1
Lack of information	17	3	13	0	1
Silence and censorship	15	3	10	1	1
Navigating consent	9	2	6	0	1
Internalized sexual-objectification	8	2	6	0	0
Self-Gaslighting	*22*				
Blame/Shame of self	20	4	14	1	1
Questioning	18	4	12	1	1
Minimization	17	4	12	0	1
Normalization	15	4	10	0	1
Emotional Dissonance	11	5	5	0	1
"SVU" Raped	*18*				
real rape	13	1	10	1	1
who can be raped	5	0	4	0	1
who can rape	7	2	4	0	1
normal responses	4	1	3	0	0

One way survivors demonstrated self-gaslighting was when they questioned their recollection of their experience. Several times survivors questioned if they were losing their sanity or if they imagined their rape. For example, Laura was sexually assaulted by someone in her dorm and struggled to get others to recognize the validity of her experience. Due to this, she began to waver in her perceptions of her lived reality. Laura talks about feeling like she was interpreting her assault wrong. She says:

> "I was probably just, like, really questioning myself. I was like, I did— wait— am-am I going crazy? Did I— am I remembering this correctly? Or, like, um…when I was little, I was always told that I was, like, really dramatic, um, that I was— I always, like, embellished things. I was like, is this another one of those times? Like, am I not even realizing that I'm making something up?"

Like Laura, Sade was raped by her boyfriend when she was an adolescent. She also wondered if she imagined everything:

> "So, like, it-it was crazy because, like, I felt, like, um… like, for so long, and still sometimes after, I felt like I was, almost, like— like, I made it up. Like, it just felt, like, it wasn't real…"

This feeling of being disconnected from their lived experience and questioning the reality of their sexual assault caused several survivors to seek external validation to confirm that they were not "crazy." Several days after her rape, Miracle, a 16-year-old, Black cisgender young woman, struggled to make sense of her experience. She was questioning herself and reached out to the non-emergency number to get clarity. Miracle describes this moment below:

> "And I um… there's like a number you can call for like the police but it's not the emergency line like not 911. So I called the police, itself, 911 and I asked for the number. I asked for the non-emergency number. I was like 'Sorry I don't know how to get this, um, but I would like help and I would like the number please. It's not an emergency'. They were um, like 'Is it anything we can help you with?' I said um, 'Probably, probably not'. Um, they said 'Alright just ask'. I said 'Well, I know the definition of what I'm bout to ask, but I just want to make sure. Um, like, the definition of rape is basically not wanting to have sex with someone and you have sex with them. Or they make you, or

somehow you have sex with them and you do not want to'. And they were like yes, um, well they said, they said, 'Did this happen to you?' That's what they said. And I said yes."

Miracle was assaulted when she was 15 years old. She reached out to a formal support person to validate her experience. Even though she knew she had experienced rape, the internalized beliefs about how rape occurs and who can rape, prevented her from accessing what she knew to be true. This form of self-gaslighting frequently occurred when survivors began to accept they were raped but had to engage in self-questioning or seek external confirmation to feel confident in their conclusion.

Survivors engaging in self-gaslighting tended to minimize their sexual assault or rape. This minimization materialized in several different ways. The most salient form of minimization was survivors who downplayed the severity of their experience. In this study, thirteen survivors discussed their assault in ways that minimized the seriousness and impact that their assault played in their life both in the past and present. For survivors like Mary-Beth, who was repeatedly raped and assaulted by her boyfriend, she did not realize the effects that the assault had on her mental health until some time had passed. She recalls why she never reached out for supports following her assaults:

"Um, well, in the beginning, I, kind of, like, didn't— it didn't affect me that seriously. Like, I was, kind of, like, 'Yeah, this happened.' And I would just, like, bring it up. It didn't seem to really upset me that much. I didn't seem, like, too traumatized by it at the time. So, I don't think I would have gone out of the way to, like, get help. And I didn't realize that, like, a lot of the anxiety and stuff I had was from that. So, like, I-I didn't

really consider doing any of those things in the beginning. Like, going to anyone or going to the hospital or anything."

Mary-Beth talked about her assault as non-consequential and believed that it had little effect on her. Yet, Mary-Beth was later able to recognize that the rape impacted her, and for her, the acknowledgment that it was rape allowed her to connect her feelings at the time with the rape she experienced. However, not every rape acknowledgment allows someone to recognize the effects of the rape they lived through. Zora minimized the impact of her rape, but in the context of her life, experiencing a rape was not the worst thing to occur. She shares:

> **"**But it was a lot of other things going on too, so I wouldn't even— like, I've told— like I said to you, I wouldn't even put this— rate this as a five between one and ten, between all the horrible shit I've been through. It was really, literally, just becoming a woman, your value of what you got, your ritual of becoming a woman. It's not-it's not something that keeps me up at night to be honest."

Normalization was another manifestation of self-gaslighting that influenced survivors to see the assault as something that "happens every day and will keep happening," as 15-year-old Amari said in her story. Zora's story offers additional insights into the normalization of sexual violence in her community. She explains below:

> 'Cause in that time, I was growing up in a place where I thought it was supposed to happen to everybody and I thought I would feel better when it happened to me. And when I felt worse, I didn't feel like I had a right to complain because it had happened to so many other females around me and none of them were sad and crying about it, they were all partying and popping and getting it locked, you know? I felt weak, like, I was a weak one. Because I had felt bad about what happened or, like— you know, 'cause in

most instances, I know at least one person would have said to me, 'You don't even remember it, so what the fuck are you dwelling on it for.'

Zora viewed rape or sexual assault as a ritual that indicated entrance into womanhood. She expected to be raped and believed that once she experienced rape, she would join the ranks with the other girls in her neighborhood and feel included. Yet, she "felt worse" and was invariably affected by being raped; she looked to other girls in her neighborhood who had also experienced rape or sexual assault. However, those young women were not "sad or crying," so Zora concluded that she was weak for not handling a shared experience that many had already traversed. Four survivors described their rape as what they thought was a normal sexual interaction. However, while it is a common experience, it is not a normal experience and can be eradicated from our society.

Another form of self-gaslighting was through emotional dissonance. *Emotional dissonance* occurred when survivors distanced themselves from their own emotions to project a strong, unaffected image to others and themselves. Emotional dissonance was very subtle at times, and the survivor may not have been aware of it. Survivors expressed less vulnerable emotions that projected strength and did not align with the traumatic re-telling of their story content. Mary-Beth talks about how she can tell her story without much emotional distress. She explains:

"Um, I mean, I…for— maybe now it's a little bit different, but like I said in the beginning, I, kind of, felt, kind of, numb to telling people. Like, I really didn't mind, like, when they asked to give all the details. Like it— it's, kind of, just, like, I feel like I've done it so many times with so many people, like, it doesn't really bother me that much. Like, I probably— chances are, I— there's a very, very low chance that, like, when, like,

> telling someone my story or, like, everything that happened, that I'll, like, start crying. Like, I'm just so, like, almost, like, numb to it now. So, it wasn't super, um, stressful I guess because of that. 'Cause I— yeah, so, like, I— I don't know. I think the interactions were good between us but, like, emotionally it didn't really, like, it didn't really, like, trigger a huge, um, you know, like— I don't know, like, anxiety about it. Just, kind of, the way that I've handled it.

Emotional dissonance is a form of self-gaslighting as it implies making a judgment and placing value on emotional responses; in addition, reveling in the ability to reject or control one's emotionality. Nine survivors discussed being uncomfortable with crying or simply not engaging in that behavior. Mary-Beth shares that being able to talk about her rape without crying allows her to tell people without an issue. She notes that she is numb to the experience and being numb is a way to deal with trauma. But it is how she describes the emotional numbness. She described it in a way that communicates "I am strong," and I am "unaffected," so much so that she can tell people about her rape in detail with no issue. At 16 years old, Miracle is already showing emotional dissonance. She describes how she emotionally engages with being raped:

> "Anyhow, I was fine. You know, I've been raped before um, I know how to deal with it, cope with it 'cause I've had therapy for a lot of things, including that. Um, which I'm tryna get back to. But um I was fine so it wasn't like, it was like shocking, or like I just knew how to cope with it you know? Not think about it, not dwell on it, just try to get past it. Um, but also get the help that I need."

Miracle's experience mirrors Mary-Beth's to some extent, but she is still an adolescent, where emotional management is challenging to achieve due to the developmental period (McLean, 2005). Miracle does mention that she has undergone therapy which provided her the skills to

"cope with it." But again, it is in the *how* Miracle talks about her emotional detachment. She says it wasn't "shocking," and she was "fine."

"SVU-Raped". This manifestation of internalized oppression highlights instances where the survivor believes that rape or sexual assault exists within the narrow confines of specific characteristics. Occurrences of this form of internalized oppression took on this moniker of *"SVU-Raped"* because several survivors specifically spoke about the television show Law and Order: Special Victims Unit as a reference for what a *real rape* is and what the *real survivor experience* includes. Survivors that had this form of internalized oppression emerge in their story were critical of their lived experience because it did not fit the dominant cultural narratives around rape (e.g., a stranger rape; sustaining visible injuries; being raped in a dark alley). Eighteen survivors mentioned instances of their experiences that aligned with "SVU-Raped". This category included what survivors believed constituted a (1) real rape, (2) what kind of people rape, (3) what kind of people are raped, and (4) how survivors are supposed to respond to being raped or sexually assaulted.

Survivors spoke of particular characteristics of a rape that they believed qualified it as a real rape. For example, survivors believed that rape resulting in visible physical harm made it more legitimate. Survivors thought those rapes where the person fought back or had specific memories of how the rape transpired meant that the rape occurred. And several survivors discussed vaginal penetration as a key indicator of real rape. Wynona, a 29-year-old White cisgender woman, talked about her perceptions of rape, and how it should be visibly apparent that violence occurred. Wynona did not sustain physical injuries visible to others, and thus she believed it was not a real rape. She describes in more detail:

> "Alright. And I still-I still— I'm working on the whole devaluing and being like, oh, it was a little rape. Because I didn't get hit, it wasn't violent, I didn't have multiple assailants, uh, I wasn't held at knife point. Um, but I tell myself, like, those are so traumatic. But, at the same time, I shouldn't say— like, the little rapes. The little rapes are just as, like— are traumatic in their own ways as well. And, if— I don't want any young… young people to go through that either because I don't want, like— I don't want them to feel devalued. And, like, them saying no doesn't mean anything. So, but even if it wasn't a violent rape… I still wouldn't want it to happen to anybody else."

Wynona conveyed this false idea that rape is always violent and severely injures the victim in the process, even though this is not the case for most survivors. In this study, 14 of the 22 survivors reported that they sustained no physical injuries at all. Most rapes are committed by someone known to the survivor, and serious injury is not always an outcome after someone is raped. Wynona continues to share:

> "Like, an SVU episode. Like, good ole black eye and disheveled, like 'Oh, okay, let's go get this woman some help [laughter]. She looks like she's hurt.' Sometimes people are hurt without lookin' like they're hurt [laughter].

Other survivors focused on if and how penetration occurred to indicate if it was a real rape or not. For example, Parker was digitally penetrated by their stepfather many times, but they understood that as only sexual abuse. Though digital penetration meets the legal definition of rape, Parker was very adamant about people viewing their assault as rape because they did not see it that way. Parker says:

> "Um, and that seems, like, a generalized reaction. You know, that that is the go-to response, um, is that 'Oh well, you must have been raped.' And it almost feels like trying

to correct them and be like, 'Oh sorry, no, I was only sexually abused,' you know, like, [laughter-expressing irony] no, I wasn't raped. I was, you know, poked and prodded inappropriately, you know."

Kai, a transmasculine man, brought attention to that point by saying that real rapes are usually defined as "PIV" (i.e., penis in vagina) rapes, and that excludes a lot of other people whose rapes did not involve vaginal penetration via a penis. But Kai distinctly calls attention to that misconception when he says:

"I was worried that, like, it wasn't real assault because it was from a woman. Um, and because there, like, wasn't a penis involved, um— yeah. There were a lot of things that were-that were complicated."

So, while sexual violence is targeted among those with feminized identities, we must also admit that feminized people also rape. Both things are true.

Aside from what real rape is, there were also ideas and beliefs about who is raped. Five survivors expressed their dismay or confusion about why they were sexually assaulted, because they followed all the societal norms and rules. For example, people stated that they dressed appropriately, were in a relationship, or made all the right decisions, so they didn't understand why they were raped. This sentiment occurred many times in Barbara's story as she tried to make sense of her many experiences with rape:

"Right, but I…I needed that other piece of he knew I had a boyfriend and he knew my b—like he was friends with— it wasn't just that I had a boyfriend, he was friends with my boyfriend and I was friends with his girlfriend. Like they—all that was solid, solidified. It was like he knew I wasn't a slut or-or I— he knew I wasn't like…like we all knew each other. And I was nice, and I was— and I

> didn't say oh, you're a fat slob and I don't want anything to do with you. I was— you know, I said the appropriate—that was me, always be appropriate always be polite, always be nice. And I did all of that. So when he came at me it was like no, I wasn't confused in my head. I wasn't questioning— did I wear the wrong thing? Did it—you know, is-is it 'cause I was a cheerleader, is it-is it because I— my boobs are too big? Or— I mean it— I wasn't [cellphone rings] — sorry I meant to shut that up."

Barbara experienced confusion because she thought she did not embody the characteristics that put others "at risk" for rape. Barbara believed she was well within the boundaries that were supposed to protect her from things like rape. She goes on to say, "So, but in certain areas, like people that were married, people that were in committed relationships, like those were clear boundaries to me." This also showed among survivors who deemed themselves the "goodie-goodie" when they were young, so they wondered why someone chose to rape a "good girl." This creates a dichotomy where there is a "bad girl" who deserves or is likely to be raped. Another survivor talked about being an "ardent feminist." Even though she had a classical gender studies education and "had all the tools," she was still raped. Inherent in these "boundaries" or assumptions is the oppressive messaging that tells us who deserves to be raped and who does not.

Seven survivors discussed who they believed raped others; they thought mean and angry men raped people. Two of our survivors subscribed to the myth of 'stranger rape,' and because they were raped by someone they knew or were in a relationship with, it created a sense of confusion. Others thought that certain substances make people rape, particularly naming alcohol

as a contributing factor. Sade talks about the conflation of who raped her, and their joint substance use made her rape less legitimate. She states:

> "So, like, I thought that the idea of your boyfriend raping you was, like— I didn't even think that was a thing. And, like, I thought that people just wouldn't believe that. And then, the fact that I was under the influence, I thought that people would think I just, you know, like, had changed my mind, or, like, just didn't remember it right. So, like— I mean, like, I thought that about myself, you know? So like, I just— I thought I had so many strikes against me in that-in that aspect."

In addition, some survivors felt they may not act in ways that align with being a "good victim." Four survivors thought that if they did not respond in conventional ways associated with victims of sexual assault, then it would make them less believable. Raven, a 20-year-old, White cisgender woman was sexually assaulted by her ex-boyfriend when she was 14 years old. She describes why adolescents may do things that people may find "unusual" after an assault:

> "I think, like, first and foremost, the fact that, like, none of us are gonna be, like, necessarily, like, like, legally the greatest victim ever. Because we're, like, so young and don't know what we're doing, and we're, like, close, usually, to this person who's, like, done this thing, and we don't understand that it's wrong necessarily. So, we might still be friends with them, or still be in a relationship with them, or not report it right away. But, that doesn't change the fact that it happened."

This challenges the ideas about how a survivor is supposed to respond after being raped or sexually assaulted. Certain expectations in our culture dictate that someone should be "shaking in a corner," as one survivor described. Now that we understand that people respond in various ways after a trauma, we must realize that there is no one way to be after a rape or sexual assault.

Raven calls for a new understanding, especially for young people. Adolescents may, in fact, still maintain their relationship or choose not to report their assault, and that is not only normal but acceptable.

The manifestations of internalized oppression in the forms of perceptions of limited agency and power, self-gaslighting, and "SVU-Raped" provided much insight and clarity on the manifestations and extent of the effects of internalized oppression among these 22 survivors of sexual assault. However, that is not the whole story. There were also moments of clarity and increased consciousness that helped survivors process their assault and encouraged them to seek resources and support. In the next section, I will share some of the manifestations of conscientization that emerged in survivor stories.

Manifestations of Conscientization

Internalized oppression noticeably arose in the data and was the focal interest of this study. Yet, conscientization became apparent as well. With increased understanding of internalized oppression, experiences of conscientization became more easily identifiable because of the stark contrasts to internalized oppression. Conscientization is the increasing critical awareness of one's sociopolitical world that allows for the identification of contradictions and untruths in an oppressive society. Just as oppressive messages about rape and sexual assault gave rise to internalized oppression, anti-oppressive messages activated the conscientization process among survivors. Three key categories emerged that facilitated the internalization of anti-oppressive messaging and fostered critical consciousness development. Conscientization was grouped around the survivors' experiences of (1) the process of awakening, (2) having power and agency, (3) and self-love.

Awakening. Awakening emerged in twenty-one of survivors' stories in this study. *Awakening* involved survivors beginning to see their experiences and themselves outside of a dominant lens. This section outlines the things that facilitated the survivor beginning to wake up to their consciousness around their experience with sexual violence. Additionally, it demonstrates how survivors continued to grow and develop their level of consciousness. This occurred in several ways: (1) naming the harm, (2) engaging in self-reflection leading to realization, and (3) others helping to facilitate the awakening process.

Survivors described how they struggled to acknowledge their rape or sexual assault, specifically when naming it for themselves and others. Naming the harm allowed the survivor to use their voice and disrupted the silence that internalized oppression maintains. Unfortunately, there are several barriers in place that can create a distorted picture to make it harder for survivors to acknowledge their rape. Still, survivors overcame a number of the barriers to say "I was raped" or "I was sexually assaulted." The awakening process is often marked by cognitive dissonance when what we understand as truth no longer feels true (Harro, 2000). Corrine is unabashedly unafraid to name her rape, so much, so she wanted to make sure that word was used in her case against the two boys who raped her:

> "Um…but ultimately, like, the {prosecuting attorney} was like, 'They're gonna plead guilty to indecent assault and battery'. And I was like, 'And what does that mean?' And they were like, 'Well, it's 'cause they penetrated.' And I was like, 'Well, isn't that rape? Like, I really want that R-word used.' And they were like, 'Well, we're just gonna-we're just gonna do a plea deal. It's easier for you.' And I was like, 'Do I not get, a like—' like, they, I didn't get a choice, I didn't get a say. They were just like, this is what's easiest, show up at the court on this date."

