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# Lived Experiences of Sexual Violence

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**Lived Experiences of Sexual Violence**

**Sherrie-Lee Rose Petrie**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of  
Arts in Sociology with a specialization in Women's Studies**

**Lakehead University 2016**

# Lived Experiences of Sexual Violence

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## Acknowledgements

I have to start by acknowledging that this thesis was researched and written on traditional Métis lands and Anishinaabe territory of Fort William First Nations under the Robinson Superior Treaty. This work on sexual violence was done on land that was taken, without consent. With that, it does not go unnoticed that there are many stories of sexual violence that we will never hear. There are individuals whose voices we will never be a part of our chorus. This can not be forgotten.

This thesis has been a labour of love for so many people. While academia can feel disconnected, the work that has been put into this thesis has been anything but. I am grateful for the support of so many people throughout the journey that researching and writing has been:

To my participants: thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Thank you for your voice. This thesis does not exist without your bravery, your vulnerability and your voices. Thank you.

Dr. Lori Chambers: what would I have done without you? Thank you for believing in this project. Thank you for understanding my vision and supporting me while I fought to have this thesis done the way that I needed it to be done. Thank you for multi-day e-mails about single sentences. Thank you for caring.

Dr. Curtis Fogel: Thank you for believing in this thesis. I am grateful for your endless reading suggestions; *One Night* has significantly changed my understanding of my own lived-experiences. Thank you for your attention to detail.

Thank you to Joe Michalski for being my second reader. Thank you for your encouraging feedback. You once mentioned the importance of building networks, and I am glad to have you in mine.

To Brian, my family, and friends: I don't have enough words to express how grateful I am for the support you have all given me. This thesis has taken more than my two year degree to write; it's taken thirteen. Thank you for your patience and for your love as I have journeyed through what it means to have experienced sexual violence. Brian: TP.

Grandma: You spirit is in these pages. I miss you.

## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of how individuals who have experienced sexual violence understand their experience(s). A feminist, mixed-methods approach was used to better capture the wide range of experiences of my participants. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten individuals who have experienced sexual violence, and a reflective auto-ethnographical analysis of the author's own lived experiences. Secondary sources used to contextualize the findings include sociological and feminist literature on various aspects of sexual violence. Using the ten interviews, as well as my auto-ethnography, I analyze eight common themes: (1) definitions of sexual violence; (2) consent; (3) identification as victim/survivor/something else; (4) blame; (5) lack of faith in the justice system; (6) rape myths; (7) violence as continuous, and finally; (8) the need for education. For the ten participants in my study, as well as myself, the subject of sexual violence needs more dialogue. This thesis provides a beginning point.

*“Every time I tell my story, it’s a chorus and then a fucking orchestra, and then a song where as a globe we are singing and suddenly the shame we are carrying is given to the person who it belongs to, and that’s not us.” – Staceyann Chin (2015).*

I was born in this city [Thunder Bay]. When I was 13 years old I moved to Manitoba. The summer that I was 14, I came back to Thunder Bay. I went to visit someone who I thought was a really good friend, maybe even a boyfriend. I told him “no sex” before and during, and he didn’t care. I trusted him. When I was 14 years old, I may have even claimed that I loved him. I made myself believe that because I liked him, and because he later stated that my “body language said that I wanted it”, that I wasn’t raped. I held onto that for years. I spoke to him for years after, and any time I questioned him, I was told he thought that it was okay. Eventually, I found myself in a Crisis Stabilization Unit, which is when my parents told him to leave me alone. When I got out, I sent him a message myself telling him to leave me alone. At this point, though, even though I may have started to recognize that I was raped, I would never admit it. Because that would mean that I have baggage. And it would mean that I was used (Chiarot 2012; 2014).

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *Silenced Voices*

In a rape culture, it is perhaps not surprising that those who experience sexual violence rarely discuss their experiences publicly. It is my view that hearing about these experiences is essential in dismantling rape culture, and transforming the law as well as social services. With that being said, while sexual violence has been talked about for a number of years, literature that prioritizes the lived experiences of people who have experienced sexual violence is difficult to come across. Some authors use statistics by government agencies, while others use quotations from people who have experienced sexual violence as provided in other documentation. Few, however, actually speak to (or provide direct narratives from) the people about whom they are talking. As Chasteen (2001) asserts, “despite the increased attention to sexual violence in both the popular and the academic press that this power struggle brought, little is known about how women define and interpret rape in their everyday lives” (103). This leads to a predicament where, while we *know about* people who have experienced sexual violence, we do not *know* them. During a conference, activist and advocate Dr. Rachel Griffin further illustrated the need for people who have experienced sexual violence to share their stories when she said: “Most people hear about sexual assault and want to put that fire out. Let’s nourish the fire. Let’s be leaders and draw attention to sexual assault as an urgent global matter” (2015).

My hope is that this thesis will provide opportunities for people who have experienced sexual violence to have their truth spoken. Griffin is asking that instead of silencing the issue of sexual violence (and thus, silencing the voices of people who have experienced sexual violence) as quickly as possible, we encourage people to share their experiences. My hope is that by letting people who have experienced sexual violence speak for themselves I can help to create a chorus

of people who are not ashamed of themselves. My hope is to be a part of facilitating an orchestra of people who no longer carry a burden that was never theirs to carry in the first place.

Literature on sexual violence is steadily increasing. Most of this literature documents (and occasionally disputes others' positions on) the frequency/prevalence of sexual violence, appropriate (and inappropriate) responses in the legal system and social services, as well as which theories or frameworks would best describe certain aspects of sexual violence. Seldom, however, does research include narratives from people who have experienced sexual violence, with the individuals voicing their stories in their own words. In the words of a woman known as Jane Doe, "no book has ever reflected my experience of the crime" (Doe 2004: 2). One of the commonly talked about consequences of sexual violence is that it steals voice. Theft, robbery and murder have all been selected regularly in surveys of those who have experienced sexual violence as descriptors of this experience (Chasteen 2001). The voices of those who have experienced sexual violence must be incorporated into academic discussions of sexual violence, its consequences, and appropriate legal and social responses. This thesis aims to fill this gap. My thesis invites people who have experienced sexual violence to share their own stories, in their own words. Instead of asking my participants to select from a pre-determined list of descriptors, I ask them to describe to me how they understand certain terms and phrases that are often used to talk about the experience of sexual violence. Rather than obscuring interpretations of sexual violence, it is necessary to acknowledge and believe the experience of people who are sharing their stories (Jones 2002: 31).

Voice was a significant focus of this thesis. Because of this, there are two places in which I have taken some creative liberties with formatting throughout this work. Firstly, it is expected that work using American Sociological Association citation style will consistently use double



spacing throughout the work. Throughout this thesis, however, I have added extra spacing before and after quotations. Secondly, I have not integrated my participant's quotations into paragraphs, regardless of how short some of them are. The point of these creative liberties is to emphasize the voices of my participants, and give their words space to breathe. Allowing my participants' voices to come through in these distinct ways is an important component to representing the diversity of their experiences.