This is a poignant moment because Corinne was gang-raped and experienced much suffering and confusion after that. When she went to college about a year after her assault, she returned to her hometown with a renewed spirit and was ready to fight to ensure others acknowledged the harm and that the boys who raped her were going to be held accountable. Demi worked hard to name her experience and was able to do so with the help of a therapist. She shares:

> "But I have— I've been calling it sexual assault more recently because I have been talking about it a lot more. Which is probably why— I think 'cause it's been something I've been addressing, why I feel able to talk about it like this. Because it-it's something that I've already— like I've been opening up to for like the last couple months of talking about it more. Very gradually of bringing it up and then not talking about it, and then bringing it up again. And it's been something that, like, me and my current therapist have discussed about wanting to talk about. But, if it was just like when I felt like I was ready to actually…lo-look into it. If that makes sense? Or go, go into it."

Demi's process was gradual because she enlisted the help of a therapist to help her explore her feelings and feel more comfortable discussing her experience, that she understands as a sexual assault. Although, in sharing her story Demi describes what can legally be defined as rape.

Table 5

Manifestations of Conscientization (*N=22)*

Type of Manifestation	**Number of Participants**	**Racial Identity**			
		Black	White	Latine	Asian

Conscientization	**22**				
Awakening	*21*				
Naming the harm	17	4	12	0	1
Self-Reflection to Realization	15	3	10	1	1
Being in Community	9	2	6	0	1
I Have Agency and Power	*21*				
Speaking Out	19	5	12	1	1
Lead in Decision-Making	16	4	11	0	1
Advocacy	13	2	10	1	0
Self-Love	*18*				
Secondary grace	13	2	10	0	1
Relinquishing Blame	10	2	7	1	0
Knowing their Worth	2	1	1	0	0

We were fortunate to be able to speak with survivors many years following the focal assault. As a result, some survivors reflected on assaults that happened more than 10-35 years ago. Fifteen survivors talked about engaging in reflection where they could recognize how they were harmed and what injustices they endured in their lived experiences. This created clarity to alleviate feelings of confusion. Laura describes how she was able to reflect and recognize that her school chose to center the person who raped her during post-assault proceedings. Laura shares:

> "Um, I think the whole dichotomy of how the-how the Dean made me and the rapist write our versions of events and compare them. That's a pretty out of control feeling. Um… and it felt weird to be treated as an equal to-to a rapist like that-like that's really what he was doing was, he was trying to make it, like, fair for both of us. And, it was like, no I'm accusing him of something and he was— he basically gave him a platform to accuse me of lying. Um, so I feel, like, that was a pretty out of control feeling."

Laura realized that the Dean of her school was being manipulative. She mentioned that at the time, it made her feel like she lacked control. But here, she acknowledges the harmful actions that occurred during her post-assault process. Other survivors were able to acknowledge that the person who harmed them was not acting in love. For example, Amari was groomed by her grandmother's boyfriend, who told her he wanted to marry her when she was 13 years old. Amari acknowledged that her age made it harder for her to see the truth: She acknowledges the true nature of her "relationship" with her grandmother's boyfriend below:

> "But then the thing is he would try to come to my room, and just… he would like… I would like undress for him, you know, 'cause I would try to make him happy 'cause I thought this was a normal relationship. So, but like, I was like… 'cause I was so young and naïve, I was like, but I'm like 'Why'd ya have a relationship with a 50-year-old man'. So, and I was like, what is, 'What's going on here'. But yeah, um, so yeah.

This acknowledgment allowed her to see that it is inappropriate for a 50-year-old man to engage in a sexual relationship with a 13-year-old girl. Amari and Laura began to see the reality of their situations through reflection and were willing to acknowledge the harm committed against them. Other survivors were able to take a critical approach and acknowledge the nature and function of sexual violence in American society. Kai offers their thoughts on why he would not necessarily encourage someone to report their assault:

> "And so, it's more traumatizing to put somebody through the process of, you know, rape kits and terrible, terrible, terrible police interactions, because police don't understand that people disassociate during trauma. So, it's, like, you can't give all the details because you don't remember them, and that's just how your brain works. Like, I just could not recommend somebody go through that traumatizing process when they could be focusing

on healing instead. If it were a perfect world, and rapists got persecuted, I would absolutely tell them to face legal things. Because I think, if the legal system worked for rapists, it would be very healing for me to know that they can't hurt anybody else. But with just the way that it is right now, like, nothing happens. So, I can't in good faith tell somebody to go and re-traumatize themselves for nothing to happen."

Kai acknowledges that not all the mechanisms available for survivors to address their assault are in a survivor's best interest. He understands that our justice institutions do not always adequately address the harm committed. Recognizing the systemic issues and injustices embedded within our social systems and their effects on us is a definite indication of consciousness.

Survivors were exposed to alternative views and beliefs that influenced them to see their rape or assault more clearly. Being around other survivors or hearing other survivor stories was instrumental in helping survivors in this study understand their experience and feel safe to say they survived rape or sexual assault. Nine survivors reported being in community with others who have similar lived experiences, where they could exchange knowledge with other members of those communities. Survivors noted the importance of this learning and community space as integral in helping them progress in conscientization. Amari was assaulted between 9-13 years old, and she confided in her friend nearly every day about what was happening to her. Her friend was also someone who experienced sexual abuse and worked with Amari to feel comfortable telling someone about the abuse she was experiencing. Amari describes the progression of that situation:

Amari: And like we were so close, like she told me everything. That she would tell me all the stuff that happen to her. And okay so like, if she's comfortable telling me stuff, then maybe I can tell her something. And she was also like, she was, she was smart, you

know. And I thought she had it all figured out. So I was like, okay, so maybe she can help me. And also, like, that pregnancy scare, like and that it just the fact that they, like… I thought, like, I was happy. You know, I thought seventh grade was the peak of my year, you know? I thought like, uh, um, I was so grown because a older man wanted me. But I'm like, this is not okay. So, I just told her. And she was like— an-and I… because of how many times I told her and how often. I told her, like, every day. And you know— so my friend used to see the guy, and they didn't know, like, what was happening. And then, um, just um, just, just the, how, the abnormality was, was...so yeah.

Interviewer 2: So you told her every day what was happening?

Amari: Every day. Every single day. Everything that would happen, she, she knew.

Amari's friend being vulnerable in her sharing and working with Amari to devise a plan to tell a trusted adult was successful because of that community and friendship. Helping someone grow in their consciousness is rooted in love, care, and patience; it can help someone feel okay to address the uncertainties associated with post-assault processes. Erica spoke about the community she built in college that allowed her to feel more comfortable sharing her experiences and helped her gain deeper insight. Erica shares:

"So, I— that's when I started college. Um, and I think I had a core group of friends, uh, who— we would, like, be really open and talk about stuff. And, um, also just again, like, being a gender studies major, I think I, kind of, had this, like, personal idea of, like, oh, like…this is what 'x' is and this is what, like, 'y' thing happened. So, like…for me, it was very much, like, a personal understanding of, like, this was assault. And then, like, having it, kind of, confirmed by other people.

Erica notes that her college community and self-reflective processes were significant in empowering her to name her assault. When she was able to be in a community with liked minds, it only solidified what she came to understand about her experience. Erica was the only survivor who also talked about the #MeToo Movement being instrumental in helping her and her friends understand their experiences with sexual assault. As survivors continued or began to awaken, it also empowered them to claim their agency and power.

I have agency and power. Power and agency are woven throughout this dissertation for many reasons. In this manifestation, survivors recognized and embraced their own personal or collective power to make internal or external changes. These moments shared in survivor stories showed the reclamation of their power, agency, and voice. Nearly every survivor (N= 21) mentioned that they claimed their power and agency at some point in their journey following a disempowering experience with sexual violence and post-assault processes. Demonstrations showing survivors reclaiming their power and agency looked like them (1) speaking out and directing their narrative, (2) taking the lead in decision making, (3) engaging in advocacy, and (4) trusting themselves.

One demonstration of their power and agency was the decision to disclose and tell others about their assault. Eighteen survivors discussed speaking out about their experiences and being in control of their narrative. Some survivors disclosed to others days following their assault, and other survivors waited years. Considering that so many struggled with the decision to tell others, at least initially, when they did tell, it was exercising their agency and demonstrating their personal power. Survivors expressed their desire to share their story and direct their narrative, specifically in response to interview questions about their decision to participate and what they

liked about participating in the study. Miracle talks about what motivated her to share her story in the interview. She states:

> **Miracle:** Um, honestly, to s– people to hear a side of the people it's happening to. Like— this, like you said, its, this could all happen but like, no one ever hears my side of what happened and how, you know, my experience was. They just know I was raped. They don't ask all the questions that are needed…for me to feel like, okay.
>
> **Interviewer 1:** And why do you think it's important to be able to— for us to hear from you?
>
> **Miracle:** Um… just so you see where I'm coming from, you know how, um, what I'm dealing with. You know, it's just a good feeling for other people to understand, even if they weren't raped. You know, just to hear how someone else is feeling.
>
> **Interviewer 1:** So how does it feel to be asked about kind of all those other things?
>
> **Miracle:** It feels good, it feels helpful, um… It feels like my voice is being heard. Like someone hears me and understands me. So, yeah.

Miracle comprehended the importance of sharing her story and understanding her experience. As she said, just knowing someone was raped does not tell the whole story, and by sharing her story, she allows others to learn about the unique and ubiquitous experiences of sexual violence. Both are valuable. Veronica also talked about the importance of directing the narrative, considering the conflicting messages in society about rape and sexual assault. Veronica explains this further:

> **Veronica:** Um, and…it's important to tell your story the way you want it to be told. 'Cause I feel like— I don't know, I feel, like, even now I'm, like, trying to think of, like, how exactly to say everything— not as much, but just, like, I wanted to be listened to and, like, told the way that exactly how I said it. Not like, 'Oh well, like, she was with

people who were drinking she must have been drinking.' 'Cause, like— or, like, someth— and, like, it doesn't-doesn't matter what the, like, situation was, like, it's something that happened to you. You couldn't have controlled it [sniffles].

Interviewer 2: So, is that, kind of, the important part, like, telling somebody because it is coming from you? This is your stor— [crosstalk]

Veronica: Yeah, I think so. And, like, it happened to you but you can still direct the narrative.

Not only was Veronica aware of how survivors' stories can be mishandled, she recognized that survivors also have the power to control their narrative and ensure their story is told correctly. In this study, survivors exercised their agency and power when they could decide how to handle their narrative and any other post-assault decisions.

Survivors were worried about having their decisions made by others, so when survivors spoke out and said, "it's my decision," it allowed them to claim their agency. Fifteen survivors discussed feeling empowered to make decisions and trusting themselves to do what is best for them. During Glen's interview, he made sure to reiterate that he decided to report his stepfather for years of sexual abuse. He did this without the support of his mother *and* after his stepfather previously made him go to the police to retract a previous report. Glen went back on his own to report his stepfather once again without additional supports. When asked what motivated him to return the second time, he said, "I was brave. I know he really did it. I wanted to stick up for myself and put it all to a stop." Amari also talked about feeling good about her decision and trusting herself:

"Um, but I feel like now I have more control because my mindset is growing, um. A lot of people say I'm mature you know. And, you know, I try to make decisions that are best

for myself because I know myself better than anybody else. But, um, well like um… I guess before there was no control. Everybody made decisions for me. But now I learned that I have to make my decisions for myself. You know, obviously, I-I still have to consult my parents about a lot of things, but yeah. I feel like I have more control now than before."

Thirteen survivors demonstrated their power by engaging with formal services to try and hold the person who caused them sexual harm accountable. Several times in this study, survivors conquered their fears and advocated on behalf of others to hold the people who committed sexual harm accountable. For example, Sade did not tell anyone about her assault, but she testified on behalf of her friend. Her friend confided in her that her father had been raping her and asked her to keep it a secret. Years later, Sade was asked to testify that her friend disclosed the rape to her years prior. Sade was traumatized by officials in court but was happy she could speak out for her friend. She describes that day in court here:

"Yeah. I mean, it was amazing, like, I-I was so happy for her, and, like, she was, like, emo— like, no emotions that day, and I was, like, a mess. So, it was, like— it was-it was a very surreal experience. But, like, I was really, really happy that, you know, he was, um…you know, he was put in jail and he was deported back to the {Country 2}. And, like, he couldn't be around her anymore, so that— and her siblings, so that was, like, amazing.

But— yeah. So, like, it-it was, like, almost, like— I-I-I was just, like, happy that I could do that, and, like, it was, sort of, like, almost, for both of us. Yeah. But it was terrifying, it was a terrifying experience. It was like the lawyer was, like, yelling at me [laughter-expressing discomfort]. I was just, like, this is the worst."

Sade testified in court at 16 years old. She was happy to help her friend, and she reported feeling like she was speaking out for both of them. Even though survivors did not disclose initially, some survivors advocated for others by telling their personal truth. Outside of the court of law, survivors made sure to identify themselves as an ally or advocate for loved ones in their life, especially younger sisters, or cousins. Other survivors began to volunteer at rape crisis centers or sexual assault advocacy centers to help other survivors.

Self-Love. Manifestations of conscientization were categorized as *self-love* when survivors extended love and care to themselves. Scholars and community practitioners write and talk about self-love as a combatant to the effects of internalized oppression (David et al., 2019). It is the antithesis of internalized oppression, and in this dissertation, lifted survivors out of the mires of oppressive thoughts. Eighteen survivors talked about moments in which they demonstrated self-love. Survivors demonstrated self-love by showing themselves (1) secondary grace, (2) relinquishing blame, and (3) knowing their worth.

The most common manifestation of self-love, with thirteen survivors exhibiting this form of conscientization, was the act of granting themselves *secondary grace*. Survivors often scrutinized their experiences and decisions, and secondary grace occurred when survivors viewed their assault or post-assault experiences with a more forgiving lens. Secondary grace often happened after a period of self-reflection, and for some survivors, that translated to several years after their assault. However, it was less about understanding and more about absolving oneself from blame and recognizing one's humanity. Iris, a 20-year-old White cisgender woman who was assaulted by her friend, shares that she was able to grant herself some post-assault reprieve when she looked back at her experience. She shares:

> "Like, so I can look back and— like, I-I look back at myself in a sense of detached form. I look at my 15-year-old self, and I say okay, I was acting like this because A, B, and C. And then I reinfo— reattach myself and try and picture myself as that 15-year-old kid and then I, like, look through the lenses."

Iris took a bird's eye view of her experience and was able to see that she was 15 years old at the time and she was doing the best she could. She recognized that there were reasons why she did what she did, and it was okay. Barbara similarly realized that rape is not normal and that one can do nothing to train or prepare for that experience. She states:

> "And it's a whole different thing, it's different if someone physically attacks you. And you still may res— I still may respond by not being able to do anything— I don't know how I'm gonna respond. But when it's a sexual attack, it-its-it's a deeper— it's a different layer, how you respond to is— comes from a different place. It's not a— it's not a— it's not the same thing. It's not processed in the same way. It's not like, you know, I'm the-I'm the lamb and here comes the lion and I better run. It's, you know, the lion's coming and doing something he's never done before, and you don't know— you don't know— you don't kn— you-you don't get— like it's not something you've experienced."

Barbara describes rape as a visceral experience that no one can predict how they will react. She says, "It's not predictable, and no amount of preparation will prevent it once the lion decides to attack." And she extends herself some grace for accepting that she did not know how to respond to a situation she had never experienced. She did not know how to react when a friend suddenly turned into a foe. Practicing self-love by refusing to blame oneself and not judging one's past is evident of conscientization because internalized oppression fosters feelings of self-hatred.

Working complimentary with secondary grace is relinquishing blame. Ten survivors were able relinquish blame and this demonstrated their ability to challenge internalized oppressive thoughts. Survivors discussed how difficult it was not to blame themselves and how it took them time to arrive at a point where they either limited self-blaming beliefs or eradicated those beliefs. Faith exemplifies this releasing of blame after several people in a club assaulted her. She talks about her process in relinquishing blame:

> "Hm, at first, I was, like, really hard on myself about it. But, um, I had to realize that it wasn't my fault. So, like, throughout the weeks— it usually takes me, like— I'm not really too sensitive, so it doesn't take me too long to really get over things, even though this is something really serious. Um, and I have to deal with it, like, throughout my whole life. Um, I just had to learn, like, to just not be hard on myself about it because it just wasn't my fault."

Faith shares that she struggled with self-blame but realized that she had to let that go. She recognized that she might have to deal with this for an extended period of time, but it doesn't help to continue blaming herself.

A less common demonstration of self-love was when survivors stated that they were worthy and didn't deserve the harm their experienced. Wynona specifically mentions taking the time to invest in her healing and embracing her emotions. She says:

> "And I realized I had a lot of stuff that I wasn't dealing with, and that I was running from. And, what ended up happening— like, what I ended up realizing, I was living a very empty life, 'cause I didn't value myself. And because I didn't value myself, I didn't even know what would make me happy [participant becomes tearful], like, agony, 'cause I wasn't worth happiness. So, since then… it's been nice to, like, find myself and to give

myself time and space and enjoy-enjoy life, like, through-through dealing with past trauma. Um, so, it sounds that it took so long, but, at the same, time… I feel lucky that I, kinda, made a conscious decision to feel."

Both Wynona and Zora talked about making sure they knew, and others knew that they were worthy and had value.