The following research questions have guided this inquiry:

- 1) How do individuals who have experienced sexual violence understand their experience(s)?
- 2) What is the importance of 'voice' for people who have experienced sexual violence?

### *Language*

The language that is used (both in activist and academic spheres) to talk about people who have experienced sexual violence plays a significant role in whether or not those individuals will feel comfortable sharing their own stories. If academics and service providers have victim blaming embedded in their discourse, the likelihood of a person who has experienced sexual violence coming forward likely decreases. The question has to be asked (and the goal of this work is to understand): is the language that is used to describe and theorize about people who have experienced sexual violence the language that they themselves would use? As someone who has experienced sexual violence in my own life, it occurs to me regularly that the language used to describe my experiences by others is simplistic and presumptuous. While a discussion of the way that my interview participants understand and experience some of the language that is regularly spoken about them will follow, it seems important that I identify the way that I understand and have framed certain ideas throughout this work.

Amy Chasteen's (2001) article aimed to understand how a diverse sample of women

understood and interpreted rape. The article outlined that 21.7 percent of the participants did not select a category of analogy (from either theft, betrayal, social status or personal destruction) to compare to their experience with sexual violence. Instead, those individuals provided some sort of commentary (131). The fact that such a significant number of the participants felt a need to provide commentary serves to further illustrate the problem of women feeling as though they are not being heard in a sufficient way. This is also illustrated in the article, “Have We Got A Theory For You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice’ by Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983) where, quite simply, they state “a woman needs to be able to tell her own story in her own voice” (573). If people are to feel comfortable sharing their experiences of sexual violence, we have got to let them tell their stories, without us assuming that we understand their lives. We have to give people opportunity to explain their experiences without interjection.

According to Anderson and Jack (1991), “to hear women’s perspectives accurately, we have to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them” (11). That is, we have to pay attention to the language that people are choosing to use. Instead of hearing someone state that they have experienced sexual violence and moving forward, there needs to be a consideration of what that means to the individual. What, for that specific individual, does it mean to have experienced sexual violence? How do they understand that experience? Are their senses (seeing, smelling, hearing, and so forth) related to that experience? Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state: “Life narratives, through the memories they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time, and in relation to their own ever-moving pasts” (2010: 30).

My experiences have certainly shaped my understandings of these concepts. Similarly, I expect that the experiences of my participants have contributed to their own understandings of these terms as well. Further, the more experiences that a person has over their life-course, the more developed their understanding of the world around them becomes. Our embodiment of language is fluid. A person who experiences sexual violence, for example, may shift over time from preferring to be acknowledged as a “victim” to assuming the identity of a “survivor”. Rachel Griffin quoted Dr. Martin Luther King during the conference as having said: “Don’t allow somebody to make you feel that you are nobody”. Following this, she reminded us that it is crucial to remember “the somebody-ness of survivors in every moment of every decision” (Griffin 2015). It is important that we remember that people who experience sexual violence are human beings, and that they have been silenced in a profound way. It is imperative that we work towards creating safe space in which people who have been violated may share their stories and their experiences.

My understandings of language (and therefore the way that I use language throughout this work) can be described as feminist and constructionist. That is, the problem of sexual violence is actively made, not just simply revealed (Chasteen 2001: 103). The way that each and every individual conceptualizes a particular social issue, and the language that is used to discuss these issues, are socially constructed. While the goal of my thesis is to better understand how people who have experienced sexual violence understand their experiences, it is important that I explain how I contextualize and will utilize terms. In order to move forward, it is important to have a brief discussion of the controversies surrounding some of these concepts, as well as the ways that I understand and will employ language about sexual violence throughout this work.

*Rape/sexual assault/sexual violence:*

Jessica Valenti stated once that there is still widespread ignorance about what rape is . . . because inconvenient definitions have been “whittled down by racism, misogyny, classism and the pervasive wink-wink-nudge-nudge belief that all women really want to be forced anyway” (2012). There are a number of ways that literature distinguishes between rape and sexual assault. In Canadian Law under the Criminal Code of Canada, sexual violence is currently understood as “sexual assault”. The Criminal Code considers sexual assault not only as a physical act of sexual violence (with a body part or weapon), but also as a threat of that physical attack. Similarly, sexual exploitation, sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, and child pornography fall under the Criminal Code. While “rape” specifically refers to an act of sexual violence where there has been forced penetration, “sexual assault” includes other forced sexual acts (such as coerced oral sex, nonconsensual breast fondling, touching a sleeping person’s genitals, etc.). According to Palmer, “the phrase sexual assault has been in use for more than a century, and 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers seem to have used it synonymously with rape” (para. 3, 2011). Some people may find themselves more connected to a statement by Lazar (2010): “in order to emphasize the brutality of what it is, I will call it ‘rape’” (6). For some people, “sexual assault” is seen as a lesser-crime, and to have their experience of rape (that is, forced penetration) whittled down to sexual assault is demeaning. While “rape” is a less-than-pleasant word that encapsulates the power dynamics that are entrenched in this crime, it is a word that some people do not feel comfortable calling their experience, especially if there was no penetration. While for some “sexual violence” encapsulates, very directly, the extreme brutality of the experience, for others it is more vague than “rape”. Further, there are different *types* of rape. As Joseph Michalski shares (2016), “ritualistic rape” is a form of sexual violence whereby “forced sexual violence us

linked to socially approved ceremonial occasions” (10). That is, most “outsiders” would look at these particular culturally legitimate practices and assess the situation as that of sexual violence. There are several different forms of ritualistic rape, including forced marriages (which, by definition suggests a lack of consent in contrast to an arranged marriage or “freely chosen” marriage)<sup>1</sup>, ritual defloration (which is the defloration of a young woman or bride in order to symbolize the “virility, attainment of warrior status, and capacity to secure alliances” a young man) (13), and wife-sharing/wife-lending (which some have argued helps to “forge alliances or extend economic cooperation beyond the immediacy of one’s local family”) (16). According to Michalski (2016), “ritualistic rapes differ significantly from [other forms of rape] through their relative *lack* of social isolation” (20). It is important to note that the language used throughout this work will be reflective of my belief that sexual violence is just that: violence of a sexual nature. Therefore, I will continuously use either “sexual violence” or “rape”. However, because this work is focusing on the lived experiences of people who have experienced sexual violence, the language that they use will remain intact throughout their narratives.

### *Sexual violence:*

Discussions about sexual violence are not new. The ways that the discussions have been framed have changed over time, however, and even the words that people have used to describe the crime have changed (Arte 2015). The construction of sexual violence as a social problem is a relatively recent formation that has come out of activist efforts (Chasteen 2001: 102). Sexual violence is also considered a crime set apart from others, because

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Michalski also notes that the sexual intercourse that typically occurs through forced marriage can also be considered a form of marital rape, given that the young (sometimes prepubescent) females cannot legally consent.