Reinforcement or Disruption of Internalized Oppression and Pathways to Conscientization

Internalized oppression and conscientization are not fixed processes; once planted, they must be nurtured and maintained, much like their corresponding outcomes of oppression and liberation. Survivors consistently described several moments post-assault that either reinforced or disrupted oppressive ideologies, and either perpetuated or mitigated harm. The way informal or formal supports responded to survivors' post-assault was influential on what messages (i.e., oppressive, and anti-oppressive) were transmitted and possibly internalized by survivors. Oppression can be exerted through imposition or force, whereby oppressed persons are inundated with messages that uphold and maintain distorted or harmful beliefs (David & Derthick, 2014). Thus, reinforced or disruptive experiences provides insight and context into how internalized oppression and conscientization was cultivated among survivors in this study. The following section offers post-assault experiences described by survivors where their interactions with informal or formal supports reinforced oppression and potentially fostered internalized oppression. It also highlights survivors' post-assault experiences where informal or formal supports disrupted oppression and provided a pathway to conscientization.

Reinforcing Experiences. Reinforcing experiences were defined by moments in the survivor's post-assault process where oppressive ideologies and continued victimization were reinforced through exposure to oppressive messaging. In some instances, there was alignment

with reinforced experiences and manifestations of internalized oppression. For example, a reinforced experience can exacerbate the internalized oppression the survivor may be experiencing at the time. Essentially, informal or formal supports interact with survivors in a manner that could confirm their initial thoughts and beliefs.

Survivors described feeling insignificant when interacting with the police, hospital staff, teachers, and behavioral health professionals. During these interactions survivors were exposed to oppressive messaging through direct or indirect communication or action. Post-assault interactions and experiences that reinforced oppression and promoted continued victimization remained significant, and at times were incorporated into meaning-making processes. For instance, Miracle, a 16-year-old survivor, was driven to the hospital because she was told that she needed care following her rape a few days prior. When she arrived at the hospital, her welcome did not indicate to Miracle that she would receive her needed care. Instead, Miracle met a nurse who made sweeping assumptions about the reason Miracle came to the hospital. She describes the interaction:

> "So when, I don't know who she thought I was or who she assumed I was, but it's not even that thought she was— I didn't even think that she thought it was a {legal code referencing emergency psychiatric hospitalization}. It was just the way she came off. Like, she didn't know who I was, and I didn't know if she thought I was someone else. But… what would she be able to assume if she didn't know who I was. Like, that's why I was kind of confused. Like… like yeah… like why are you assuming it's a bad case on your hand like that its gonna aggravate you. Or I'm gonna flip out or something. Like it's the way she was giving like she didn't even want to deal with it, but she didn't even know what it was."

Miracle reports that the intake person seemed annoyed by her presence and was not very kind to her. Miracle said that she felt she was expected to follow through with going to the hospital because she believed the police who responded to her "might think I'm [Miracle] lying." Miracle already anticipated that formal responders would not believe her prior to arriving at the hospital. When she arrived at the hospital, she was immediately met with disbelief and impertinence. This poor response reinforced the disrespect created by her rape and the oppression many survivors face, especially those of color, when attempting to access medical care.

Survivors also talked about being shamed, with seven survivors recalling times during the post-assault experiences where people said or did things that encouraged feelings of shame within the survivors. Corinne's rape was highly publicized in her small town, and because of the severity of the crime, it eventually went to trial. Corinne was subjected to social ridicule and shaming as a high school student by her peers and even her friends. Corinne talks about losing her friends following news spreading about her assault:

> "Um… [pause 9 seconds] probably just-just her [friend] not believing that it wasn't consensual. Um… I think at that point, like [sigh], there were weird rumors coming out. Um…and, as you— I think the way she reacted was just, kinda, like… like, no you're just a slut, kinda, stuff. Um… [sniffles] I think because the rumors were out there swirling, um… she felt, like, social pressure, to, like, hop on that bandwagon. Um… yeah, teen years are so [laughter-expressing discomfort]— we're so fickle at that age. Um… 'cause I remember being pretty traumatized to lose her."

When Corinne told her best friend, and she shamed and blamed her, Corinne shared that she "didn't know where to go." Corinne's friend slut-shamed her and fell into the social pressures to treat survivors of sexual assault as social pariahs. Corinne talked about telling a few of her

friends and not having positive interactions. She lost many of her friends and had to search for a new friend group. The reinforced experience depicts the shame and isolation that systems of oppression produce.

Three survivors specifically mentioned being silenced or unable to discuss their assault with others because people did not want to hear about it. Laura tried to access the Title IX office at her school, which is supposed to address issues of sexual assault on a college campus. However, when Laura attempted to access that resource, she was turned away. She describes that interaction here:

> "Um, and I went to the Title IX Director actually, um, because I was starting to get—I was starting to feel very bullied in my meetings with the Dean where I—he was a very charismatic guy. And I was starting to feel, like, he was, kind of, just…wearing me down until I was agreeing to do what he wanted to do. So, I contacted the Title IX Director and said 'Hey,' I'm like, 'I really need an advocate, can you help me?' And she basically just said, 'That's not my job,' and told me to leave. Um, I was like 'Okay'."

Laura had repeatedly been "bullied" by the Dean of her school. Thus, she wanted to have support in subsequent meetings with him to achieve some of her post-assault goals, like having the person who raped her removed from the dorm or acknowledging the harm committed. Unfortunately, multiple institutional actors reinforced that Laura's needs and experiences did not matter, and the support she desired would not be provided.

Oppression and continued victimization were also reinforced when the needs of others were prioritized, which often left the survivor having to adjust or risk losing a social resource. Sexual violence is demonstrative of ignoring the needs of one person to appease the needs of another. Reinforced experiences also reproduced this form of harm, but instead those committing

harm were the survivor's support systems. For example, Heather had been raped and assaulted several times but had not been explicit in naming her experience among her close friend group. Someone in her extended social network raped Heather, and when she finally understood what happened to her, Heather's friends did believe her. But they also treated her rape as an inconvenience and would not prioritize her. She describes her friends attempt to accommodate her:

> "I don't know what I needed, um, and then they did— it took them a long time to understand that I needed warning about going to social events, or if the perpetrator was gonna be there. It took them a little while to adjust to that, but I thi—they did end up, um, like, do—being able to do that, um, and, I believe that recently they actually still told me when he was gonna come, so they still do-do that sometimes, which I also appreciate. Um, that, like, that action in itself is really, um, it's not like we're not inviting him to do things, but the fact that like you're telling me beforehand is, um, still something that I value."

Heather appreciated that her friends were willing to inform her when the person who raped her would be at a social event. However, Heather notes that it took her friends some time to consider her comfortability at social events where the "perpetrator" was going to be present. Heather's friends did not choose to disinvite the person who raped her but committed to informing her before an event took place to allow Heather to decide if she wanted to attend events where the person who raped her would be there. When talking about why she believed her friends responded in this way, she said, "I think that they assume that my reaction about the situation is more extreme than it needs to be…and that might be me projecting on them." While Heather appreciated the effort and believed her friends were supportive, she shares that their support was

"not enough to, like, change their habits." Heather states that it was "disheartening" to have her friend group continually dismiss her feelings and not be deterred from wanting to continue a friendship with the person who raped her.

When survivors understood their rape or sexual assault and were able to name it, that was a tremendous feat considering the inundation of messaging they sifted through to claim control of their story. However, as they came into knowing their truth and shared it with others, that was a crucial time to disrupt oppressive ideology around perceptions of their assault. Laura, who was assaulted by a dorm-mate, was struggling to understand her assault. When she finally recognized what had happened to her, she went to confide in her friends. Laura shares:

> "And my roommate and her— or like our friend at the time, {friend 2}, was— were there and I-I, kind of, like, walked in and was like, 'Guess what I just realized?' Like-like I, kind of, just, sort of, had, like, this epiphany. Um, and that's when {roommate} was like, 'No, I don't believe you, you're taking this too far,' etcetera."

Laura had been trying to make sense of her experience with sexual assault. After finally trusting herself and concluding that she was assaulted, her friend told her that she didn't believe her, and she was "taking this too far." Consequently, Laura was made to feel like her truth and experiences did not matter. This was also a missed opportunity to challenge oppressive messaging and foster anti-oppressive cognition, but instead, her roommate followed up Laura's "epiphany" with an oppressive message. While this did not obstruct Laura's conscientization process, it did reinforce some aspects of internalized oppression, especially as Laura had just accepted that she was raped.

In Yelena's story, we can see how impactful it is when someone re-creates someone's narrative that is not authentic to how the survivor experienced it. Six survivors talked about the

ability to tell their story when they witnessed their story being co-opted. For illustration, Yelena was 15 years old when she went to court to get a judicial bypass to terminate a pregnancy that resulted from her father raping her. Yelena was told that she should make smarter choices when choosing to have sex by a court judge. The judge's re-telling of her rape tremendously impacted Yelena. She shares how much it affected her:

> "I think it was one, the fact that he had called my sexual assault, 'Sex,' and that he put the responsibility on me, as if I could've stopped and fought harder, you know? Like— and in that moment, I thought, like, does he know? Was he given the background? And he definitely was, 'cause my attorney, like, apologized and was like, 'He knows the circumstances.' So, that just made me feel like this is some shitty older dude, that's-that's judging me for being assaulted and doesn't think that it was assault, or maybe doesn't get it. I don't know what it was. But, I guess, when an older person, like, tells you to think harder as a kid, that's just, like, a shameful thing, like, think about the consequences, kind of, thing. And then, I was like— I guess, right after that, that's when I started to think, like, was it my fault? I guess was a bit more of how it turned into, and I was not feeling that way before."

Yelena exercised her power and agency when she went to a health clinic to receive medical care and then engaged, on her own, (aside from her lawyer) in the judicial bypass process and did so successfully. She did this because she knew her father raping her was not her fault and wanted to make the appropriate decisions for her health. The judge successfully reinforced oppression and fostered internalized oppression with one statement; he implanted doubt. However, reinforced experiences were not the only post-assault experiences that occurred in survivor stories.

Survivors also discussed post-assault interactions that were conducive to developing conscientization processes.

Disruptive Experiences. Survivors also described several interactions with others that disrupted common post-assault experiences rooted in oppression and reduced continued victimization. Disruptive experiences were those characterized by the actions of informal or formal supports that challenged oppressive ideologies and created validating experiences for survivors that provided a pathway to conscientization. The anti-oppressive messages functioned as a cog in the wheel and interrupted oppressive ideology associated with post-assault interactions that maintain oppression. During the re-telling of their interactions, some survivors described being exposed to anti-oppressive messages that disrupted their previous cognition rooted in oppression. Unlike reinforced experiences where oppression and internalized oppression are fostered and maintained, disruptive experiences disrupted oppression and potentially internalized oppression.

In some reinforcing experiences, survivors were shamed and told that the assault was their fault. For Zora, who had received so many oppressive messages and experienced internalized oppression because those beliefs were embedded into her neighborhood culture, she appreciates when others respond in ways that challenge some of the thoughts she held within. She describes such an interaction below:

> **Interviewer 2:** Right. And why is somebody's present and not accusing of something that is needed and appreciated?
>
> **Zora:** Because, often times, when things happen to you, you often feel like you either deserved it or did something you did to provoke it to happen. So, when you have someone there to say that it wasn't your fault, to say that, um, it didn't, um, necessarily

have to happen. This wasn't supposed to happen to you. It feels better, it just makes you feel better.

As Zora mentions, disruption of internalized oppression with anti-oppressive messaging makes survivors feel better. In this example, Zora talks about how not being blamed or shamed challenged some of her previously held beliefs by offering recommendations for responders informed by her own experiences. Zora says that survivors may believe that the assault was their fault or that they deserved what happened to them. Hence, it is imperative that informal or formal supports do what they can to disrupt those beliefs and thoughts by offering an alternative way to think and believe.

Survivors also described disruptive experiences where no one blamed or shamed them after sharing their assault and instead encouraged them. Five survivors described interactions like this in which they felt encouraged about their circumstances. For example, Sade struggled with shame after her assault for so many reasons. Sade experienced shame because she was under the influence during her rape and was hanging out at her boyfriend's house without her mother's permission. Those feelings of shame and guilt made it challenging to make sense of what happened to her. Sade's talk with her friend disrupted the self-blame that Sade was engaging in at the time. She recounts that poignant moment:

"Yes. So it-it-it, uh— it— I felt, like, sort of, like, this experience was, like, such, like, this hazy, sort of, like, 'Am I remembering it right?' Like, you know, like, that, kind of, stuff. And just to have someone— it was, like, someone putting, like, a magnifying glass and just, like, really focusing something that had been blurry for so long. So— yeah, that was really important for me. And, even when, like, I would continue to, sort of, waiver about that, like— I-I, like, still can see that moment, like, sitting on her couch at her

parent's house talking about that. It's, like, so vivid to me, and that was, like, also almost 20 years ago, you know, so."

Her friend helped Sade feel affirmed in her recollection of her experiences, which allowed her to release some of those thoughts and feelings related to shame. It was such a meaningful interaction that it continues to ground Sade and help her to remember that her story is as she experienced it and that she does not have to continue to engage in self-blame. This post-assault interaction demonstrates the power of anti-oppressive messaging as an intervention to disrupt internalized oppression and shows that the effects of disruptive experiences can extend beyond the interaction. They can help survivors when they begin to cycle back into internalized oppressive cognition around their assault.

Returning to Laura's story, the following example demonstrates when institutional actors disrupted internalized oppression and fostered Laura's conscientization. Laura was very active in addressing her own post-assault needs by requesting access to resources to help her do so. She was assaulted in the residential housing at her university. When she went to the school health center for care, she disclosed that she was raped to one of the staff members. She describes how the staff member followed up on her concerns:

> "Um, and so I-I did have a pretty good conversation with the woman who was working there and she said— 'cause obviously, like, they were getting ready for the next orientation. And she went to go, like, talk to her boss and they're like, 'We're gonna talk about having something happen at orientation where, like, people know that they can come to us after they had been assaulted.' I was like, 'Cool.'"

Laura had previously had poor responses from university administrators, so when this staff person listened to her story and then told Laura, she would address issues around sexual assault

at orientation for incoming students that made her feel like she mattered. This diversion away from oppressive messaging promoted a growing consciousness within Laura as she claimed her power and navigated multiple systems to address the harm committed against her. She asserted herself as she advocated for other potential survivors on campus and inspired changes to campus orientation to address issues around sexual assault.

Survivors' ability to make their own decisions and have their choices honored was rare, considering that many of the survivors were minors. When adults became aware of their assaults many times, the adults decided what happened next. But there were moments where five survivors talked about people letting them take the lead. Iris talks about letting her desires be known and having people honor her decisions. She shares:

> "Yeah. So, I had— like, when-when I went for this risk assessment, they said, 'Do you want the police involved?' And I explicitly said 'No.' And so, at that time in my life my dad was not really involved in my life— my choice. Um, but my dad obviously, um, would have to know, because like, even though I didn't really wanna be speaking with him because us children had, like, a lot of, like, just, like, conflict with him. But, like, my mom would have to let him know. Like, they were divorced but they shared, like, custody and stuff. But he hadn't heard that, like, I didn't want police involved, so like, he had gone to the police. But, like, when he heard that, like, I didn't want it involved, he, I think, got it dropped, like pretty soon after."

Iris was clear in her decision not to report her assault, and her father listened to Iris and followed her lead in the resource-seeking process. Her father honored her decisions and ensured that he used his power and authority to reinforce Iris' belief that she should have the power to make her

own post-assault decisions. This is especially important because survivors often feel like their power and agency are limited. In addition, Iris was a minor, so ultimately, her father could be instrumental in making Iris participate in legal processes.

After her rape at a high school party, Demi then went off to college, where she was exposed to alternative ways of thinking about sex, sexuality, and sexual violence. She was beginning to change her perspective on her assault after exposure to consistent anti-oppressive messaging, which fostered her conscientization. Demi shares how new social groups changed her thoughts and approach to her adolescent sexual assault and a subsequent assault she experienced while on winter break from college. She shares:

> "Like, you can—from being that age and getting older, like, understand, that like, this is not okay. And, like, I think I opened—after that experience I told more people. Like, I felt more open talking about it. Maybe, not to the person themselves. But, that experience that, like, that openness from the people around me—and not just talking about assault, but really just talking about sex openly. It changed a lot of things. I think."

For Demi, she was able to speak about her experience with others and share her story because other people modeled that behavior for her. She said it didn't "feel shameful or anything" to discuss her assault with others and supported her developing consciousness around sexuality and sexual violence. This change happened because Demi saw a "change in culture" and was consistently exposed to anti-oppressive messages that fostered her developing consciousness and reoriented her in an anti-oppressive perspective. Demi's story is a prime example of the influential power that disruptive experiences can have in creating pathways to conscientization and empowering survivors following an assault.

Disruption and reinforcement of oppression had the potential to intensify the survivor's suffering or completely stop the perpetuation of post-assault harm. Post-assault messages used by informal and formal supports either aligned with oppressive ideology or they did not; depending on that alignment it served as an apparatus for oppression or liberation. These types of experiences are crucial because they also have the potential to also influence survivor's processing. Reinforced and disruptive experiences show how oppression and liberation can manifest in post-assault interactions, and how those experiences can relate to the internalization of oppressive and anti-oppressive messaging. With that understanding, informal and formal supports can focus on messaging centered in disruption of oppression and consciousness building. The next theme demonstrates some key considerations that survivors of varying identities must confront and navigate when managing the aftermath of being sexually assaulted or raped.

"He is Black, I am White": Multiplicative Identities and Post-Assault Considerations

Survivor experiences are not a monolith. It is the reason critical race feminist theory was employed in this study because it calls us to recognize that all marginalized experiences are not the same. Thus, across intersecting identities, there were nuanced considerations that should be introduced to understand the many complexities associated with experiencing sexual violence within a multi-layered oppressive society. In this study, I could not incorporate all the multiplicative identities that each survivor had because that information was not collected systematically. This was an intentional choice to allow survivors not to be reduced to the sum of a range of identities and give them the power to choose what identities they would like to disclose. What I can account for systematically in this study is the survivor's racial identity, gender identity, and age. Each of these social categories is a criterion for oppression and intersect

to increase the likelihood that someone will be a target of sexual violence. This section will outline additional considerations that factored into survivor experiences with sexual assault and how that impacted the manifestations of their internalized oppression.

Racial Identity

Race is a social construction used in American society to determine how much resources, value, and power to ascribe to a specific group of people based on their racial identity (Pyke, 2010). Survivors who self-identified as members of a racially marginalized group had aspects of their story that varied from the predominantly White sample. These variances provided insight into how internalized oppression and post-assault experiences require survivors of color to consider their racial identity in how they are perceived as survivors of rape or sexual assault without the benefits and protections of whiteness. In this study, there were two notable experiences among survivors of color that did not appear in the stories of White survivors: (1) Survivors of color believed their racial identity would negatively impact their post-assault experience, and (2) survivors of color appeared to demonstrate regulated emotionality during their interviews.

Race Informs Post-Assault Experience. Survivors that identified as Black and Asian were the only survivors that talked about how their racial identity would negatively impact their post-assault experience. There was a hyper-awareness about how people perceive other people who have been sexually assaulted. The stigma around being a survivor is intensified when survivors factored in the racist beliefs about their claimed racial identities (McGuffey, 2013). While the one Latine survivor in this study did not explicitly discuss race, it does not mean that racialization did impact their experience. We did not directly ask people how racial identity influenced their experience, so any information we received from survivors was given

spontaneously in their stories. This phase of analysis captured times that race was alluded to or explicitly discussed by our Black and Asian survivors.

Five survivors self-identified as Black, and four of them discussed being perceived as more culpable in their own victimization and their mistrust of White responders to see them as deserving of care. Amari spoke about the assumptions people make about her and other Black people. When asked about recommendations for police, Amari says that police should stop assuming "we are all criminals…we're not always looking to get arrested". Again, while both Amari and Miracle do not explicitly name their Blackness as a reason for the assumptions people make, it is important to note that both were concerned and upset that people would make assumptions about them. Amari and Miracle were aware that the harm and pain they experienced were potentially not enough to overshadow the assumptions made about them that would find them deserving of care and support.

Sade explicitly talked about her Blackness being a factor in why she did not tell anyone about her assault. She speaks about her decision:

> "Well, okay. So I was drunk and high, I was dating him and his father's a lawyer and he is rich. I am not. He is white, I am black. And I felt, like, there was just, like, everything against me, like— and I just didn't think that anybody would believe me. And, it was already so fuzzy for me, like— so, I just was like, I don't— it's hard enough for me to, like, wrap my brain around this. Like, I just don't even know that I would be able to explain it in a way and have anybody believe me. So, um… [lip smacks] so, I didn't tell anybody."

Sade reports that along with some of the other concerns raised by White survivors in this study (i.e., being under the influence, lack of social/economic capital), she saw her Blackness as she

later referred to as a "strike against" her. Sade was critically aware of how Black people are perceived and treated in the United States and decided she had no redeeming information to convince others to believe the truth of her experience. Black people are forced to consider how their Blackness will impact their circumstances and whether their experiences and lives will matter (McGuffey, 2013). As Sade considered reporting her assault, she was critically aware of the dual nature of police and what their true objectives seem to be. When speaking about police Sade says, "I just grew up not trusting the police would ever— were ever here to, like, serve me. They were here to serve, like, White people and rich people, and not me." Amari and Sade both recognized the connections made in American culture between Blackness and culpability.

Sade and Zora, who self-identify as Black, discussed being a Black person who may be subjected to the judgments of the White people in their life, specifically White people who were institutional actors. Sade was a part of a small population of kids of color admitted into a special program that allowed her to attend an affluent school in the suburbs, where she was bused in from the city. She talked about being assaulted by her boyfriend who also went to her school, where she said she was an "outsider", and he was a part of the community. Although Sade was a very accomplished student, and the boy who assaulted her was not, she knew that her racial identity and social background would automatically disqualify her from compassion. Sade talked about wanting to tell her guidance counselor, but that gave her pause because she thought, "I guess, like, I just didn't really trust anybody to be impartial…it's, like, such a small community there." Which is a fair assessment, being that Sade went to a small school with a graduating class of 100 seniors in a predominantly White community where only "a tenth" of the school were people of color. Sade felt that being a young person of color from outside that small community would invite judgment, which would be biased against her.

One of the reasons Zora stated she could never be influenced to report to police was because of her godfather, a cop. However, her godfather's White racial identity was an added layer Zora felt would upset her mother. She states:

> **Zora:** At that time? No. There would have been nothing you could have told me or did to get me to go to the police, Mm mm.
>
> **Interviewer 2:** And was it specifically just people knowing, finding out, or was there other things too?
>
> **Zora:** It was my godfather. Who wants their godfather to know about their sex life, wanted or unwanted? And he was White. My mother would have skinned me alive, embarrassing her in front of that White man like that.
>
> **Interviewer 2:** Mm, okay. So, that was like some other additional—
>
> **Zora:** That's some southern shit right there.

Zora discussed how her godfather becoming aware of any sexual behavior she engaged in was undesirable. Still, she specifically drew attention to her godfather's White racial identity to express her mother's possible discontent and referenced "southern shit" as additional context to further explain her mother's response. Zora's anticipated that her mother would believe Zora's rape reflected poorly on her and can speak to the historical contexts of being under the microscope of the White gaze. Stereotype threat is a form of internalized oppression where there is an intrinsic fear that one's behavior confirms all the disparaging beliefs that white supremacy has created about one's racial/ethnic group. Black survivors were cognizant of how their Blackness influenced their life experiences. In addition, they were aware of how Blackness is

socialized in society and how that will expose them to further harm, even when they are asking for care and support.

Kai, the only person who self-identified as Asian, was the sole survivor to talk about the centering of White women's voices in the survivor community. Kai talked about his experiences in survivor support groups, where White women would monopolize the conversation, and Kai felt his voice went unheard. Kai specifically spoke about his multiplicative identities and how most system responses do not consider his needs:

> "But, I think-I think that, um, the more, like, niche you go, the more helpful it is, because I think, like, I— even though I and a white woman who has had a single assault share a lot of things in common, we have very different needs. And so, I think having resources specifically for LGBT people, or having resources specifically for people of color, or, you know, specifically for trans people, for sex workers, or whatever, I think is very helpful because all of those communities have very different needs, and the intersections of identity absolutely impact healing.
>
> And also, just because in spaces that are dominated— like, a lot of the spaces for sexual assault survivors are very much dominated by white women and, you know, I-I, like, I just don't have the opportunity to have a voice in those spaces. Um, and you know, having spaces where my voice is heard because they're not dominated by white women is very helpful."

Kai identifies the way that systemic changes must be made when responding to survivors with varying combinations of identities. The erasure of Black and Asian stories in the movement against sexual violence is real, and Kai demonstrates how harmful that erasure can be. Three White survivors mentioned race, and in each reference to race, White survivors discussed their

privilege and how it allowed them access to more resources and the time to focus on their healing. However, no White survivors spontaneously brought up their racial identity as a concern about how they would be treated or perceived.

Regulated Emotionality. Another pattern that emerged was the regulated emotionality among survivors of color during the actual interview. There were several instances in which survivors of color discussed being less impacted by sexual violence because they had experienced it previously and were strong enough to deal with it or that sexual violence was a normal or expected experience. Thus, they were equipped to weather the harmful impacts of rape or sexual assault. To demonstrate the latter form of regulated emotionality, Miracle referred to her experiences with rape as equipping her to know how to cope with rape and "deal with it." She reports that the focal rape discussed in the interview was "shocking," but she was "fine." Miracle was a survivor who we spoke to nearly a month after her assault occurred.

Regulated emotionality was most prominent when survivors talked about what would be perceived as traumatic and painful incidents but showed a disconnection from that painful experience, which is documented in this dissertation as *emotional dissonance*. While emotional dissonance did not emerge solely in the stories of survivors of color, six survivors of color had a least one presentation of this phenomenon. When Zora, a 37-year-old, self-identified Black cisgender woman, was asked how she felt about all the decisions she made during her post-assault experience in reference to her focal assault, she said:

> "For me, it's a sense of pride, 'cause I dealt with it. I didn't let it break me, I don't cry over it. It's not— it's nothing to be ashamed about. Like, right now, I could stand in front of a group people and talk about and not have no feelings about, like, I honestly thought I was gonna cry, but I-I'm not. You know what I'm saying? So, I feel good."

Zora, in this statement, felt proud that she was not emotional over her rape at 14 years old. She doesn't perceive it as the worst thing to happen in her life. She reports that she is a "boss bitch" because it didn't break her. And to be honest, that mentality probably saved her life. As we have seen in other stories, dissociating and disconnecting from the experience of rape allowed many survivors to continue to function. When people did sit down and connect with the experience of their rape and tap into those feelings, it often occurred much later. So, I understand the utility of that strategy. Zora's understanding is that she must be strong and fight, or else there are consequences to being perceived as "weak."

Veronica, the only survivor who self-identified as Latine, voiced concerns about being perceived as "weak" several times in her interview. Veronica talked about people becoming aware of her assault, and then seeing her as a weak person, describing that people "rushing to support" her was undesirable at the time. Amari also referenced not wanting people to "pity" her and feel sorry for her during her interactions with post-assault responders. Kai, who self-identified as bi-racial with Asian heritage, did draw connections between being a person of color and having trauma be an expected experience:

> "Um, yeah. I-I've been doing pretty well, um, with, like, not cutting people off and reaching out for support. Um, and so I've, like, connected with a couple other survivors and most of my friends are queer and people of color, which means that we're just all sort of traumatized [laughter-expressing discomfort] because we have pretty high rates of, um, bad stuff. But— yeah."

Kai often spoke about how his multiplicative identities impacted his life experience. He takes care to specifically call in the experiences of queer folx of color that are often subjected to traumatizing experiences specifically related to their claimed and assigned identities. Kai laughs

when discussing how his friends of color, specifically for their identities, experience trauma and "bad stuff" at "high rates." So much so that there is a community built around that reality. While emotional dissonance is a manifestation of internalized oppression, it must be recognized that being consistently traumatized is a part of lived realities for marginalized people, where deep emotional connection to that experience may be immensely painful and thus avoided.

Gender Identity

The focused analysis among differing gender identities of survivors in this study revealed three additional conceptions: (1) the association of power with masculinity and weakness with femininity, (2) the decentralization of non-binary experiences, and (3) normalization of violence and mistreatment of gender-expansive folks. However, without centering gender as a tether in this focused analysis, these additional findings would be non-existent. And without the offerings of gender-expansive folx, the influence of gender on the topic of interest would be significantly limited.

Masculinity is Power and Femininity is Weakness. Kai's story ignited the processing of masculinity and femininity. Kai was assaulted by his girlfriend, and he believed that because he was assaulted by a girl, no one would take his assault seriously. As Kai identified as a transmasculine survivor, he believed that being assaulted by a female would undermine his assertion of his masculine identity. At the time, Kai was newly out and was much more sensitive to threats to his masculinity. He talks about why he felt this way:

> **"**Um, I appreciated that, like, after I told her [Kai's ex-girlfriend], um— like, after I told her and after we had, like, a, like, talk, she didn't really, like, coddle me or, like, bring it up again. Um, I appreciated that, um, because I was already feeling a lot of, like, um— I was alr— I already had a lot of very complex emotions, um, especially about, like— I

had very recently come out as trans. Um, and there's this, like— I don't know, phenomenon that a lot of, like, trans-masculine people experience— or when you first come out, you're like, 'Yes, I have to be, like, manly.' Um, and, like, masculinity is something that's, like, very fragile in a lot of, like, newly out trans-masculine people, and that was something that definitely applied to me. Um, so I was very worried about that. Um, and I was worried about, like, um, you know, my-my, uh, assailant being, like, a woman, um, because a lot of, like—like, that just, like, doesn't happen, um, in any media."

Kai uniquely contributes to this study, by discussing the nuances in perceptions of masculinity and how they also influence how men behave and are perceived. For example, being assaulted by a woman made Kai feel like his masculinity could be challenged and judged. As someone who was trying to be perceived as masculine, that indeed can be anxiety-inducing. However, Kai shared that as he grew in his identity, being sexually harmed by a female no longer made him feel so insecure. Yet, his beliefs about masculinity as a young person show that internalized oppression can cause us to see ourselves through the dominant lens.

In continuance Kai's struggle to reconcile being assaulted by a woman, as a newly out transmasculine person, some survivors talked about gender identities and sexual orientations as "safer" to be around following a sexual assault. Heather and Laura talked about feeling less anxious around people who would not be attracted to them. Heather said that being around gay men, "there is no threat there," and feels comfortable interacting with them. Laura says when she is around solely women, she also feels much safer than when men are present. Zora discussed that because she was outspoken and defended herself from boys and men in her neighborhood; men and boys labeled her as a lesbian.

Erica discussed beliefs around masculinity and femininity in the form of expectations associated with gender identity. Erica says:

> "Um, and where I'm from, {Region 4}, originally, and I think there's a lot of just, like, gender expectations, unfortunately, on women. And, like, they are working class. And I think, like, there's an…uh, there's this idea of like, 'Oh well, like, if you're drinking, or if this.' But, um, I'm fortunate in the fact that, like, they understand that, like, no, these things are wrong."

Erica notes that gender expectations impact how her community perceived women who are raped or sexually assaulted. She also states that sexually violent men are excused for their behavior because men are expected to be pursuant of sexual pleasure at all times

Gender Expansive Stories Excluded from the Narrative. There were several ways that survivors who claimed gender-expansive identities felt excluded from the majoritarian narratives around sexual assault. One fundamental way is the assumption that all sexual assaults involve a cisman and ciswoman. Kai and Parker both said they didn't have typical or normal sexual assault stories because they were non-binary or trans. Kai also states that their Asian and disabled identities also put them outside the normalized understanding of survivor narratives. As Kai states:

> "But, I think-I think that, um, the more, like, niche you go, the more helpful it is, because I think, like, I— even though I and a white woman who has had a single assault share a lot of things in common, we have very different needs. And so, I think having resources specifically for LGBT people, or having resources specifically for people of color, or, you know, specifically for trans people, for sex workers, or whatever, I think is very

helpful because all of those communities have very different needs, and the intersections of identity absolutely impact healing."

Kai notes that White ciswomen are centered, and system responses are developed with their needs in mind, and that excludes folx like Parker, Jordan, and Kai, who may have different needs. Parker talks about how excluding non-binary or gender-expansive people from our understanding and responses to sexual assault will alienate a lot of people." Parker shares:

> "You know, like, at least that was my experience. You know, [laughter-expressing frustration] like, if you're gonna tell me, like— I'm gonna come in and tell you that I've been assaulted, and you're gonna tell me that it was a man that assaulted me, I'm probably not gonna wanna talk much after that, 'cause that's an assumption. Or on the flip side, being a masculine presenting person with a uterus, coming in and having someone assume that it was a female that assaulted me. Um, you know, things like that. Those kinds of things unintentionally— because they are so core, they are so tied to our identity, and who we are as a person, and shame, and vulnerability, and all those things. That, kind of, accidental exclusion, um, I think gate-keeps more than people realize."

Parker and Kai both discussed in their interviews that often queer stories are only included if they meet the needs and desires of others. Both have participated in other research studies and were told their stories didn't meet study criteria or they expected researchers to fetishize their stories because, as Parker pointed out, "it met their diversity bingo."

Normalization of Violence and Mistreatment of Trans Folx. Kai and Parker, who identify as trans and non-binary, respectively, talked about the normalization of violence against trans bodies. Internalized oppression can manifest as believing sexual violence is normal. However, it can also look like accepting the normalization of targeted violence against

marginalized bodies. Kai and Parker highlight how sexual violence against trans bodies is normalized and used to manipulate trans folx concerned with being outed. Parker is a non-binary person who conducts research with trans folks and talks about what some of their trans participants and friends share about their experiences:

> "Yeah, like, that buy-in is gone, um, especially with teens. Especially if it's their first foray into a same-sex partnership. Especially if it has to do with— I mean, trans-trans youth are most often coerced into sex for identity keeping, um, you know, to prevent being outed. Um, and they don't see that as rape, they see that as survival. They don't see that as coercion, they see that as a choice, to choose to offer sex to maintain an identity. And so, those-those teens are not coming in because they feel like they've been violated, they're coming in because they're afraid of who they are, and they're afraid to feel safe in their own body first."

Parker talks about sexual violence as a typical and expected experience among the trans community. Similar to the manifestations of normalization previously covered in this study. But according to Parker, trans folx' desire to keep their identity concealed is used to manipulate and coerce them into having sex. For marginalized people, a choice must be made, and that choice is survival. These experiences come from a non-trans person but seem to align with what Kai shares about his experiences as a trans person who has been forced into sex work. Kai describes his experience:

> "Yeah, because I know that, um, in times that I have been assaulted in sex work, I was, like, if I go to the police and they ask me what were you doing there, I don't know what I can say. Um— yeah. And since most, um— huh, maybe not most, but a lot of LGBTQ people— and then, every time you put, like, another intersection of, like, poor, LGBTQ

> people and, you know, trans people especially. Like, queer people are very active in sex work because a lot of times it's the only work that we can do. Um, and having competency and compassion for sex workers in sexual assault resources is essential because I…would not feel safe disclosing the full details of my assault if I didn't know that the place that I was reporting it to was sex worker competent."

Kai's story offers further enlightenment about the normalization and sexualization of queer bodies. Engagement in sex work is another form of survival for some trans folx, and because violence against gender non-conforming bodies and sex workers is normalized, Kai revealed that he had experienced sexual assault in doing sex work. It was a welcome perspective that Kai introduced in this study. Kai was the only one to mention sex work specifically and its practice in the trans community and the judgments associated with engaging in sex work.

Survivor's Age

The depth of processing was influenced by the length of time between the assault and the interview. However, when survivors did talk about their adolescent sexual assaults, they brought up several considerations that align with some of the previous findings. The considerations that emerged in this focused analysis were: (1) developmental age impacts the processing of the assault, (2) age limited agency and power, (3) and adolescent social ramifications.