Rapists use sex organs as the locus of their violence, but rape is not about sex, at least not in the sense of being motivated by sexual attraction or an uncontrollable sexual urge.

Rape *is* about sex in the sense that rapists not only commit acts of sexual violence, but that the pervasive threat of sexual assault is used to limit women's sovereignty and justify sexual assault itself<sup>2</sup> (Philipovic 2013).

As Brownmiller (1975) echoes, "in a sexual assault, physical harm is much more than a threat; it is a reality because violence is an integral part of the act" (384). There is a lot of discussion about what *causes* rapists to rape.

There are many myths and misconceptions (as well as much ignorance) about the causes of sexual violence: often, blame gets put on the people who experience sexual violence when they are asked about their previous sexual encounters or what clothes they were wearing at the time in question. However, sexual violence is about power. Sexual violence is a systemic issue which stems from a patriarchal society that has passed down beliefs from generation-to-generation that women are objects that can be used and discarded as per a man's pleasure. Further, sexual violence has been historically defined by males, even though the statistics have long-since shown that women are more likely to experience sexual violence than are males. In the words of Brownmiller (1975), "as man understood his male reality, it was perfectly lawful to capture and rape some other tribe's women, for what better way for his own tribe to increase?" (376). It was, however, considered unlawful if someone from one's own tribe was sexually violated. While these assertions by Brownmiller are important, it must be kept in mind that this work was an early interpretation of sexual violence. Brownmiller's explanation has been

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in original text.

critiqued as being simplistic on many grounds. One of those reasons is because of her assertion that sexual violence only happens to females. Further, she disregards that sexual violence is most commonly done at the hands of those who actually know the person they are abusing (Jackson 1997). Sexual violence needs to be defined by the people who are most likely to experience this specific violence. According to Brownmiller (1975)

to a woman, the definition of rape is fairly simple. A sexual invasion of the body by force, an incursion into the private, personal inner space without consent- in short, an internal assault from one of several avenues and by one of several methods – constitutes a deliberate violation of emotional, physical and rational integrity and is a hostile, degrading act of violence” (376).

That is, sexual violence occurs *any and every time* where, without enthusiastic and ongoing permission, someone invades another person’s body.

*Victim/survivor/person who has experienced sexual violence:*

There has been a great amount of debate in recent years about how to label people who have experienced sexual violence. The two most commonly discussed ways of naming people – victim and survivor - are also paradoxical. A woman, known as Jane Doe (2006), has commented on the two contradictory labels:

I never allowed anyone to refer to me as a ‘rape victim.’ Certainly for the time that buddy held a knife to my throat I was his victim and I cannot deny that. But every time

that term is used to define me, I feel I am returned to that moment, that night of terror and helplessness. Nor am I fond of the label ‘survivor’. Like everyone else, I was already surviving the normal pain and hardships of life before I was raped, thank you very much. ‘Okay. So what do we call you?’ you ask. Call me a woman. Call me a woman who has been raped. Call me a woman who has been raped by a man” (498).

The labels that are put on people who have experienced sexual violence vary as much as the people themselves. As Jane Doe points out, the term “victim” is typically seen as a word that could be easily replaced by “helpless”. This is outlined further by Cathy Winkler (2002), who quotes Pamela, one of her friends: “I do not call Cathy a ‘victim.’ Cathy did not want to be patronized. She did not want people to pity her. She did not see herself as a victim because she was dealing with the situation. She was not helpless or weak” (100-101). For some people who have experienced sexual violence, being called a “victim” could trigger making them re-live their experience in great detail. While this question hasn’t been asked in the literature so far, it is one that I hope my work will illuminate. Further “victim” indicates that sexual violence is an unusual and dramatic event, a deviation from the common experience of most women (Randall 2010: 408). Given the statistics that show the prevalence of sexual violence, “victim” can be seen as presuming a social script that has people believing that sexual violence is rare. Such use of language, then, may discourage people who have experienced sexual violence from understanding their experiences as a violation.

The idea that there are “real victims of sexual violence” is rooted in the misconception that if your body responded to the act of sex, you must not have been victimized (or if you were victimized by a date or a spouse, it is just a part of the way the world works). For the most part,



people who experience sexual violence are people who are going about their everyday “normal” lives. “Victim” could be seen as implying that there was something different or questionable about the specific daily-doings of the person who was violated. With that being said, the language of “victim” is often well-intentioned. The word “victim” also places the blame on the rapist. Further, acknowledging the person who has been violated as a “victim” ties to the language of other crimes, which points to the wrong nature of the act of sexual violence.

For others, however, a “survivor” is someone who remains resilient through the highs and lows of every-day life. A “survivor” is someone who is resilient and courageous. Further, there are some people who have experienced sexual violence who might not feel as though they are “surviving”. Taking a cue from Doe, and combining my belief in the usage of “sexual violence” as a way of describing the experience, I will refer to my participants as “people who have experienced sexual violence”. First and foremost, the people who experience this traumatic crime are just that: people. It is of the utmost importance that people have the ability to claim the language that they would like to have used to describe themselves, and that they retain the freedom to change that language over time. People who experience sexual violence should be able to describe their experiences on their own terms. Therefore, should participants identify themselves as something specific, I will use that descriptor for them. In referring to myself, I will largely use “VISA” (Victim as Survivor and Advocate). This language was introduced to me by Cathy Winkler, in her text *“One Night, Realities of Rape”*. This identification is rooted in my desire to acknowledge the reality of my victimhood, but also be true to the work I have done to overcome my experiences.

The next chapter is a literature review in which I discuss themes of rape myths, rape

culture, and consent. In chapter three, I outline my methods. In the following chapter, I share the findings from my interviews. In chapter five, I share my auto-ethnography. Chapter six is a synthesis and reflection on how this work has impacted my own understandings of sexual violence. Finally, chapter seven is a conclusion and call to action.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *A Note About Statistics*

When talking about sexual violence, it is very difficult to rely on statistics. In large part, this is due to a lack of reporting from people who experience sexual violence (Morris 2002: 506). There are a number of reasons why individuals may not report their victimization: fear of retaliation, fear of a continuation of their trauma at the hands of the police and the criminal justice system (which is also known as the “second rape” (Morris 2002: 510)), fear of a perceived loss of status, and lack of desire to report due to the typical effects of sexual assault such as depression, self-blame or loss of self-esteem (*R. v. Seaboyer; R. v. Gayme*, [1991] 2 S.C.R. 577: 1991). In their search for assistance and justice, many people who experience sexual violence are repeatedly subjected to highly insensitive, victim blaming treatment by law enforcement, medical practitioners, and other support services workers, and these experiences can be quite re-victimizing in their own right (Campbell et al. 2004: 254). People who experience sexual violence need to feel supported in order to be willing to share their experiences. It is unlikely that people who have experienced sexual violence will want to report their stories in any way, much less in a public court, when they see others sharing their stories and being blamed or shamed. In fact, in Canada it is estimated that “of every 100 incidents of sexual assault, only 6 are reported to the police” (SexualAssault.ca). In the United States of America, it is estimated that only 32 of every 100 rapes gets reported to the police. Of that 32, 7 percent lead to an arrest. 3 of those are referred to prosecutors. 2 of those 3 will lead to some type of conviction. The rest will not spend a single day in prison (United States Department of Justice. *NCVS 2009-2013*). Despite pervasive problems with reporting, the statistics that have been published about sexual violence are eye-opening:

There is an average of 293,066 victims (age 12 or older) of rape and sexual assault each year. There are 525,600 minutes in a non-leap year. That makes 31,536,000 seconds per year. So, 31,536,000 divided by 293,066 comes out to 1 sexual assault every 107 seconds (United States Department of Justice. *NCVS*. 2009-2013).

There are other reports that simplify the numbers to assert that one in four women, and one in six men, will experience some form of sexual violence. Contrary to popular belief about the “creepy man in the back-alley”, most perpetrators are actually known to the victim; often they are family friends, relatives, coaches or other trusted individuals (Brownmiller 1975: 176). It has been shown over time that the rate of cases classified by police as unfounded is higher in instances of sexual violence than in other violent crimes, and that this difference has been unwavering over time. Unfounded cases are those which are dismissed before the stage of a full formal investigation, often because they are said to be not based on fact/evidence. Further, most people who experience sexual violence are woman and most offenders are male. According to Light and Ruebsaat (2006), in fact, the rate is more than twice as high for unfounded cases of sexual violence (3). Unfounded cases have made advocates and researchers relate the high unfounded rates to dominant gender biases.

Blair Crew (2011) shares the following statistics:

<i>Year</i>	Reported Sexual Assaults	Sexual Assaults Classed as “Unfounded”	Percentage	Reported Criminal Offences	Criminal Offences Classed as “Unfounded”	Percentage
<i>Total (2003-2007)</i>	2,314	720	<b>31.11%</b>	239,957	6,390	<b>2.66</b>

That is, 31.11% of reported instances of sexual assault were considered unfounded, while only

2.66% of other criminal offenses were so considered. Overall, the frequency with which individuals who experience sexual violence are told that they are fabricating their stories is over 11 times higher than those who report any other crime. Light and Ruebsaat (2006) found that the following issues were statistically significant determinants as to whether or not a case of sexual violence would eventually be determined to be founded or unfounded:

whether victim and suspect were strangers, mental health issues/mental disability of complainants, use of force in the sexual assault, victim's physical resistance, whether the victim said 'no', whether the victim appeared upset or not, and what information was in the files regarding the victim, witness and suspect" (8-12).

That is, if the person who experienced sexual violence did not know the suspect, it was more likely that their case would be founded. Similarly, if there was evidence of physical resistance or that the person who was being violated said "no", or if the person who experienced sexual violence was distraught, the case was again more likely to be founded. Conversely, if the person who was sexually violated had mental health issues, the case was statistically more likely to become unfounded. These findings are disturbing, as most perpetrators are known to those who experience sexual violence, and reactions to such violence vary enormously. The resilience of these stereotypes as determinative factors in naming cases as unfounded has deep legal roots.

### *Legal Framing of Sexual Violence Over Time*

There are problems in the ways that different acts of sexual violence have been framed over time. The Criminal Code, which was originally passed in 1892, is the document that states

most criminal offences and procedures in Canada. While the document itself has been regularly updated, the courts have not always reflected these provisions. In 1975, the Criminal Law Amendment Act repealed some of the statutory corroboration requirements, and provided that questions about the sexual conduct of the complainant with persons other than the accused could not be asked unless they were pre-screened (Backhouse 2008: 299). It was taboo for a woman to engage in sexual activity with a man who was not her husband (Brownmiller 1975: 18). The law stated that a woman could not be sexually violated by a man who was her husband. It was only after the 1983 amendment to the criminal code that women could charge their husbands with sexual violence (Statistics Canada 2008). This fact reflected wider attitudes about women not really owning their own bodies, and those who shared their bodies were not seen as worthy of protection. “Sexual assault” is still a relatively new term. As Backhouse (2008) states “the phrase ‘sexual assault’ did not become a legal term until 1983, when it replaced a number of other offences (such as indecent assault)” (5). Later, in 1997, the Supreme Court “attempted to restrict the production and disclosure of some personal records regarding the complainant” (299).

The rape shield law was a change in the Criminal Code to forbid testimony of prior sexual activity except under certain specific circumstances (such as if it relates to specific instances of sexual activity, if it is relevant to an issue at trial or if the benefits of sharing about a person’s prior sexual activity would outweigh the danger of prejudice) (Statistics Canada 2008). In the *Seaboyer* case, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down a rape-shield provision of the Criminal Code of Canada. According to Justice McLachlin (on behalf of the majority), the provision, which prevented people who are charged with sexual assault from cross-examining the complainant about their sexual history, could (in some cases) exclude evidence that is relevant, which would then prevent the accused from being able to entirely defend themselves

(*R. v. Seaboyer; R. v. Gayme*, [1991] 2 S.C.R. 577: 1991). Justice L'Heureux-Dubé disagreed, and found in dissent that the Code provision just excluded evidence that is irrelevant and would tamper with the integrity and fairness of the trial process. The *Seaboyer* case prompted new legislation, which would clarify the definition of consent. Whereas previously the onus had been on the person who was sexually violated to prove that they had not given consent, under the new law responsibility was on the alleged perpetrator to prove that they had sought and received consent to each sexual activity.

This new understanding of consent was confirmed in the *Ewanchuk* case in which a man (who had previously been convicted of sexual assault several times) brought a 17-year-old woman into his van for a job interview. After the interview Ewanchuk invited the woman to his trailer behind the van, and made a series of advances. Each time, she would say "no" to his advance and he would stop, but after the passing of time would then renew his sexual advances. She testified at trial that during her time in the trailer she was "frozen by a fear of force" and cited this as the reason why she did not take further action to stop the sexual conduct such as leaving or attempting to physically resist the man (who was also reportedly twice her size). Before she left, Ewanchuk paid her \$100, presumably for the massage that was given prior to the touching (but in all likelihood, this was an attempt to coerce her to keep quiet about his behaviour). At trial, Ewanchuk (somehow) successfully argued that, although the woman had initially said "no" to his touching, because he had continued and she had not continued objecting, this constituted "implied consent". The acquittal was upheld on appeal. In the decision of the Alberta Court of Appeal, Justice John McClung commented that "it must be pointed out that the complainant did not present herself to Ewanchuk or enter his trailer in a bonnet and crinolines" and that Ewanchuk's conduct was "less criminal than hormonal". This case was taken to the