Developmental Age Impacts Processing of Assault. As the primary study focused on adolescent sexual assault, survivors were asked to reflect on the assault in their adolescence and how their developmental age at the time impacted them during their post-assault processes. Generally, a lack of awareness and preparedness left many survivors ill-equipped to discern that they were assaulted. This was especially prevalent if the assault did not fit the "real rape" narrative. Some survivors spoke about being an adolescent without much sexual experience, so

they believed the sexual violence they experienced was how sex transpired. Even violent and brutal rapes still created confusion for survivors during their adolescence. Due to their confusion and internalization of oppressive messaging, survivors decided that it wasn't a sexual assault or needed another person to confirm their assault. Barbara reflected and talked about the influence of her age on how she processed her assault:

> **"**Even understanding what rape is, you don't. I didn't. As a teenager you don't understand. I didn't understand that no meant no. Um, that it was just enough to say no. I shouldn't have to— I was afraid to fight him or hurt him. Um, and I blamed myself because I went with him. Again, you got in the car. You were stupid. You're just stupid. It's your fault. You got in the car with him. But you must really love him because you had sex with him on the first date. I wasn't that kind of girl… Didn't wanna be that kind of girl. I wasn't having sex with my boyfriend. That wasn't…that wasn't anything I…was even interested in. With—not with this guy…um."

Barbara and many other survivors also had time and experience behind them to compare their adolescent experiences with their adult experiences. Survivors interviewed as adolescents within weeks of their assault did not mention how their age impacted their processing of the sexual assault. Barbara highlights how being an adolescent did not give her enough information to understand her rape and realize that she did nothing to invite that experience into her life. She also, as an adult, has more information to allow her to understand why she may have thought or behaved in certain ways as an adolescent sexual assault survivor.

As survivors matured and made new connections, they could think about their adolescent sexual assault and gain clarity. Many of them found they could stop blaming themselves because they recognized that their developmental age influenced their understanding and decision-

making following their assault. Parker shares that after they were able to reflect and look back at their experience when they were an adolescent, they were able to put into perspective how they felt and processed their assault: Parker shares:

> "Um, and, um, I think that my anger and my, um, conflict, and the things that I was experiencing at the time, I felt made it so that I couldn't disclose, or do anything. Or make anything change in my environment, were a side effect of what I was going through, and weren't necessarily real. And I think that— that even now, as an adult sometimes, I can see how that can, kind of, be a reality. Where having someone, you know, take that step that you're too afraid to take for whatever reason can be a really valuable tool. But, especially as a teenager, I didn't— for sure didn't, have any scope of, you know, the reality of choosing not to disclose. I was just really fixated on the emotions of figuring out what had really happened. And then, you know, having that realization, and seeing all the patterns, and seeing the history, and feeling as strongly as I did about having been put through that experience. Um— yeah, for sure."

Age Limits Power/Agency. Marginalized people have their power and agency heavily regulated in an oppressive society. The sections outlining oppressive messaging and manifestations of internalized oppression demonstrate how survivors internalize those beliefs of limited power and agency. However, like with gender and race, oppression does intently limit someone's agency and power. Adolescents are minors, so many of their decisions and agency over their personhood are put in adults' hands, particularly parents. Survivors talked about these limitations and how they impacted their post-assault decision-making. Survivors spoke about feeling out of control of their body and decision-making and how adults were in power, so they had no choice but to defer to them. Yelena, who was raped by her father and became pregnant,

truly understood lack of agency and power as a young person when she requested permission to terminate her pregnancy:

> **"**Mhm. And now that I'm thinking, you know, looking back as an adult, I'm-I'm sure— I mean you just, kind of, hit on it. Like, um, once you— when you're that young, once you tell something happens— someone that something happened to you, it's not-it's not your body anymore, it's your parents. And I-and I don't think, you know— I don't really know that many people who would have thought about it as, like, my being and my body, because I was so young. And I think, um, connecting it to my experience with the judicial bypass process, I don't think that somebody could have recognized that it was my-my body to make that decision with."

It is very telling that Yelena says being a young person means that power over your body is restricted. If the judge had denied her request, Yelena would have been forced to have her father's child, assuming her mother also refused to allow the abortion to take place. Additionally, as much as they realized there were limitations to being a minor, they were uncomfortable making big decisions independently. In some instances, adults did make decisions on behalf of the survivor in their adolescence, and they appreciated it because, as adults, they felt they could not have made the best choices at the time. Corinne shares that reluctance to make those big decisions:

> "[Sigh] There's a hope that somebody was gonna be like, 'We need to tell the police about this. We need to, like, go knock on doors and, like, [laughter] let's do the Law & Order thing. And I— but I… I didn't dare ask for that. I needed adults to make that decision."

Unbeknownst to her, Corinne's parents did report her rape to the police, and she was glad they did it because she later decided that she wanted to pursue legal recourses. She acknowledged that had they done that when she was still in high school, and she knew about it, she would have been very upset. Because minors are a population with limited rights, survivors felt that people would not take them seriously. They anticipated being dismissed and not listened to or believed. In some survivor stories, those exact things occurred. Thus, limited power and agency are manifested within the internalized oppression experiences. Still, as a young person, it provides some context as to how internalization occurs, as it is reinforced by how we treat adolescents, especially after a sexual assault. Kai talks about how adults can treat adolescents:

> "Um, I feel like a lot of being a teenager is having people not listen to you, um, and having your experiences dismissed just because you're a teenager and because you're young. Um, and I feel like that's something that can be especially harmful if somebody is talking about something as delicate as sexual assault."

Just as Kai discussed, in referencing his racial and gender identities, his age at the time also meant that his experiences did not matter. Power is allocated disproportionately to adults compared to adolescents in American society. As a result, adults can dismiss and silence adolescent voices, which is a form of oppression and reinforces the idea that young people have no power or agency.

Adolescent Social Ramifications. Social considerations played a very important part in survivors' decision-making post-assault, particularly during adolescence. There was pressure to keep in line with social norms, especially regarding sex. Survivors were pressured not only by the person who harmed them, but many survivors were pressured by their peers. Mary-Beth talks

about that pressure she faced and how she and her boyfriend at the time felt rushed into having sex:

> "So, um…yeah. So, we had been going out for a while. And, um… at that point there was, like, a lot of pressure between both of us to, like, start having sex. But not like— it was from, like, friends and, like, people, like, outside of us. So, like, I don't think originally he wanted to do it either. So, it just kept happening, kept happening, people just kept, like, bugging him about it. So finally he was like— he would just, like, um, bother me about it. He'd be like, 'Why can't we just do it like everyone else can,' whatever. So I was like, 'Fine, we'll go and do it,' so. And then after that, it just, kind of, like, went downhill. It just continued on and on, and, um, yeah, so…"

Mary-Beth's boyfriend took it too far and continued to coerce and then force her to have sex with him. Although the outside pressure does not excuse his actions, it does provide context about how young people may start engaging in sex to adhere to social norms with limited to no knowledge or skills about having safe and consensual sexual relationships. Mary-Beth also speaks to the socialization that being in a relationship means having sex, which is not valid. Peer pressure also influenced survivors not to disclose their sexual assault for fear that it would negatively impact their social life at school or peer relationships. Wynona talks about the social ramification of her peers finding out that she had been raped:

> "Um, also, I knew, at that age too, I don't-I don't wanna be the rape girl at school. Who wants to be the rape girl? Um, they're, [laughter] they're— I don't know. They want attention [laughter]. They're whiny, you know? It's just— it's— there's such-such a stigma to it, that like, how do you make friends after that? I don't know. I just feel, like, it

was all the stigma. And, with all the stigmas, it was just like, okay, so I will just definitely not talk about this 'cause that's just not my best interest."

Wynona believed, probably correctly, that she would be ridiculed and socially ostracized for being someone who experienced rape. She recognized that it was not going to benefit her to have people find out about her rape. Her perception of what a "rape girl" is also demonstrates social beliefs about rape survivors: they are lying to get attention and "whiny." Concerns over social exclusion and punishment intensified if the person who assaulted them was popular or well-liked at school. Heather talked about how the social capital possessed by the person who harmed her impacted how her assault was perceived:

"Um, that continued, um, then kind of, within the story, my— in, um, [tongue click] September, or October of my senior year, I was at a much bigger party at a person's house I don't know, most of the grade was there. Um, and…I was talking with my friends, and then I was talking to this guy, who was like more popular, air quotes, um [laughter] more popular or whatever than myself, um, which I didn't really know who he was. Um, and he was like 'Do you wanna hook up?' and I said 'No.' And he kept asking me, getting closer to me. And the next thing I know, um, the next thing I remember from that night is being pulled out of a closet when I was on my knees and he was standing up, again being forced to give oral sex and it was videotaped. Um, and …um, everyone thought it was—everyone at the school thought it was really funny, as those things go as well."

In high school, popularity is a form of power. In a new age where sexual assault and rapes can be filmed and shared for enjoyment, social ramifications outside of school extend to potentially much larger social networks. Faith was also filmed while being assaulted by numerous people at

a club. She only found out about her assault because a friend let her know the video was widely shared on Snapchat.

The results of this study have implications for all that interact and serve survivors. In the next two chapters, I will summarize what emerged from this secondary data analysis and offer suggestions and paths forward in exploring internalized oppression and conscientization within the context of sexual assault.

Chapter 6. Discussion

Sexual violence is not an aberration but is a form of structural violence facilitated by institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression (David, 2014). This study elucidates the integral role internalized oppression plays in fostering cooperation among oppressed persons in maintaining a social structure that privileges a few and oppresses the many (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The study expanded what we know about internalized oppression and how it manifests among survivors of sexual assault (see Figure 2). I highlighted the utility of socialization in fostering internalized oppression and creating collective narratives around sexual violence that allow for its continued perpetuation. Sexual assault survivors in American society are forced to navigate a culture that inhibits their ability to process their lived experiences and presents them with little recourse to redress the harms committed against them (e.g., the ineffective criminal justice and civil responses; see Spohn & Tellis, 2012). That cooperation is predicated on the success of internalized oppression and its influence on how we perceive the world and the choices we make because of those perceptions. For sexual assault survivors, this study shows that internalized oppression is an inevitable symptom of living in an oppressive society. In this discussion, I will highlight key findings and contributions made by this study: (1) the role of

socialization in facilitating internalized oppression and conscientization, (2) how internalized oppression and conscientization manifested among survivors, and (3) the role of reinforced and disruptive experiences. I then offer what contributions the findings for this study have for implications in social work practice, policy, and research.

Socialization as a Conduit of Internalized Oppression and Conscientization

Focal assaults in this study occurred when survivors were adolescents; thus, socialization was instrumental in how survivors made meaning of their experience. The findings of this study documented that socialization informs manifestations of internalized oppression and conscientization and that occurrence remained the same across the initial and revised conceptual models (see Figure 2, pg. 118). Socialization played a significant role in how survivors processed their assault, their disclosure process, and what resource-seeking decisions they made following their rape or sexual assault. Developmentally, identity formation and meaning-making of the social world were at the forefront, and survivors discussed taking in and incorporating a lot of information as adolescents. The phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) asserts that the development of self-perception among young people is influenced by the meaning they give to their lived experiences. The meaning-making process occurs within cultural contexts (Spencer et al., 1997). Central to this study were the cultural contexts specific to the experience of sexual violence and how those contexts are created and shaped by socialization. Like SDT, this study found oppressive and anti-oppressive messages present in survivor stories, which means oppressive messages supported beliefs, values, and norms that align with oppressive ideology and practice. In contrast, anti-oppressive messages challenged beliefs, values, and norms meant to maintain oppression as a process and societal structure.

These are referred to within SDT as hierarchy enhancing (HE) and hierarchy attenuating (HA) legitimizing myths, respectively (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Oppressive messages were harmful to survivors and contained messages that: conveyed to them that they did not matter, were to blame for their victimization, shamed them, normalized the sexual violence they experienced, and tried to gaslight them to distort their lived realities. For example, gaslighting messages fostered self-mistrust, undermined self-knowing, and encouraged survivors to question if they are "crazy," creating external and external environments that promote suffering. Oppressive messages occurred more frequently in survivor stories and appeared in more variation. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) indicate that oppressive messages are successful in allowing dominant groups to maintain control with limited use of force, making it a very effective tool of social control. Thus, it is common for oppressive messages to be deeply embedded within the social culture and can be challenging to identify because they are endemic to society (David, 2014). Oppressive messages were the seeds that germinated in the hearts and minds of survivors in the form of internalized oppression. Oppressive messages transmitted by various entities were influential on the intersubjective processes that influenced survivors' meaning-making of their experience with sexual violence (Blumer, 1969; Spencer et al., 1997). Several of the oppressive messages outlined in this study mirrored themselves in the manifestations of internalized oppression, except external messages transformed into harmful internal dialogues. Anti-Oppressive messages were antithetical to oppressive messages. These messages told survivors: they mattered, acknowledged their agency and power, indicated that the assault was not their fault, nor should they feel shame about being raped or sexually assaulted. Anti-oppressive messages appeared much more discernible for survivors because they directly contrasted with oppressive messages that survivors may have previously internalized. When

confronted with these messages, some survivors created a notable dissonance because it provided an alternative perception of their experience and validated what many survivors intuitively already knew. Anti-oppressive messages are present and available in society; however, they are not as embedded within American society. Anti-oppressive messages about sexual violence do not serve dominant interests and dissolve an environment that spreads fear with the threat or actual use of violence (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Anti-oppressive messages were important for survivors in this study because they contributed to their conscientization process rooted in their truths. The socialization documented in this dissertation unveils what survivors were told was acceptable or unacceptable regarding sex, sexual identity, and ultimately sexual violence.

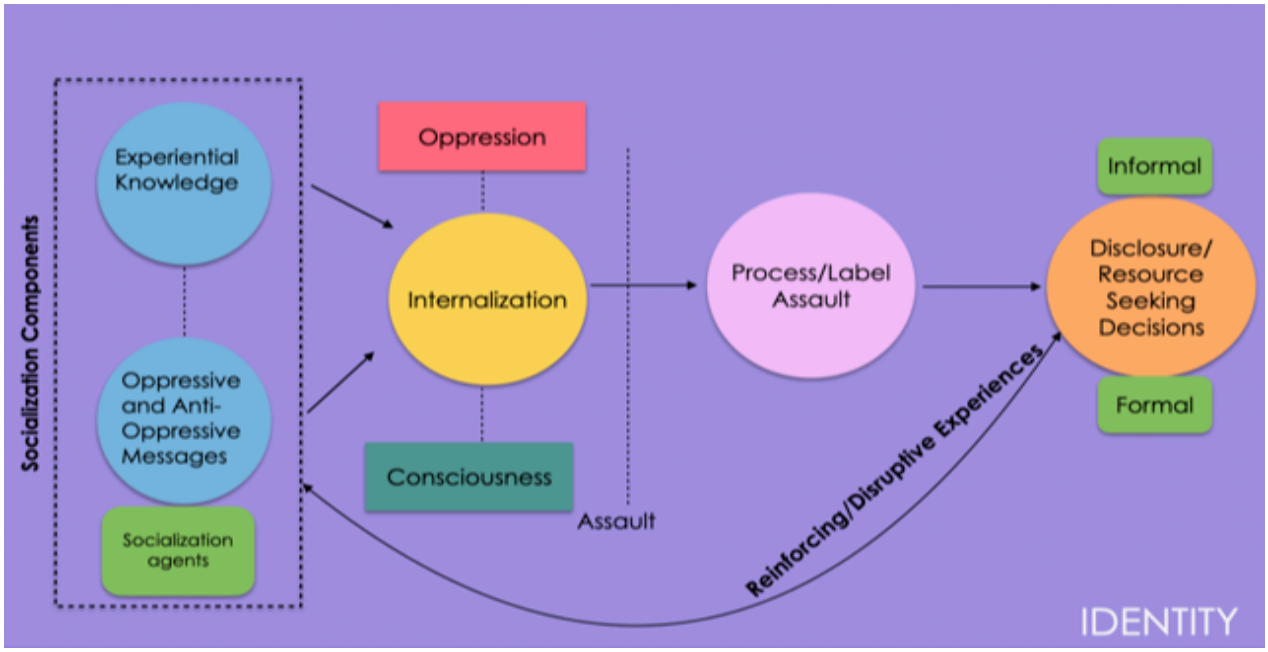
Sources of Socialization. The sources of both oppressive and anti-oppressive messaging came from a wide array of sources. As evident in survivor stories, messages came from both formal and informal sources. Most messages came from informal support like family members, specifically the survivor's parent(s). Out of 22 survivors, 16 of them had messages that originated in their interactions with their parents. This is not exceptional in the context of this study. Research shows that social networks and social interaction are essential to describe human behavior pertaining to decision-making and meaning processes that contribute to understanding lived experiences (Bandura, 1971; Blumer, 1969; Pescosolido et al., 1998). Survivor stories demonstrated that their interactions with others in their social networks were influential in how internalized oppression manifested in their lives that affected their post-assault experience.

Survivors who participated in this study were recruited to reflect on their experiences with adolescent sexual assault. Focal assaults occurred when survivors in this study were minors, and parents or caregivers are the primary socialization agents during a young person's development (Sanchez et al., 2017). Other primary sources of socialization messages were peers

and friends, with 11 survivors experiencing this. For adolescents, friends and peers become another primary source of socialization during this developmental period (Mclean, 2005). Beyond friends and family, other informal sources of socialization included: the person who caused the survivor sexual harm, clergy, and other community members.

Figure 2

Revised Conceptual Model of Internalization and Conscientization and Post-Assault Processes



Out of the 22 survivors in this study, 21 knew the person who raped or sexually assaulted them; and some survivors continued to interact with the people who assaulted them voluntarily and involuntarily. The person who caused survivors sexual harm sometimes served as a socialization agent, contributing to the socialization content and transmission from other socialization agents. Informal support messages at times involved sharing messages that absolved the person who caused sexual harm. Some informal supports continued to treat that person as if they caused no harm at all by continuing to include them in social events where the survivor would be present, as with Heather's story.

These occurrences reinforced oppressive messaging and made it more likely to develop internalized oppression among survivors who experienced those types of experiences. Interestingly, some survivors were able to speak with the person who raped or assaulted them post-assault, specifically about the rape or assault, and some received a type of tangible or intangible resource. For example, Wynona first processed her assault with her boyfriend after he raped her and apologized. Other survivors had experiences with the person who raped or sexually assaulted them that were consumed with oppressive messages that blamed and shamed them or denied the occurrence of the rape or sexual assault.

Although most survivors in this study did not seek out formal resources, several survivors were exposed to messaging from formal supports. Formal supports included police, medical personnel, lawyers, judges, advocates, teachers, and mental health clinicians. Educational professionals like teachers, coaches, school counselors, and school administrators were the most common institutional actors. Many of the survivors were still in secondary school or attending their first year of university during their assaults and encountered school actors when seeking support. Other socialization sources included the survivor's community and organizations with sexual assault specific services. Several survivors discussed how messages from formal supports held more weight because of their professional capacities and the legitimacy of their roles. Thus, when oppressive messages came from formal supports, they may have felt absolute, and anti-oppressive messages may have felt truer because they came from professionals.

Two sources of socialization that I would like to highlight because of their unique contributions to the understanding of this study were *social ether* and survivors as socialization agents. Barbara elucidated the concept of social ether as a socialization source. She talked about

the "committee in the head," which I defined as the messages that we are all inundated with that become a part of our culture. These messages evolve into truths because of their embeddedness in society, and to some degree, are agreed upon by both oppressors and the oppressed (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Some survivors were unsure or could not identify the source of some of the messages they internalized. Social ether or those indiscernible messages can be found in the media, political movements, or even damaging tropes that have been passed down through history (Harris, 2003). Messages from the media included platforms like TV, social media, and music. Two of the survivors especially mentioned the #MeToo movement and the messages associated with that movement, namely bringing attention to the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the U.S., although now it has become a global movement. Survivors as socialization agents were the most common transmitters of anti-oppressive messaging. Survivors in this study either were the sources of socialization for other people or interacted with other fellow survivors who exposed the survivor to messages. Interestingly, survivors as socialization agents proliferated in this study because many of the other survivors encountered were friends, family, or even formal supports.

The Functionality of Internalized Oppression and its Impact on Survivors

A significant contribution of this study was how it demonstrated the manifestations of internalized oppression among survivors who participated in the primary study. Prior work has not examined intersecting forms of internalized oppression among sexual assault survivors beyond rape myth endorsement, while also using qualitative methods to center the survivor's voice (Aosved & Long, 2006; Charles, 2010; Constanzo, 2018; Syzmanski et al., 2014). Additionally, it expands our knowledge about what influences survivors to refrain from acknowledging their assault (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004) and why they may choose to forgo

seeking out formal supports (Bendt, 2020). I was also able to identify how internalized oppression impacted survivors during their post-assault processes. Internalized oppression is a "multi-dimensional phenomenon" that is amorphous in a sense because it occurs in variation across contexts and depends on the unique intersections of someone's position within oppressive social structures (Pyke, 2010). The consensus among internalized oppression scholars is that internalized oppression works to maintain systems of oppression and has detrimental impacts on oppressed persons and groups. It is shown to negatively impact self-perception, connectedness to one's collective identity, and one's value and efficacy in society (David, 2014).

The manifestations of internalized oppression in this study collated in three major categories: limited power and agency, self-gaslighting, and endorsement of false narratives about rape and sexual assault, which I referred to as SVU-Raped. Limited power and agency forms of internalized oppression made survivors feel they could not speak up for themselves before their assault, during their assault, and post-assault. This form also showed instances in which survivors viewed themselves as objects instead of agential and powerful beings. For example, perceptions and beliefs about virginity occurred several times in survivor stories, specifically if survivors were virgins at the time of their assault. Virginity allowed survivors to be categorized or categorize themselves as pure or impure, which caused some survivors to conflate their rape with 'losing their virginity.' In Zora's story, you can see how problematic virginity can be, in that it created a system of girls to be respected and those who were meant to be objectified, like the "demos" or other girls in Zora's community.

Many survivors were apathetic when reflecting on why they chose not to report their assault or disclose their assault. They felt as if they would just be treated poorly, so reporting or disclosing was useless. Other survivors struggled to name what happened to them or felt helpless

in using their voices to talk about their experiences. Women are socialized to believe that they don't have agency over their body or sexuality from a young age. Men are taught that their sexuality is an extension and demonstration of their power (Rosetto & Tollison, 2017). Internalization of perceptions of limited agency power and agency made it difficult for survivors to discuss consent or feel like they had the power to revoke consent at any point in time. As many survivors were adolescents at the time of their assault, they talked about simply being uninformed or not knowing how to handle being raped or sexually assaulted. Adolescent autonomy is precarious because it is a time when many young people are asserting their independence but are still very much dependent on their parents (Mclean, 2005). One survivor even talked about blaming other survivors for their victimization because it was presumed that if they didn't upset the person or followed directions, the person would not have raped or abused them. Charles (2010) argues that any choice or thought that exists in the context of self-devaluation or rooted in other forms of internalized oppression is not an exertion of autonomy. Internalized oppression operates in ways that disempower and use the self as a method of social control.

Self-gaslighting is an understudied phenomenon, and generally is not discussed within the context of sexual assault or is not explicitly identified (Bendt, 2020; Stark, 2019). It was important to document instances of self-gaslighting in this study, not only because it was so prevalent among the survivors in this study but also because it fostered thoughts and feelings of blame, shame and encouraged silence. Self-gaslighting was the most prominent manifestation of internalized oppression in this study. It influenced survivors to engage in self-blame and question the validity of their experiences. When survivors began to overcome such thinking, self-gaslighting patterns would return, which I referred to as *cycling.* Along with blame came its

tether, shame. Survivors felt shame for not preventing their assault, and survivors talked about feeling less valued or "spoiled." This also included survivors being so unsure of their reality that they consulted with others to see if they were at fault or to receive confirmation that an assault actually occurred. Self-gaslighting included survivors minimizing their assault and determining that it "wasn't that serious." Other survivors experienced emotional dissonance, which did not allow them to connect to the feelings of their assault. During the interview, survivors would appear unscathed or unaffected by the assault. Self-gaslighting can stimulate the concealment of emotional experiences and the regulation of natural emotional responses to the trauma of rape or sexual assault, rendering them unwarranted or inappropriate (Bendt, 2020). One form of self-gaslighting that this author has not witnessed in the literature was the emergence of the *boundaries were clear.* In these instances, survivors experienced confusion or frustrations about being raped or sexually assaulted because they followed all the social rules that they believed would protect them from sexual assault. For example, survivors would say they weren't "sluts," they were "good girls," so the person should have known not to rape them. Or they were strong and fiery, so people should have known not to mess with them. This was an interesting finding because it aligns with the theories used in this study as it alludes to the cooperation of subordinate groups in maintaining group hierarchies and how deeply rooted internalized oppression can be (David, 2014; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Survivors in this study provided additional insight into the damaging effects of rape narratives based on oppressive ideology, which in this dissertation was addressed through the SVU-Raped findings. In this study, survivors processed their assault and were heavily influenced in their resource-seeking process by characteristics of their assault. The endorsement of rape myths, sexual scripts, and rape narratives is shown to impact how survivors label their assault or

whether they choose to disclose or report their sexual assault (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Rossetto & Tollision, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). Survivors in this study were mindful of aspects of their assault that they believed would invalidate their rape or sexual assault. There is some precedent for this belief, as sexual assault survivors are assessed for the validity of their story based on characteristics of their assault or their behaviors (Hockett et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2017). Survivors often alluded to what they believed invalidated their experience as a "real rape." These things included: being raped by someone they knew, no penile penetration, a woman who raped them, they didn't remember what happened, or they sustained minor to no injuries. These beliefs about what constitutes a legitimate rape aligns with previous literature (Kahn, 2003; Koss, 1985; Littleton & Henderson, 2009). In addition, survivors were concerned that because they were under the influence, they would be blamed for their assault; this was especially significant for stories about adolescent focal assaults due to the possibility of underage drinking. Lastly, survivors were preoccupied with their unconventional responses to being raped. If they weren't crying or visibly distraught, they thought that made them appear less like a "true victim." The manifestation of internalized oppression referred to as SVU-Raped was particularly influential in whether they decided to seek out formal resources. Internalized oppression has been associated with a decreased likelihood of accessing or seeking out resources and support (David, 2014).

Internalized oppression ultimately was of interest in this study because it caused survivors considerable suffering, and unfortunately, some of it was self-inflicted. Therefore, it was necessary for this study to call out internalized oppression as a form of parasitic harm that can turn a person into a their own worst enemy. Survivors in this study blamed themselves continually for years for what happened to them, and they often felt so much shame they

couldn't bear even to say the word rape out loud. Some survivors were isolated and suffered alone because survivors felt they could not tell anyone or would experience further harm should they tell others their truth. The inability to confide in others and subsequent isolation caused a disconnection from their feelings and emotions associated with their assault. The suffering incurred by survivors not only during their assault but continuously after their assault by people other than the ones who caused the sexual harm is what CRF refers to as spirit murder or injury. Spirit murder is the "disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard" (Wing, 1990). The suffering survivors experienced during, and after their sexual assault is a form of structural violence because it is pervasive, it is supported by our social structures, and it is preventable (Galtung & Hoivik, 1971; Lee, 2019). Thus, I wanted to uplift the observances of conscientization occurring in the data and how it helped reverse or reduce the harmful effects of internalized oppression.

Conscientization: How Survivors Embraced Inner Knowing and Found Healing

Conscientization or consciousness building was not initially a phenomenon of interest. However, it emerged in relevance to internalized oppression because it essentially was the antidote in many ways. The revised conceptual model demonstrates that consciousness, or the understanding of lived realities outside the lens of oppression, was also a part of the internalization process that created pathways to conscientization (see Figure 2). Conscientization was noted in three major ways: it allowed the survivor to claim their agency and personal power, incited a critical consciousness awakening, and encouraged acts of self-love. Some scholars refer to internalized oppression as the *false consciousness* or the "holding of false beliefs or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one's social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or group." (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 103; David,

2014). Conscientization can then restore the truth to the oppressed person by allowing them to engage in rearticulation or the ability to view the world and one's self outside of the dominant paradigm (Collins, 2000).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discussed four ideas that Black feminist thought scholars could help foster consciousness building and create safe spaces for Black women. She stressed the importance of (1) self-definition, (2) self-valuation and respect, (3) self-reliance and independence, and (4) self, change, and empowerment. While these tools focus on the experiences of Black women, they have utility and meaning for other marginalized groups as well. As there were Black, Asian, and Latine survivors in this study, the framing of consciousness offered by Collins, demarcates several manifestations of consciousness within survivor stories. Self-definition is key to moving through internalized oppression and journeying to the "free-mind." It allows one to depart from the inaccurate definitions that society assigns to survivors based on their varying identities, including the identity of being a survivor of sexual assault or rape (Collins, 2000). In redefining the self, it can assist survivors in building a sense of self-value and fostering deep respect for the self, which can be particularly important in processing the violation of a rape or sexual assault. Self-reliance and independence encourage one to embrace functioning with confidence to sustain and build the life one desires (Collins, 2000). And finally, self, change, and empowerment recognize that the changes and transformations made within can create external changes in society. It does not diminish the importance of self-work and its utility in helping others make the societal changes they would like to see (Collins, 2000).

Conscientization was beautiful to witness in the data because it demonstrated the audacity and determination of survivors to engage in the practice of liberation—each action toward

increasing their consciousness allowed for an improved sense of self and reduced suffering. Conscientization allowed survivors to find their power and voice by taking control of their stories, trusting their perceptions, and leading their post-assault processes. This increased their trust in themselves and expanded their agency (i.e., self-definition, self-reliance, and independence). Survivors had an awakening during their post-assault process that permitted them to regain stability in their self-image and their perception of the world (i.e., self-reliance and independence; self, change, and empowerment). The awakening included moments where survivors were: learning from others in the community, witnessing political movements that helped them acknowledge the harm they experienced, naming their experience as a sexual assault or rape, and seeing the injustices in society around issues of sexual violence. They were then able to extend grace and love to themselves, which facilitated their healing process (self-valuing and respect). Grace was helpful for adult survivors when they reflected on their decisions as adolescents, and it allowed them to recognize that they did their best with what they had at the time.

Reinforcement and Disruption: Post-Assault Experiences and Continued Socialization

Internalized oppression and conscientization are not fixed phenomena. Internalized oppression and conscientization must be cultivated and fortified to ensure that they are secure within the psyche. In their post-assault interactions with informal and formal supports, survivors had experiences with others that either reinforced their internalized oppression or disrupted it to clear pathways to conscientization. This was captured provisionally in the initial conceptual model as a feedback loop. However, the findings that informed the revised conceptual model (see Figure 2, p. 167) identify what is fed back into the socialization components identified in the model. Reinforcing and disruptive experiences show that if another assault occurs, how the

survivor was treated during post-assault interactions with others informs their socialization and determines if internalized oppression or conscientization is fostered and expanded. Reinforcement and disruptive experiences were shown to impact post-assault processing and resource-seeking decisions as well. Reinforcing experiences were aligned with research that describes post-assault interactions with others that result in secondary victimization. In comparison, disruptive experiences were those experiences that I identified as post-validation because they involved the survivor leaving a post-assault interaction without continued suffering, and a few survivors left with some form of healing.

Reinforcement. Reinforcing experiences occurred consistently across post-assault interactions with both formal and informal supports. The oppression and violence that survivors were already experiencing was reinforced through what people said and did when the survivor was attempting to seek out support. These experiences caused emotional and mental distress, and in some cases impacted the survivor's self-perceptions and processing of their lived experiences. Again, this aligns with theory and research that shows the impact of social interaction on cognitive processing and behavior (Bandura, 1971; Blumer, 1969). Reinforcing experiences clustered around similar ideas to oppressive messaging. The similarity across ideas of reinforcing experiences was due to messaging remerging to reproduce or foster internal cognitive processes associated with internalized oppression. The consistency in transmission across oppressive messages and reinforced experiences is not coincidental. Consistency in the content of messages across extended periods is the most effective way to canonize them into societal culture (David, 2014).

Reinforcement was characterized by interactions where the survivor was not prioritized and received little support when they were in the midst of a post-assault process. Survivors felt

like they did not matter when people didn't follow up or remain in contact with them. They also felt like they didn't matter when responders did not believe them or made sure to prioritize the person who raped or sexually assaulted them. When survivors decide to seek out support, it can feel like secondary victimization following the initial trauma. Some survivors described the indignation they face in post-assault interactions as feeling worse than their sexual assault or rape (Campbell, 2013). Secondary victimization often involves victim-blaming and shaming, and many survivors in this study experienced this when attempting to access resources or supports. Survivors who have been raped or sexually assaulted experienced something traumatic and may not have control in how they respond to stimuli that may resemble some of their feelings or responses to being raped or assaulted (Bandura, 1971). When they interact with others who use harmful oppressive messaging during post-assault interactions, those messages can produce feelings and responses associated with their rape or sexual assault and cause continued harm. Words indeed are quite powerful.

Reinforcing experiences also restricted survivor agency and power. Many survivors experienced being unable to make post-assault decisions for themselves, such as who they were able to disclose to or what resources they were able to access. Decisions made on behalf of the survivor often caused disruption in their life or didn't allow them to tell their story as they wanted. Due to survivors being adolescents at the time of their focal assault, many of the choices available to them required getting their parents involved, which was not something they desired, or they were forced to re-tell their story repetitively. While many of the survivors who engaged with post-assault formal services made that choice of their own volition, those choices were often informed by the messages they received through their social networks. For example, Erica decided to pursue legal resources following her experiences of rape. Still, it was many years

later, and she had discussed that decision with her parents, romantic partner, and other survivors as well. Some survivors "muddled" their way through decision-making processes and had no objections nor a strong desire to access formal supports (Pescosolido et al., 1998). For example, Amari was ambivalent about accessing formal supports, as she felt the process was strenuous and fast-paced. But she was coerced by her parents and other formal actors to engage in criminal justice proceedings and was heavily influenced by their socialization. Amari's teacher told her she must tell her parents, or he would, and her parents alluded multiple times that Amari may be lying. Both Erica and Amari had reinforcing experiences that influenced their decisions and their feelings about their choices.

As shared previously, survivors can interact with informal and formal supports with an established or developing consciousness about their experience with sexual assault. However, during survivors' post-assault experiences, informal or formal supports used oppressive messaging that interrupted the conscientization process. Many survivors were at a nascent stage of conscientization. Therefore, they were not as prepared to contend with the oppressive messages received post-assault. Additionally, when survivors engaged in post-assault processes as adolescents, their simultaneous developmental maturation made it difficult to ascertain and trust themselves. However, it did not completely obstruct their conscientization process. Developing adolescent identities and self-perceptions organize behavior, thoughts, and actions. For adolescent survivors, the experience of sexual violence can create a lot of dissonance with identity and meaning-making processes that were already underway (Spencer et al., 1997). Sexual violence can unearth many of the understandings that sexual assault survivors had previously held. Thus, it can form chasms in identity and perceptions of the world that can be replaced with harmful messages. Post-assault interactions are opportunities for others to either

reinforce oppression or facilitate healing using anti-oppressive messaging. Many scholars discuss the catalyst that changes the socialization of oppression and disrupts internalized oppression (Freire, 1970, Harro, 2008). Still, this study highlighted that socialization can also be catalysts that can reengage sexual assault survivors in internalized oppression after having begun the process of conscientization.

Survivors who experienced interactions that were oppressive and caused further harm, had additional opportunities to internalize oppressive messaging because it confirmed what they believed would happen or served as another example of a previous belief. For instance, some survivors in this study who were already engaging in self-blame, and then had an encounter with another person who told them the sexual assault or rape was their fault could then continue engaging in self-blame. Reinforcing experiences were particularly salient for survivors in some cases because they believed certain people would be a source of support and care, but instead, those people caused them harm. Reinforcing experiences helped to fossilize internalized oppression and created barriers to conscientization. Even if internalized oppression is reinforced, subsequent interactions disrupting continued oppression and victimization, while fostering conscientization can overshadow prior poor experiences. For example, in Campbell et al.'s (2015) study examining pathways to disclosure, adolescent survivors who initially felt betrayed by friends who disclosed their rape to adults without their permission could overcome feelings of betrayal if the interaction with the formal responder went well.