Supreme Court, where the question was "whether the trial judge erred in his understanding of consent in sexual assault and whether his conclusion that the defense of "implied consent" exists in Canadian law was correct." Justice Major, for the majority, held that there was no defense of "implied consent" to sexual assault and overturned the ruling of the Court of Appeal. The accused, Major explained, must raise a reasonable doubt that there was consent. (Consent could be shown, at that time, in one of two ways. Either where the "complainant in her mind wanted the sexual touching to take place" or, in the case of establishing a mistaken belief of consent, where "the complainant had affirmatively communicated by words or conduct her agreement to engage in sexual activity with the accused.") Justice L'Heureux-Dube held that the defense (of implied consent) could not be used unless he took sufficient steps to ascertain consent. Here, the accused did not make any attempt to ensure that the young woman had consented when he moved from a massage to sexual touching. Further, Justice L'Heureux-Dube criticized McClung J.'s opinions, arguing that:

complainants should be able to rely on a system free from myths and stereotypes, and on a judiciary whose impartiality is not compromised by these biased assumptions . . . it is part of the role of this Court to denounce this kind of language, unfortunately still used today, which not only perpetuates archaic myths and stereotypes about the nature of sexual assaults but also ignores the law" (Backhouse 2003: 170).

At the time of the Ewanchuk case, in order for a perpetrator to be convicted of sexual violence, two elements needed to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt:



that the accused committed the *actus reus* and that he had the necessary *mens rea*. The *actus reus* of assault is unwanted sexual touching. The *mens rea* is the intention to touch, knowing of, or being reckless of or wilfully blind to, a lack of consent, either by words or actions, from the person being touched (*R. v. Ewanchuk 1999*).

That is, there had to be knowledge about a lack of consent.

This has changed now. The perpetrator is expected to obtain explicit consent. Legally, the perpetrator has to prove that they had both sought and received explicit consent. Despite this fact, however, the courts still have difficulty with rape cases. In particular, in some cases, wife rape (also known as spousal assault or domestic assault) is translated into “bad” or “unwanted” sex (Lazar 2010: 5), but not as rape. In the case of wife rape, as well as date rape, the assumption is sometimes made that what happened was a bad ending to a fantastic evening (or unpleasurable sex) (Jones 2002: 26). Further, the activist notion of “enthusiastic and continuous consent” has not been discussed broadly enough. Larger society has yet to recognize that just because someone consents to one aspect of sexual activity (kissing, for example), this does not equate to consent for other aspects of sexual activity (oral sex). The fact of the matter is that we live in a society where sexism, racism, classism and homophobia are very real. According to Jane Doe (2004), the “tools and the information they store are based on faulty conclusions about empirical evidence. Which means they can be as racist and as sexist as the agents who design and interpret them” (125). Policy makers, police officers, and individuals who are otherwise involved in helping people who experience sexual violence exist in the same rape culture as everyone else. Unfortunately, because of this, there is a strong possibility of those service providers perpetuating rape culture.

*“The Second Rape” (and Other Responses)*

The initial experience of being sexually violated is traumatic. Unfortunately, many people who experience sexual violence have noted that the further they go in the process of attempting to charge their perpetrator, the more violated they feel. Winkler cites Williams and Holmes (1981) as stating:

While these second assault comments do not individually match the horror and trauma of the rape, the accumulative effect of prejudicial and antagonistic statements toward the survivor do have a compounding effect that is more cruel than the rape attack itself” (2).

That is, while certainly *to be* sexually violated is traumatic, having that experience of trauma drawn out, questioned, and challenged is difficult. While experiencing sexual violence is awful, having our lived-experiences prodded at is horrendous. Jane Doe (2004) outlines the ways in which she experienced this “second rape”. She remembers feeling as though she desired to do several things immediately following her attack (“vomit, pee, be quiet, put some clothes on, clean up, call home. Be in control . . . but you can forget about any of that. Especially the control stuff” (10). She further writes about getting up to use the washroom, and being told that she should wait (so that a rape kit could be collected once she got to the hospital). Even when she defied that order, she recalls being told to leave the door open and not to “wipe or wash up”, as well as watching the police watch her through the crack in the door (12). Doe writes later about how she was told to sign papers giving the authorities consent to run a rape kit (or Sexual Assault Evidence Kit) without ever having an explanation provided about what that process meant.

According to Jane Doe:

The overriding purpose of forensic testing is not to collect evidence to catch the rapist but to validate a woman's claim that she has been raped. . . Anyone would agree that the tests are invasive and intrusive. I can testify that they are experienced by the woman involved as a second assault" (305).

She recalls that after signing the paper, she was "wheeled out of her home disguised as Casper the Friendly Ghost"<sup>3</sup> (12). Once she arrived at the hospital, Doe was bombarded with a line of questioning that felt uncomfortably intrusive to her. Doe was then rolled into a room where three women in white lab coats were awaiting her. They asked questions as to whether she had attempted suicide at any point, or had any abortions or recent consensual sex. They asked her about her alcohol consumption. Then they had Doe stand on a circular sheet on the floor and remove her robe. Continuing their examination, the nurses "brush the hair on my head and count out fifty hairs and then they brush between my legs and pluck fifteen pubic hairs by the root and it should hurt but I don't feel it. I don't feel anything" (13). They scraped skin from her shin, and asked her to spit into a tissue. Doe's mouth was swabbed. "They take some blood and then take more and more and then – *and then* – they do an internal pelvic examination, stirrups, gloves, stainless steel inside me, entering, expanding"<sup>4</sup> (13). After finding a live sperm, and everything being "collected in vials and plastic or under glass, labelled with [her] name, these pieces of [her] are placed in a kit to be touched and examined, probed and considered some more, somewhere, by someone, for something" (13). Doe was then given antibiotics and pills to

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<sup>3</sup> Doe was given a blanket to put over her head while being wheeled out of her apartment on a stretcher.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis Doe's.

prevent fertilization by errant sperm, and gravol to ease the upset stomach that the medication causes.

People who experience sexual violence often refer to the process of retelling their story to the court as a “second rape”, but Doe’s description suggests that perhaps the truth is that there are multiple experience of re-traumatization throughout the process of preparing for and going to trial. The suffering that people (much like Doe) experience beyond the initial attack is phenomenal. But, as Jane Doe asserts, rape pays. “Every report, investigation, stakeout, news story, interrogation, charge, motion, court appearance, jury selection, objection, witness, exhibit, conviction, appeal, sentence served or acquittal results in the creation or performance of a job, a salary paid and a host of economic spinoffs” (62). A person who experiences sexual violence has to sit and watch people benefit from their suffering. In her book, Doe explains that while her lawyer was telling the story about her rape, she felt as though he was suddenly telling his story, not the story of her rape. “[They] will define your experience for you. For example, oral sex was part of my rapist’s MO. The Crown instructed me to use the Latin term ‘cunnilingus’ when describing this on the stand” (65). When she said that she didn’t want to say that word because she found it “embarrassing” and she “couldn’t even spell it” and further, “it’s not what [she] says” (65), she was told that it was what the courts required and that she had to use that language. When she testified to the act of rape cunnilingus, however, the rapist’s lawyer interrupted her to clarify that she was talking about oral sex. Doe has since asserted that the ordeal she went through was about policy and procedures, not crime prevention, and certainly not about protecting or serving (16). This second rape, which perpetuates rape culture, also contributes to the silencing of people who experience sexual violence.