Disruption. Conscientization "invites the people to grasp with their minds the truth of their reality" (Freire, 1970, pg. 60), thus disrupting internalized oppression is an opportunity for informal and formal supports to extend that invitation to survivors post-assault. Disruptive experiences presented an alternative way of knowing or thinking that served as an intervention

that created opportunities for survivors to challenge some of their cognitive processes that fostered their internalized oppression. Symbolic interactionism theory posits that social actors must identify the things that have meaning in the world and engage in an "internalized social process" with the self to then construct meaning for themselves (Blumer, 1969). Of course, symbolic interactionism also believes that we construct meaning through action, with ourselves and with others. For example, rape in itself is the act of forcing unwanted sexual contact on someone with complete disregard for their agency, and some would say humanity. However, society, collectively and individually, constructed meanings of rape and sexual assault that ascribe value and meaning to the people who are involved in that act. The person who is raped is perceived as a victim or non-victim, careless, meek, or, as Barbara put it, "damaged." The person who raped is dangerous, vile, or, depending on the context, someone who made a grave mistake. Many of the negative connotations associated with rape or sexual assault survivors are rooted in those social meanings related to rape. Those meanings and understandings are often oppressive. Disruptive experiences can be the catalyst to help survivors create new meanings about the experience of rape or sexual assault that are separate from ones that would cause them suffering or harm.

Disruption of oppressive ideologies did not occur as frequently, and this makes sense because challenging beliefs and ideas rooted in oppression is anti-oppressive. We do not live in an anti-oppressive society, and oppression is embedded within our interpersonal interactions and institutions. The meanings we construct about rape and sexual assault and the lies (e.g., legitimizing myths) attached to those meanings are antiquated and historically deeply rooted in our culture (Davis, 1981). Thus, the existence of experiences that disrupt oppression is not extensive during post-assault experiences. However, they do occur and should be highlighted

because they offer ways for informal and formal supports to intercede for survivors and potentially reduce their suffering. These experiences were oppositional to the reinforcement of oppression and victimization. Instead, survivors felt like they mattered and were not exposed to further harm. Disruptive experiences were devoid of shaming or blaming and expanded the survivor's sense of power and agency. This presented an alternative way of thinking, disrupted the rumination on oppressive messages, and created cracks in the foundation of internalized oppression present within a survivor's psyche. As they occur collectively among the masses, those cracks can give rise to cracks in social structures that make it necessary for society and "power elites" to transition in thought and action (Freire, 1970).

Conscientization was cultivated through validating and pleasant experiences with informal or formal supports. Survivors were engaging in the conscientization process throughout their post-assault experiences. They were entering interactions with burgeoning or rooted thoughts and beliefs that liberated them from the cerebral confines of internalized oppression. These disruptive experiences were characterized by interactions in which informal or formal supports: avoided blaming and shaming the survivor, helped them to feel in control of their ability to make decisions for themselves, and were infused with compassion and care. They were marked by survivors reporting these experiences as ones that validated what they were feeling and experiencing, and did not cause further harm. Studies show that when informal or formal supports encourage and validate survivors' feelings and thoughts about their experience, they are more likely to reach out to formal services or rate their experience with formal support services higher (Campbell et al., 2005; Paul et al., 2014).

Survivors who described experiences where oppressive ideologies were disrupted felt prioritized and valued. People believed them and followed up with them to ensure they were

okay. Mattering is important to make one feel included and valued in society. When a person is made to feel like they don't matter, or their experiences and feelings don't matter, it can challenge a sense of self-worth and threaten one's dignity (Prilleltensky, 2020). Mattering is an inherent human need, and when infused into post-assault interactions, it can help reduce harm and instances of secondary victimization (Flett, 2018). In interactions with survivors that augmented their agency and power, survivors felt that people trusted them to make the best decisions for themselves and allowed survivors to lead their post-assault resource-seeking and healing processes. Finally, disruptive experiences where others did not blame the survivor but instead encouraged them were not common, but when they occurred, they were highly impactful, especially when the survivor was worried that other people would blame them. For example, one of the survivors who received support from the entire police department in her town was provided with an alternative perception where police don't blame survivors for their rape.

Disruption of oppression following a sexual assault, offers a path forward in supporting survivors by acknowledging that not all survivors will present with feelings of self-blame or be shrouded in shame during post-assault interactions. Therefore, informal or formal supports may only have to support and foster the conscious thoughts and beliefs that survivors have already accepted to minimize or eliminate the effects of secondary victimization. It can be difficult to know what to say after a sexual assault. However, following the survivor's lead can reduce the occurrence of harmful experiences that instead reinforce internalized oppression. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in her seminal work on Black Feminist Thought, extols the personal power of Black women in redefining and rearticulating their understanding or truth of who they are outside of the dominant society that strategically and successfully uses inception to recreate a false self. I would argue that all marginalized folx have this same power to pursue and uncover

their truth. While that power to self-define is accurate, powerful oppressive forces can also introduce messaging into our environments that make self-definition more difficult. So, supporting survivors' efforts to redefine themselves and hold firm to their inner truths is a way to be an ally to someone practicing liberation.

The survivors in this study were primarily asked about the sexual assault(s) they experienced as adolescents; however, the pervasive nature of sexual violence made it likely that many of the survivors experienced subsequent assaults. Of the 22 survivors in this study, 14 of them experienced multiple sexual victimizations, both before and after their adolescent sexual assault. Socialization is continuous, and each sexual assault experience informed the next, either reinforcing internalized oppression or disrupting internalized oppression. Reinforcing or disruptive post-assault experiences were certainly intensified soon after an assault occurred. However, they were still felt intensely by survivors many years after their assault. Particularly for disruptive experiences, survivors were still affected by words of affirmation and encouragement after much time had passed. While redefining the self underneath the light of one's authentic truth is ultimately the choice of the oppressed person (Collins, 2000), others can assist through disruptive socialization. For example, Sade reported telling one of her friends about being raped as an adolescent, and her friend assured Sade it was not her fault. Her friend's use of anti-oppressive messaging to affirm Sade was so impactful that it provided a memory that Sade drew upon when she waivers in her self-trust. In this study, the temporality of messaging that reinforces or disrupts internalized oppression was somewhat inconsequential as it influenced survivor cognition post-assault. However, anti-oppressive messages that occurred before an assault or early in the post-assault process had the potential to alleviate symptoms of internalized oppression and possibly reduced subsequent suffering by several years. If one is stranded at sea,

the rescue boat arriving two days later or years later provides immense relief either way. Still, early arrival can mean the difference between someone surviving or perishing.

The impact of reinforcing and disruptive experiences demonstrates the importance of wielding socialization messages responsibly when interacting with sexual assault survivors. The flippant use of oppressive messaging can be a source of unnecessary suffering experienced by the survivor. And conversely, the intentional use of anti-oppressive messages post-assault can relieve suffering the survivor may be experiencing. This dissertation highlights the cognitive processes experienced by survivors and highlights their choice in decision making as influenced by their cognition. But what I also highlight here is the onus on others who interact with and support survivors of sexual assault to be well from which the survivor can find nourishment.

Formal and informal supports have the power to be sources of socialization that can disrupt internalized oppression that survivors may be experiencing. They can also alleviate or perhaps be influential in eradicating self-inflicted suffering that many survivors engage in post-assault. This awareness that this dissertation uplifts can assist survivors in identifying the sources and oppressive ideologies that contribute to the processing of their assault. Additionally, it increases the awareness of formal and informal responders about the effects of their words and behaviors on survivors' post-assault. Finally, if there is a desire to better support survivors of sexual assault and move toward a healing and justice-oriented vision, in that case, we must examine the ways in which we created a society for survivors to be inclined to silence themselves and decline to seek external supports.

Chapter 7. Study Implications and Conclusion

The findings from this study have several implications for social work practice, policy, and research. This chapter will highlight how the socialization components and subsequent internalization of oppressive and anti-oppressive messaging have utility in responding to sexual assault survivors across disciplines and professions. In this chapter, I will focus on how social workers can effectively support sexual assault survivors in their practice, then transition to implications for policy development, and finally discuss implications for future research.

Implications for Social Work Practice

In 2021, the National Association of Social Workers revised its ethical standards to state that social workers must "take action against oppression, racism, discrimination, and inequities and acknowledge their personal privilege." The ethical standards also encourage social workers to "demonstrate awareness and cultural humility," engage in "critical self-reflection," and commit to "holding institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). This dissertation provides the necessary information to adhere to these new ethical standards, specifically as it relates to serving and supporting sexual assault survivors. Social workers are often placed in institutions, organizations, and other spaces that serve and support survivors of sexual assault. While social workers have strict ethics and values that center on social justice, they are not exempt from causing harm to sexual assault survivors. The new additions to the social work ethics provide the precedence for the offerings I will outline in this section. It is evident in this study that large-scale social problems like oppression and structural violence have very intimate impacts on individuals, groups, and communities. The findings in this study situate sexual violence in the context of a hierarchy-based system, where there are oppressors (dominant groups) that control the resources and power in American society. It

highlights the creation of an environment where feminized and racialized groups must live in fear as the violence enacted against their bodies is justified by oppressive socialization. This justification excuses the sexual violence experienced by marginalized folx and further cement the continued existence of rape and sexual assault. Responders must recognize these contextual realities. In alignment with the social work ethics, I believe that social workers can engage in an external and internal investigation to (1) identify and acknowledge the anti-oppressive and oppressive messages they may be transmitting to the survivors they serve, (2) understand and use anti-oppressive methods to encourage conscientization among themselves and survivors they interact with, (3) and finally, they can practice cultural humility by recognizing the multiplicative identities of survivors and centering marginalized voices and experiences.

Social Workers as Sources of Socialization

Socialization was shown to be very instrumental in how survivors process their assault and make decisions about resources and services. This includes socialization messages that come from formal responders. In some instances, survivors mentioned that messages they received from people in official capacities were highly impactful, negatively or positively. Responders are called to be mindful of the messages that they transmit during their interactions with survivors. To do this, social workers must have a critical understanding of oppression and its relevance to sexual violence. Social work education and professional training may not provide this critical education. Thus, social workers must dedicate their time to unlearning some of the oppressive beliefs that foster internalized oppression. As the ethics suggest, taking the time to engage in self-investigation to understand their belief systems and determining where those beliefs align. Social workers are invited to assess where they are in their conscientization process and how they can build their consciousness around manifestations of oppression (e.g., institutional,

interpersonal, and internalized), precisely how it relates to sexual violence. Starting with the self is imperative to challenging and overcoming oppression, so those critical reflective processes cannot be ignored or bypassed (Collins, 2000; David, 2014). There are books, movies, and other available materials that can provide critical information to supplement gaps in knowledge that some social workers might have with understanding the function of sexual violence and its impact on those who are targets of that violence. Perhaps one of the most readily available approaches is listening to survivors and creating space to tell their stories without imposing one's beliefs, values, or ideologies on survivors during interactions with them.

Social work education and continuing education should include pedagogy that discusses socialization and consciousness-raising. Providing this essential learning for emerging and veteran social workers would allow them to recognize their role as socialization agents and encourage service as anti-oppressive and transformative agents when interacting with survivors of sexual assault. Jemal (2018) discusses the importance of social workers moving toward "critical transformative consciousness," where social workers reject acting in cooperation with oppressive structures and resist the continued perpetuation of inequities. While social workers must develop their consciousness, they are in a position to create space for survivors to engage in their own conscientization process. When the veil is lifted, social work responders can help survivors make sense of their experiences, affirm them, and help contextualize sexual violence in ways that foster conscientization.

Consciousness Facilitation and Intervention

Beyond mindfulness, there are opportunities to disrupt oppressive messages when responders provide an alternative message that can support a survivor in building their consciousness to alleviate self-inflicted suffering. After social work professionals have

committed to practicing self-reflection and fostering their critical consciousness, social workers can be instrumental in supporting survivors in their post-assault interactions with them. When social workers choose to listen and engage in dialogue with survivors about their experiences, it encourages the development of inner knowing and thinking about oneself and the external world (Berta-Àvila, 2003). This study shows how difficult it can be for survivors to grasp their realities due to the intense programming endemic to our society. When people believed survivors, it disrupted an oppressive message and provided an alternative message that helped to affirm survivor experiences. Social workers can intentionally use anti-oppressive messaging like those discussed in this dissertation to support survivors in building their consciousness and being equipped to lead their resource-seeking and healing processes. This will include making survivors feel like they matter, letting them know they have power and agency, and refraining from blaming or shaming the survivor.

Social workers are representatives of "helping-institutions" (e.g., hospitals, criminal justice organizations, behavioral health organizations) or those institutions that have been identified in society as purveyors of resources that contribute to the improved wellness of human beings and their successful social participation. Therefore, they are often agents that help people get connected to formal systems. Understanding the ability of these institutions to provide sexual assault survivors with desired resources and also knowing their potential to cause further harm should be considered. Social workers use collaborative efforts to help survivors identify the best post-assault decisions for themselves. In doing so, it is important to recognize that others may influence a survivor's resource-seeking decisions. For example, people have been shown to enter into formal health systems by choice, but others in their social networks can heavily influence those choices through encouragement and even coercion (Pescosolido et al., 1998). With an

increased understanding of the influence of socialization and social networks, social workers can create space for survivors to engage in introspection to discern what their next steps post-assault may look like, especially if a survivor is experiencing varying levels of internalized oppression. Of course, this does not mean that entrance into formal systems is the epitome of consciousness; survivors can be engaging in conscientization and still decide that non-disclosure and declining formal services is in their best interest.

Woven deeply into the findings of this study is the power of believing survivors and being vocal in acknowledging that they did not cause their rape or sexual assault. These two messages work in tandem to disrupt the most consistent and powerful oppressive messages, that rape or sexual assault does not occur outside of a very restrictive dominant narrative, and survivors are culpable in their victimization. If a social worker demonstrates their belief in a survivor and avoids blaming them, they have already reversed or reduced a significant amount of harm. It appears like a simple and easy request, yet many survivors longed to hear these two messages and suffered when they didn't hear these two disruptive messages. It is also crucial to recognize that disbelief and blame can be conveyed in subtle and indirect ways. Thus, self-investigation and self-awareness of one's beliefs can make social work practice less harmful and more likely to facilitate the conscientization process among sexual assault survivors. Affirming and allowing survivors to lead their story is also especially helpful in the circumstances where survivors have not yet acknowledged their experience as a rape or assault. With the information provided in this study, social workers can gain an awareness of how internalized oppression impacts the processing and labeling of experiences of sexual violence among survivors. They can then recognize these manifestations and support survivors by utilizing anti-oppressive messaging to provide pathways to conscientization.

Multiplicative Identities and Service Provision

It is imperative that social workers recognize how sexual violence is exacerbated by the layered oppressions that survivors may be experiencing due to their multiplicative identities. It can provide context into specific choices that survivors make. For instance, it can help social workers understand why survivors may not disclose their assault to their families due to their cultural beliefs about sex and sexuality. It also helped illuminate how specific marginalized groups may be easily targeted. Many of our survivors lived at several intersections of oppression, and it created a unique experience for them post-assault. Sexual assault is a gendered crime, and it predominantly affects those with feminized identities. However, narratives around sexual violence are centered on the experiences of White cisgender women. The exclusion of gender-expansive people from our understanding of how sexual violence occurs across different groups truly limits our insight into sexual violence. During this study, I made a point to highlight the specific experiences mentioned among our gender-expansive survivors in the sample.

Gender expansive survivors and their stories provided clarity and additional insights into post-assault experiences and the influence of gender on manifestations of internalized oppression. Additionally, it calls attention to gender-expansive survivors' specific needs and desires following their rape or sexual assault. Internalized oppression related to gender does a disservice for those folx who exist outside of a binary paradigm. Parker discussed how those perceptions are incorrect but can keep gender-expansive people from participating in services or other resources. Parker calls it “accidental exclusion”, but I would argue that it is not accidental at all. For example, if we internalize that rape is when a penis penetrates a vagina, where does that leave a survivor where no vaginal penetration occurred. In this study, it was evident that this belief led some survivors to believe they didn’t experience rape, and legally they did. It is

important to understand the unique circumstances that gender-expansive folx may have when responding to sexual assault survivors, so their exclusion and continued exploitation are not reproduced in post-assault interactions meant to support survivors.

Black survivors feared being seen as culpable in this own victimization or believed that their Blackness delegitimized their experience. There is some evidence that this is a real fear and materialized in interaction with formal responders. Post-assault secondary victimization that is culturally insensitive and generally harmful is common among Black sexual assault survivors. Black people often experience harm while seeking care at the hospital (Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). Their concerns and pain are minimized and ignored, and this treatment extends into criminal justice system responses (Shaw & Lee, 2019). Black sexual assault survivors are subjected to being viewed through an oppressive lens that judges them based on harmful stereotypes that depict Black survivors, particularly Black feminized survivors, as sexually promiscuous (Harris, 2003). Shaw et al. (2016) found that Black survivors who engaged with police post-assault were more likely to be deemed uncooperative, believed to be withholding information, or labeled as a "bad" victim, based on their ability to do well at the trial. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that Black survivors know that they are believed and are provided equitable care.

The emotional responses of some survivors may not align with what responders may view as typical post-assault behaviors. This was something survivors felt influenced how people perceived them following their assault. However, assumptions made about how survivors are feeling based on observable responses are not an accurate way to discern how they may be managing their emotions post-assault. The findings make this significant for survivors of color, where outward expressions of emotion may be deemed culturally inappropriate. There can be some reluctance to show emotional vulnerability for cultural and societal reasons. Emotional

suppression and management are covered in the literature in the form of the *strong Black woman"* trope. The strong Black woman trope is both a coping strategy and characteristic used and assigned to Black women that invite others to perceive Black women as impenetrable and impervious to pain (Lindquist et al., 2016; Pyke, 2020). In some cases, Black women are almost thought to have "superhuman" powers that allow them to withstand tremendous amounts of harm and appear unfazed (Collins, 2000). The literature continuously shows that while it was initially something positive, adherence to this image can lead to psychological and physical health issues (Geronimus & Thompson, 2004). Other aspects in Zora's story alluded to her alignment with the strong Black woman image, one of which is her explanation for why she fought a lot in her youth. She says she would rather fight and acquire scars than be "somebody's tool." There is little room or space given to Black women to be emotionally vulnerable and to have their tears be humanized.