## *Consent*

Consent is the most important aspect of what transforms an experience from “sex” into “sexual violence”. Nicole Desnoyers states that “the idea of ‘un-consensual sex’ is not a thing because if there isn’t consent, it isn’t sex. It’s rape, it’s assault, it’s violence” (Desnoyers 2015). While consent gets talked about often, it remains the center of nearly all contested cases (historically and currently), and it seems linked to the idea of respectability (Phipps, 2009). People who have been sexually violated are often expected to prove in court that they are good people who contribute in some significant way to the betterment of society. In the case of *Seaboyer*, the question was whether the rape shield provisions (which prevented those charged with sexual violence from cross-examining the complainant about their previous sexual history) were deemed to violate the “right to full answer and defence” as outlined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (*R. v. Seaboyer; R. v. Gayme*, [1991] 2 S.C.R. 577: 1991). In the *Ewanchuk* case, because the victim had “consented”<sup>5</sup> to a massage in the back of Ewanchuk’s van, and because she had not physically resisted, the question became whether there was “implied consent” (*R. v. Ewanchuk* 1999).

In a case that spurred Winnipeggers to band together, Judge Dewar cited the woman’s clothing (a skirt, tube top, heels and plenty of makeup) as evidence that she was “ready to party” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 2011). In 2006, Kenneth Rhodes and a friend met a woman and her friend one night outside a bar in Thompson (under what Dewar would later call “inviting circumstances”). Dewar also noted that “they made their intentions publicly known that they wanted to party”, saying that the women spoke of going swimming in a nearby lake that night “notwithstanding the fact neither of them had a bathing suit”. The two women and two men left

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word “consent” in quotation marks here, because there is evidence that due to a degree of coercion, and power dynamics, that consent was not actually freely given

the parking lot of the bar. Rhodes began making sexual advances towards the woman who was sexually violated, and she initially rejected him but later returned his kisses. Rhodes later forced himself upon the woman once they were alone. At the trial, Rhodes pleaded not guilty on the basis that he thought the woman had consented. At the time of his ruling, Dewar stated "this is a different case than one where there is no perceived invitation. This is a case of misunderstood signals and inconsiderate behaviour" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 2011).

Sexual violence is a crime distinguishable from any other *because* of consent. It is accepted without question that someone who is a victim of robbery doesn't have to prove that they attempted to resist the robber, and they are certainly never questioned about whether or not they consented or somehow gave permission to their robber. In fact, as Brownmiller (1975) states, "police usually advise law-abiding citizens not to resist a robbery, but rather to wait it out patiently, report the offense to the proper authorities, and put the entire matter in the hands of the law" (383). The same could be said about other crimes (fraud and car-jacking, to name a few). The discussion about consent becomes even more complex in the context of a relationship, where the negotiation of sexual contact is rarely as simple or direct as asking 'do you consent to xyz sexual activity with me?' It is even more unlikely that the question is re-asked every time the sexual activity changes. Jones (2002) writes, "There are a whole host of subtle, nuanced signs and signals, which ritualize and complicate sexual behaviour. Often these complications are used to give excuse to or justify a claims mis-reading of 'sexual signs'" (24). Sexual safety is seen as a female responsibility and thus failure to communicate effectively is often cited as the woman's fault. The expectation is that women not only shoulder the responsibility for reading risk in the context of sexual encounters, but also to read the situations accurately (Jones 2002: 29).

Consent, the most important aspect of every sexual encounter, seems to be difficult to understand

clearly. According to Jones, however, “if, as is often claimed, he did not read the signals correctly, then perhaps he should wait until the signals are clearer” (31). Today, the Criminal Code of Canada outlines consent as “the voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity in question” (Criminal Code, s. 273.1). Further, consent cannot be obtained if the complainant (or, the person who was violated) was incapable of consenting to the activity<sup>6</sup>, as well as where the accused abuses a position of power<sup>7</sup>. Consent can be revoked at any time, and is not transferable from one sexual act to another. Even though consent is now clearly defined at law, we continue to live in a society that perpetuates rape myths and encourages sexual violence.

### *Rape Culture*

It is not untypical for women to grow up expecting to be sexually violated at some point in their life-course. In the words of Susan Brownmiller (1975),

Women are trained to be rape victims. To simply learn the word ‘rape’ is to take instruction in the power relationship between males and females. To talk about rape, even with a nervous laughter, is to acknowledge a woman’s special victim status. We heard the whispers when we are children: *girls* get raped. Not boys. The message becomes clear. Rape has something to do with our sex: it is the dark at the top of the stairs, the undefinable abyss that is just around the corner, and unless we watch our step it might become our destiny” (309).

While Brownmiller was right that from a young age females are trained to be rape victims, she

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<sup>6</sup> For example, if they were drunk.

<sup>7</sup> Such as in the case of a coach or teacher

was also contributing to rape myths by asserting that rape does not happen to boys. Indeed, most discourse around sexual violence exists with the perception of woman as potential victim, and man as potential violator. It is also true that the majority of sexual violence is experienced by female-identified individuals, at the hands of male-identified individuals. However, sexual violence happens to males as well. With that being said, however, sexual violence happens to women of all ages, while males are predominantly assaulted during childhood and youth. While discussions about gender are important to this issue, sexual violence is not solely a matter of gender, but also of hierarchies and other forms of power differentials. The relationship between a coach and an athlete, for example, is one of a power difference. This expectation of violence increases as young girls are told that a boy who pinches, pushes or teases her on the playground must like her because “boys tease girls they like”.

A Rape Culture is a culture that “normalizes the violence of rape due to attitudes about violence, sexism and sexuality” (Peters 2015). It is a culture that believes in and perpetuates sexism. It is a culture that reifies hierarchies. It is not until we work towards reducing these hierarchies that a consent culture could become a reality. A consent culture, on the other hand, could be described as one in which the predominant description of sex is centered around mutual consent (for without consent, sex is not possible). Rape culture exists when the dominant belief is that if you are not sexually violating someone, you cannot possibly be participating in (and perpetuating) sexism. But simply by telling someone who is making a person uncomfortable at a pub that they are doing so, or by encouraging sensitivity training and other prevention activities, every single person can be engaged on a very practical level in eliminating rape culture. Rape culture is a colonization of the body (Peters 2015). Colonization has been conceptualized as “a form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behaviour of



other individuals or groups” (Horvath 1972: 46). Colonization, at its most basic level, is the process of violently taking the power to a people’s land. An individuals’ body is their land; it is the space in which they exist and over which they should be able to have power. Similarly, sexual violence is an issue in which people’s bodies are violently invaded.

Rape culture is the process by which communities are given permission to be complicit in the sexism that contributes to sexual violence. A rape culture is what we live in right now. Statistics show that at least half of Canadian women will experience sexual or physical violence at some point in their lives (Stats Canada, 1993), yet disagreements and misconceptions about what is and is not rape are still points of discussion. Activist, feminist, advocate and teacher, Dr. Rachel Griffin, who spoke at a conference on campus sexual assault, addressed staff and faculty, stating: “if your campus is not actively against a global rape culture, you are condoning it and you are complicit within it. There is no ‘ish.’”(Griffin 2015). This is similar to the idea behind Jackson Katz’s bystander approach (2011) which is based on “the elementary premise in social justice education that members of dominant groups -- men, whites, heterosexuals - play an important role in efforts to challenge sexism, racism and homophobia.” That is, people who are of a privileged gender, race, class, sexual orientation must be actively engaged in efforts towards the elimination of rape culture. If they are not engaged, then they are part of the problem. Rape culture is founded on, and perpetuates, false beliefs about sexual violence that blames those who have experienced it.

### *Rape Myths*

In 2011, Kathryn Ryan quoted R. May as stating that a myth is: “a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence” (1990:

774). All myths serve some purpose. Some entertain children and adults alike, and some explain some phenomenon of nature (such as the Lochness Monster). Rape myths serve to both blame victims and, paradoxically, to convince women who exist in a rape culture that it will not happen to them because rape only happens to “other” (“bad”, “slutty”, “drunk”) girls. Commonly understood rape myths include that a woman wearing clothing that is viewed as provocative *must* want to have sex with anyone with whom she comes in contact and that if someone moans or climaxes while being sexually violated, they must have liked it and thus it is not sexual violence. The reality, however, is that an orgasm cannot be a stand-in for consent. Further, consent needs to be obtained prior to the start of sexual activity. There is also a discrepancy between what is considered a “real rape”<sup>8</sup> and what is not. Jane Doe, a woman who was raped at knifepoint in 1986 by the man who was known as the “balcony rapist”, writes in her book that she was told throughout the course of the investigation that her experience was an “un-violent rape”. The “ideal rape victim” is not the wife of her attacker (Randall 2010: 414; Jones, 2002: 23). If it was a wife who was sexually violated, it becomes construed as a bad ending to an otherwise good evening. “Real victims” are those who are considered “low risk”. In other words, they do not have multiple sex partners, they do not wear mini-skirts, they do not drink at bars, and they certainly would physically fight back if they were attacked.

The *Ewanchuk* case went to the Supreme Court under a question of what ‘consent’ means and if it could be implied. In her decision, L’Heureux-Dube decried Justice McClung and stated that the case at hand was “not about consent, since none was given. It is about myths and stereotypes” (*R. v. Ewanchuk 1999*). L’Heureux-Dube continued, outlining some well-known rape myths:

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<sup>8</sup> I use quotation marks to reflect their use in literature. My use of the quotation marks, much like the literatures’, is a reflection of the obscurity of ideas such as there only being some violent rapes (all rapes are violent), or that there is such thing as a “real” (and consequently, “not real”) rape.

Myths of rape include the view that women fantasize about being rape victims; that women mean ‘yes’ even when they say ‘no’; that any woman could successfully resist a rapist if she really wished to; that the sexually experienced do not suffer harms when raped (or at least suffer lesser harms than the sexually ‘innocent’); that women often deserve to be raped on account of their conduct, dress, and demeanor; that rape by a stranger is worse than one by an acquaintance (*R. v. Ewanchuk 1999*).

Discussions of rape myths are as varied as the myths themselves. Amy Page (2010) describes rape myths as “stereotyped belief(s) about rape that place blame for the crime of rape on the victim” (32). Rape myths can further be defined as “pre-judicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (4). All of these definitions share, at least to some small extent, that rape myths are socially constructed beliefs. The third definition also speaks to the reality that there are false beliefs about not only sexual violence and people who experience sexual violence, but also about rapists. This would include the problematically popular belief that rapists are the “creepy man in the back ally” when, in fact, statistics show that more often than not the people who experience sexual violence actually know their perpetrators.<sup>9</sup> As Cathy Winkler (2002) details, “trusted people, not strangers, raped my friends. These trusted people were fathers, brothers, uncles, neighbours, friends, dates, and coworkers” (91). It is within rape myths that victim-blaming finds its origins. There are myths that perpetuate a false belief that if a person who is being violated does not physically resist and “fight back”, then they must have “wanted it”. There are other myths that women who are dressed provocatively (whatever that means) must be “loose” and “ready to party”. While these myths are officially prohibited in a

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<sup>9</sup> 68% of the time, according to RAINN

court of law, they are as pervasive and powerful in that space as anywhere else. In the *Ewanchuk* case, for example, it was brought up that the woman had a young child and was living with her boyfriend. In other instances, the specific clothing worn by a person who has experienced sexual violence is brought up as a means of saying that the person who experienced sexual violence was somehow inviting their attacker (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 2011).

### *Victim Blaming*

Melanie Randall (2010) argues that “not only do the particular individual and contextual factors in a woman’s life influence her reactions to sexual assault, but the social context of victim blaming and stigma can also be influential in the way in which women construct narratives about their experiences” (430-431). People regularly seem surprised when women align themselves with male-dominated ideologies and practices that perpetuate rape culture (Backhouse: 11). The fact of the matter is, however, that women are brought up in the same sexist, patriarchal rape culture as men. Even the ways in which people are expected to resist sexual violence are based on patriarchal beliefs (Jones 2002). It is expected that in order to adequately resist sexual violence, an individual should leave bite marks and shoe imprints (Jones 2002: 23; *R. v. Ewanchuk* [1999]). In this context, it really should not be a surprise that women are often afraid to come forward, particularly when their resistance was more verbal, or further, they were too afraid to resist at all. When a person who has experienced sexual violence is held partially or entirely responsible for what happened that person is experiencing what is known as “victim blaming”. Any time blame is moved from the actual rapist or perpetrator of the sexual violence and put on the person who experienced sexual violence- the person who experienced sexual violence is unjustifiably carrying a burden that they should not have to deal with.