The gendered socialization among Latine feminized folks instills self-sacrificial behavior and deference (Berta-Avila, 2003). Perhaps, Veronica in her desire to refrain from being perceived as weak, did not want to adhere to that socialization. Gendered socialization among Black and Latine communities can impact how Black and Latine women and those with feminized identities process their assault and how they feel they can show up in the world following their assault. For Kai, the only survivor to self-identify as being of Asian heritage, there were also instances that aligned with emotional dissonance. To this author's knowledge, there is no literature on the adherence to gendered stereotypes around emotional expression among transmasculine people of Asian descent. However, culturally Asian American families and communities are collectivist in nature. There is an expectation that one does nothing to bring shame to the family, and emotional expression is not always encouraged (Tsong & Ullman,

2018). In this study, emotional dissonance, or discomfort in being perceived as "weak" occurred at least one time in every person of color's story. This does not indicate that survivors of color are not impacted emotionally by being raped or sexually assaulted but may be indicative of living in an oppressive society where emotional vulnerability is perceived as a liability. For example, the ritualistic nature of sexual violence in Zora's community made being emotionally expressive about experiencing rape difficult. Oxford Languages define a ritual as a "solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order." The belief that rape or sexual violence is ritualistic and signifies womanhood is evident that our society has effectively created an environment where sexual violence is expected and normal. Not only this, because it is "normal," it then becomes difficult to react or speak of its horror because it can be perceived as an overreaction to a completely ordinary part of the human experience.

Developmental age impacted survivors' processing of their assault and resource-seeking decisions. Age is an oppressed identity and, paired with developmental processing capacities and schematics, can explain why adolescent sexual assault survivors have very salient experiences with internalized oppression. As survivors matured, they showed an increased level of consciousness by experiencing more life and having additional sources of information to perceive their lived experiences through. Unfortunately, some survivors also experienced additional assaults in adulthood that served as a catalyst for changing their perception of their recent assault and their adolescent assault. Therefore, accounting for a survivor's developmental age in their focal assault and age at the time of the interview puts experiences with internalized oppression and conscientization into context. Social workers equipped with more understanding of multiplicative identities and their influence on experiences of sexual assault is a meaningful step towards transformative social work practice.

This dissertation requires social workers to work beyond cultural humility and take a critical consciousness and anti-oppressive approach to their work. To do this means not all social workers and agencies may be appropriate to meet the needs of survivors with varying multiplicative identities. This might include identifying other service providers in survivors' networks or communities that can better serve select survivors when our inadequacies prevent us from providing survivors what they need rather than assuming we can do it all. This might also include agencies developing such networks for referrals to connect survivors to agencies that can best meet their needs. Additionally, if social workers and partnering agencies feel empowered to serve survivors with multiplicative identities best, but there is limited availability of resources, it is imperative that social workers respond holistically. Social workers and other responding agencies can tailor supports to address the intersectional needs of survivors outside of typical heteronormative and White-centering responses.

Implications for Policy

Our policies, laws, and procedures need to reflect an accurate understanding and acknowledgment of oppression. Various forms of oppression live within the policies, laws, and procedures that govern our land, and without commitment to transform those laws, policies, and procedures, sexual violence will continue. I am inviting policymakers to recognize that policies, laws, and procedures at the structural, institutional, and local levels perpetuate harm against survivors of sexual assault. The majority of survivors in this study elected not to access formal supports. Several survivors noted that the current systems that respond to sexual assault could not help them or had the potential to cause them more significant harm. The legal system has a reputation of ineffectively addressing sexual harms, and often leaves survivors open to experience further harm, and seldom provides survivors the justice they desire (Shaw & Lee,

2019; Spohn & Tellis, 2012). The current systems in place are not working to address the harms caused by sexual violence effectively, as evidenced by the stories of survivors in this study and the documented lack of engagement in these systems by survivors in the literature (Campbell, 2013; Lorenz et al., 2019; Lonsway & Archambualt, 2012; Spohn & Tellis, 2012; Ullman et al., 2019). Sexual violence occurs across all these domains and will need systemic policy responses that address how sexual violence is used to oppress people within those domains.

Policies that focus on strengthening survivors' agency and power are of importance. Current system responses to sexual assault may not be what survivors believe align with their needs and desires. Sexual harm presents many complexities and intricacies that our current systems do not account for (Kaba, 2020). Many of our survivors, particularly when they were adolescents, were still in contact or were forced to be in a social setting with the person who caused them sexual harm. Some survivors spoke about the complexities of continuing to be in relationship with people who harmed them, some of whom were their family members and romantic partners. Presently, carceral solutions are the dominant response to address sexual violence. Criminal justice and carceral systems have consistently shown to be ineffective in meeting the justice-related needs of sexual assault survivors. Mariame Kaba (2020) discusses society's tendency to glorify carceral solutions to demonstrate their disgust for sexual violence and then commit to sending people to rape factories (i.e., jails and prisons). Rape is socialized in society as a warranted form of punishment during incarceration because it is seen as deserved for the crime committed. It is normalized and minimized, with it often being referred to in humorous antidotes. How we respond to sexual harm sets a precedent for what we believe about that harm. Policies that can invest in community responses to harm are using alternative methods that call for accountability and acknowledgment; while still holding space for both the survivor and the

person who raped or assaulted them to potentially heal. These methods are often rooted in ancient and cultural practices and values that provide alternatives to incarceration. If survivors elect to pursue a legal solution and desire a carceral outcome to achieve their idea of justice, then their choice should be honored and supported. Should survivors decide to pursue alternative justice methods, funding and structural mechanisms should support those forms of justice outside of the carceral state. Internalized oppression can repudiate the importance of identifying policy options that focus on solutions to sexual violence, and ultimately continue to uphold oppressive structures. There have long been anti-carceral feminist voices calling for the transformative movement of responses to sexual and other forms of gender-based violence that are: community-centered, create space to foster accountability, and focus on forms of transformative justice (Kim, 2020). There are community responses to sexual assault that are doing the grassroots work to center survivors and respond to sexual harm in ways that are rooted in abolitionist practice and expand collectivist responses to harm (Kaba, 2020). Currently, anti-rape and survivor communities are demanding policy interventions and funding that support alternatives to carceral solutions and focus on healing initiatives that are led by members of the community (Survivor's Agenda, 2021). The #defundthepolice movement also calls for the funneling of police budgetary provisions to be reallocated to community programs and organizations that can be used to respond to sexual harm, as well as other forms of harm.

Several survivors did not understand what they experienced as sexual assault or rape. Policies related to addressing sexual violence often have a restrictive definition of sexual assault. Subsequently, organizations and agencies that receive any funding allotted through specific sexual violence policies may also be restricted by the narrow understandings of how survivors may perceive their rape or sexual assault. For example, the Office of Violence Against Women

through the Department of Justice defines sexual assault and rape in their materials and grants to support work and organizations that serve survivors of sexual assault. However, this may exclude survivors who have not yet come to understand their experience as a rape or sexual assault. Therefore, policies should expand language outside of "rape" or "sexual assault" that could reduce self-elimination among survivors who are unsure that they were raped or sexually assaulted but may still be looking to utilize resources bound by experiences labeled with those terms. Political entities should explicitly acknowledge that not every survivor immediately labels their experience as a rape or sexual assault and encourage programs and organizations that receive government funding to serve those still trying to make sense of their experience. There should be additional resources and funding to support people who are unsure how to label their experiences. Increasing funding for centers that focus on sexual liberation and health and address services specific to sexual harm may invite more survivors to participate in services and resources. This could also allow further funding opportunities to create alternative systemic responses to sexual violence if the language in policy and calls for grants were less restrictive. I hope this research can assist policymakers, activists, and other legislators in creating and implementing policy that acknowledges the false beliefs and ideologies that oppress marginalized communities. In addition, I hope it encourages the recognition of sexual violence as a weapon to dominate feminized folx and other marginalized groups. Policy creation can be a catalyst for liberation and possibly eradicate sexual violence from American society once and for all.

Implications for Research

Additional research on internalized oppression is needed. Internalized oppression infects so many areas of life, outside of how it impacts survivors of sexual violence. In an

oppressed society, survivors live under layered oppression and experience difficulties from all intersections of society. Scholarship on those experiences will help illuminate the manifestations of internalized oppression and its influence across the phenomenon. Internalized oppression is the least studied form of oppression and is arguably the form of oppression that needs the most attention because liberation from internalized oppression precedes the liberation from other forms of oppression (David, 2014; Pyke, 2010). If we do not examine and understand how to eliminate internalized oppression, any external or societal changes made will be reproduced (Kaba, 2020). Research in this area is understandably difficult because it requires the self-examination of the researcher's own internalized oppression. As a scholar investigating this phenomenon, I can attest to this. However, it must be done. Additionally, manifestations of internalized oppression are varied and can change depending on the specific type. Still, this study offers possible pathways forward in mapping internalized oppression, specific to sexual assault and rape and how it affects survivors who experience it.

The literature pertaining to sexual violence can be more explicit in naming internalized oppression instead of circumventing it with elusive language. There is a plethora of sexual violence literature exploring oppressive beliefs, values, and norms (i.e., rape myths, sexual scripts, unacknowledged rape) that, when internalized, can manifest as internalized oppression. Still, the literature does not explicitly mention internalized oppression. Acknowledgment of the problem is key to identifying a solution (David, 2014). This study tried to center internalized oppression as a vessel of understanding of why survivors process their assault and make certain choices post-assault, which included rape myths, sexual scripts, and unacknowledged rape as symptoms of internalized oppression. The survivors who struggled to say the word rape or label their experience of sexual assault were reluctant to tell others or seek formal supports because

they were disempowered through misinformation and shame. It is a lesson to scholars who study sexual violence to name and call out internalized oppression explicitly. Specifically, because internalized oppression distinctly contributes to survivors not acknowledging their rape or sexual assault. If we want to understand unacknowledged rape and survivor reluctance to access formal supports, there needs to be examination and naming of internalized oppression, its influence, and connections to different forms of structural oppression and violence.

More research on sexual violence must extend beyond the experiences of White cisgender women. Not simply in the diversification of a sample, but to see sexual violence and post-assault experiences outside of the dominant lens. Survivors introduced ideas about masculinity and femininity in the re-telling of their stories. Research that explores social constructions around masculinity and femininity in the context of sexual assault can expand our knowledge about what oppressive socialization does to create constraints around expressions of masculine and feminine identities. In American society, men are the dominant group, and tropes about what it means to be a "man" or "masculine" are rooted in oppressive ideology. It doesn't allow us to understand the full scope of sexual violence without showing deference to the authority of men, even when they aren't involved (Harris, 2003). Women are perceived as the weaker sex in every way (oppressive message), and if someone who sees themselves as masculine is assaulted by a woman, it can feel like a threat to their identity. It is another level of precision in the effects of internalized oppression and its impacts on sexual assault survivors and how they process their assault. Masculinity is associated with violence and threats to safety, and femininity is safe and non-threatening. These beliefs create confusion and inaccurate understanding of people, their behavior, and their identities. It is not to say that we need to bring more attention to feminized folks as people who cause sexual harm. However, we can be more

thoughtful on how internalized oppression provides us narrow views of masculinized and feminized identities and creates false beliefs like gay men can't sexually assault ciswomen, or ciswomen can't assault other ciswomen. Internalized oppression around sexual violence and its utility put us all at risk because it signals that the one who rapes has all the power, and the one who gets raped is powerless. Society's idea of femininity punishes and admonishes violators of social norms, like women who "let themselves get raped" (oppressive message). On the opposite side, men are expected to rape because they have insatiable sexual desires that they pursue until that desire is met, "men don't mean to, but they can't control it" (oppressive message). How we socialize and understand masculine and feminine energy and identities is harmful and impacts our understanding of power, agency, and sex. It also influences our societal understanding of sexual violence, the people committing that sexual harm and those who experience that harm.

Limitations

This study brings a breadth of knowledge and insight into a very elusive and cerebral process. Internalized oppression as a phenomenon is understudied and a difficult experience to confront. Thus, several limitations should be acknowledged and taken into consideration when reviewing this work. First, in exploring and analyzing the stories of others to identify manifestations of internalized oppression, I could be analyzing the stories in this study through my own internalized oppressive schemas. While I was reflective and used my analytic memos to track this and investigate my own internalized oppression, there is the possibility that my internalized oppression influenced the way I analyzed survivor stories. Second, when identifying manifestations of internalized oppression and other relevant constructs related to the research questions of this study, all findings only capture what survivors offered spontaneously through the re-telling of their stories. There were no direct questions asked of the survivor that allowed

them to respond to their experiences with internalized oppression. Similarly, questions were not asked about conscientization or consciousness building as it exists among the survivors in this study. However, I should note that I believe this could be seen as a strength because the findings reflect the often unconscious internalization of oppressive and anti-oppressive beliefs that impact our lives in ways unknown.

Another consideration is the extensive manifestations of internalized oppression and conscientization vary across many different social factors that influence how others live and operate in a group-based hierarchy. However, my intent was not to exhaust and find all manifestations of internalized oppression or conscientization; but to identify the key messages and manifestations of internalized oppression and conscientization that impacted survivors in this study during their post-assault processes. To that end, I believe I was successful.

It must be noted that while I was fortunate to have the stories of survivors with varying racial and gender identities and different ages, the overrepresentation of White cisgender survivors did limit my ability to explore specific experiences. The extent to which race and gender were explored relied on spontaneous offerings made by survivors about their post-assault experiences influenced by aspects of their gender and racial identities. The study would have been more inclusive with additional survivors with different multiplicative identities. However, the survivors with varying multiplicative identities offered significant and valuable information informed by their lived realities. This study did contribute to the experiences of Black, Asian, and gender-expansive survivors, particularly as it explicitly and comprehensively discusses their experiences within the context of internalized oppression and conscientization processes.

In reference to reinforcing and disruptive experiences, I did not investigate what factors contributed to survivors internalizing either oppressive or oppressive messages. If a

survivor was rooted in conscientization, I did not explicitly analyze the types of experiences likely to disrupt the conscientization process. For example, the level of authority and status of the socialization source, the context in which the experience occurred, or extended time removed from the experience of the assault that may impact the internalization of oppressive and anti-oppressive messages. As such, this may also speak to the internalized oppression and conscientization findings. This study took a first-level look into what messages were present, whether or not there was evidence that those messages were internalized, and how it manifested for survivors as they processed their assault and engaged in post-assault processes.

Further research should conduct focused analyses on contributing factors that increase the likelihood of internalized oppression or conscientization. This study's secondary data analysis of survivors' stories influenced the inability to investigate this in-depth. They were not systematically or directly asked about messages they received and what influenced them to internalize them. In addition, I did not analyze reinforcement or disruptive experiences to identify the efficacy of either experience in creating alternative cognitive pathways. Thus, while changes in survivor cognition were present for both internalized oppression and conscientization processes, there was no systematic analysis of one experience directly tied to those changes. Arguably, based on this research, it appears that while one message is powerful, survivor stories showed that one experience or message is also accompanied by years of socialization. In the future, it would be beneficial to explore the intensity and weight of specific experiences and messages among survivors, which again may be evident in some of the survivors' stories, but this study cannot substantiate this.

While this study was fortunate enough to include the voices of survivors who also hold multiple marginalized identities, it must be noted that the intersections of their multiplicative

identities and sexual violence could not be rigorously and justly examined. The limited number of Black, Latine, and Asian survivors did impact the ability to speak to those intersectional experiences in ways that would allow for their contributions to the topic of this dissertation extensively. Additionally, the non-existence of Native Americans and other indigenous voices in this study did not include those stories from a community overwhelmingly impacted by sexual violence in the United States. I did try to uplift the voices of survivors with varying multiplicative identities along the categories of race and gender. However, it is imperative and urgent that research continues to explore and expand upon our knowledge of the intersectional aspects of sexual violence and internalized oppression. I hope this dissertation can encourage continued research development in this area. Research that centers on Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, and other marginalized voices; and expands our understanding of intersectional experiences of sexual violence as they are influenced by internalized oppression and conscientization.

I was the only person to analyze this data for this study in comprehensive detail. Additionally, I was the only person to apply codes to the data within the context of the identified research questions. However, the analytic process and subsequent findings were reviewed and discussed with my two dissertation chairs, who provided critical and invaluable feedback. They helped to ensure that the findings aligned with the words and experiences provided by the survivors in this study. Constructs and ideas were discussed over several months to ensure they were correctly defined, outlined, and aligned with the data and research questions. Several aspects of findings in this study could be an individual study and could provide additional detail in more focused analyses. This study provides a path forward in investigating each of these constructs and findings individually.

Conclusion

Findings from this study have implications and offerings that can be further explored and identified by the reader. What can be garnered from this study is the necessity of naming something to limit its power. Recognizing that what we believe and think about sexual assault can be rooted in oppressive ideologies, and therefore is not aligned with what survivors' experience and know about their lived reality. While internalized oppression is elusive and pervasive, it can be overcome. Investing in developing one's consciousness builds an internal practice that leads to continued liberation. Survivors in this story are testaments that internalized oppression can obstruct the path, but it cannot destroy it. All we must do is remain committed to finding our authentic voices outside of the lies of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. We must stand in our power and embrace our truth at every moment because only then can the illusions created by oppression be shattered.

Offerings for Survivors

I would like to conclude this dissertation with offerings that I took away from this process that helped me in my healing journey as a survivor of sexual assault. My main motivation to conduct this study was to tell a story where survivors could see themselves and possibly create a path forward in healing. Therefore, it is my sincerest hope that survivors can take away from this dissertation the following offerings:

1. It is not your fault, and the shame you may carry is not yours to bear.
2. Healing is possible, and the testimonies provided by the survivors in this study show us that there is light amid the darkness.

3. How you choose to heal is your choice. As one survivor stated, sometimes that can look like “thrashing” and others may not understand it, but it is not for them to understand. Remember to be kind to yourself and give yourself love when you can.
4. Trust your inner knowing. You know what you experienced. You know how it made you feel. Your story is your power, and no one can take that away from you, even though some may try. So, I invite you to investigate what you know to be true and release anything that feels inauthentic or untrue.
5. When you are ready, consider sharing your story with someone you love or with others who could receive healing from your message. You have the power to liberate yourself and others through sharing your story. As someone who has experienced this power and healing, I can confidently say someone needs to hear your voice.

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