Victim blaming is more than just asking about how a person was dressed or how much they were drinking. In the context of partner violence, deeply embedded in the seemingly-genuine questions of “why does she not leave her abusive husband?” exists a tendency towards blaming the people who experience abuse. As Angela Browne (1982) explains, instead of attributing factors such as a lack of resources/economic dependency, or fear (statistics show that more often than not, it is when someone is attempting to leave their abusive partner that the violence moves from “beating” to “murder”), the shame gets displaced onto the person who is experiencing the violence because it is difficult to understand why they do not “just leave”. If discussions about consent took place more regularly, perhaps discussions about rape-myths and victim-blaming would be less imperative. Until society takes conversations about consent seriously, however, we will continue to deal with the plethora of issues that are a result of our misunderstandings (and in some cases, sheer ignorance).

### *Conclusion*

Women live with a constant fear of being sexually violated. As Catherine MacKinnon (1987) states: “To be about to be raped is to be gendered female in the process of going about life as usual” (7). This is echoed by Susan Griffin (1981) in her popular essay “Rape: The All American Crime”:

I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as a part of my natural environment – something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature. (26).

While it seems a distant goal for anyone to be able to be free of the fear of rape, what does not seem so far off is the possibility of more individuals being empowered to share their own stories. As more people choose to share their stories of sexual violence, the less power sexual violence will have over us. There is healing that comes from speaking truths to silences. Further, it is possible that the more we learn from hearing people share their experiences, the more likely we are to move closer to a culture where people who experience sexual violence can feel as though their voices and their stories are important. Once people believe that their voices and stories are important, they may begin to believe that they will be respected for their truths. Once we empower people to believe that their experiences are valid, we can work towards creating a consent culture in which people are free from the experience, and fear, of sexual violence.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING SEXUAL VIOLENCE – A FEMINIST, MIXED METHODS APPROACH

Often social science researchers will either specifically use interviews, or solely rely on discourse analysis, statistics, or some other isolated form of inquiry. This work, instead, uses mixed methods, which allows for a broader scope for analysis. As Cathy Winkler (2002) says: “statistics are valuable, but they do not convey the experience of a rape attack” (31). To ensure that the experience of sexual violence is conveyed, this thesis is undertaken within a feminist framework. I use semi-structured interviews to better understand the way that sexual violence is understood by a larger sample size of people than only myself, and auto-ethnography, or my own narrative, and analysis of that narrative, which I weave throughout the thesis.

In this chapter, I start by examining what it means to work from a feminist framework. I then detail my interview, recruitment and sampling procedures. I also analyse the importance of safe space creation and explain the reasoning behind allowing my participants to opt to use their real names (or some version thereof), as opposed to pseudonyms. Next, I discuss my coding (as well as the challenges of coding lived-experiences). Following that, I conceptualize auto-ethnography as an important method for the sharing of lived-experiences, and analyse its pros and cons. Finally, I discuss my emphasis on self-care, as well as some limitations of this thesis.

### *Feminist Framework*

Anderson writes “if we want to know how women feel about their lives, then we have to allow them to talk about their feelings as well as their activities. If we see rich potential in the language people use to describe their daily activities, then we have to take advantage of the opportunity to let them tell us what that language means” (Anderson and Jack 1991: 11). This

has influenced my choice of mixed methods and use of auto-ethnography, as well as the way that I have conducted my interviews. Instead of asking only questions about “activities” (such as whether or not they chose to report their experience to the police, to whom (if anyone) they disclosed their experiences and how those people reacted, and whether they have been to counselling and what that experience was like<sup>10</sup>), I also asked my participants to define the language used to describe their experiences. Instead of assuming that my understanding of sexual violence was the same as that of my participants, I asked them to explain to me how they understand their experiences and sexual violence more generally. Similarly, instead of assuming that the ways that I understand victim-blaming are true for everyone, it is important that my participants be able to conceptualize these issues for themselves. Further, because of the feminist perspectives through which this work is done, it is imperative that consideration was given to the following issues: space, naming and claiming (voices and choices), and alternative means of empowering my participants not only to share their experiences, but also to feel safe in doing so.

### *Interview Methods*

My research explores the lived experiences of people who have been sexually violated. My interviews were semi-structured. While structured interviews have set lists of interview questions, my interviews were semi-structured, allowing some room to ask follow-up questions based on the ways that my participants responded. I chose to use semi-structured interviews because this format lends itself best to my goal of exploration and inquiry. After reflecting on interviews that she had conducted, Kathryn Anderson wrote:

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A for additional questions.



What I learned by listening carefully to my interviews is that women's oral history requires much more than a new set of questions to explore women's unique experiences and unique perspectives; we need to refine our methods for probing more deeply by listening to the levels on which the narrator responds to the original questions. To do so we need to listen critically to our interviews, to our responses as well as to our questions. We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn't" (Anderson and Jack 1991: 17).

That is, an important benefit of doing semi-structured interviews was that I, as the researcher, could explore my participants' experiences and perspectives in a more nuanced way. Beyond simply asking my participants how they understand victim-blaming and leaving their answer as is and moving on to the next question, I could ask what my participants meant by certain words that they used, or what specific experiences have helped them to shape their understanding of a particular concept.<sup>11</sup> A common criticism received by individuals, like myself, who do interviews with only a small sample size, is that our research cannot possibly be representative. In order to make up for the issue of breadth, I prioritized depth.

### *Recruiting*

I recruited my participants with the use of posters<sup>12</sup>. In order to keep my exploration as open as possible, I did not look for people of a particular gender, race, class, age or sexuality. The poster was designed in a way that was meant to be clear and direct, and not ambiguous. It was important not to hide or be discreet about the fact that my research was on sexual violence.

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix D: Interview Questions. These questions were approved by the Research Ethics Board.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix E: Recruitment Poster. This poster was approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Given that a goal of my thesis was to empower people who have experienced sexual violence to share their stories, it was important that my poster reflect my belief that sexual violence is something that needs to be talked about freely, and without shame. I chose to make tabs on my poster that could be torn off because this layout lends itself best to the discretion of my participants. Because of the reality that a number of my participants might not have told their friends about their experiences at the point of interview, I wanted my participants to have a discreet way of getting my contact information without having to spend time writing down my name, phone number and/or e-mail address.

### *Sample Source and Details*

I conducted 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews between September and December of 2015. I wanted to understand the ways in which people understand their lived experience(s) with sexual violence. There were no characteristics that would exclude any individual from being a participant. That is, there was no limitation with regards to gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or anything else. I interviewed anyone who contacted me who wanted to be interviewed. My participants included one male-identified individual, eight female-identified individuals, and one fluid person. The ages ranged from 18 to 64. All of the participants were students at Lakehead University (Thunder Bay Campus), although a number of my participants consider geographical locations beyond Thunder Bay, Ontario their home. My only requirement was that my participants had experienced sexual violence. I was asked by two individuals, both of whom became participants in my research, if they could participate if their experiences weren't of a violent nature. One of those participants had experienced incest, and another's experiences were with an acquaintance. As mentioned in Chapter One, there are a lot of ways

that individuals understand the language around sexual violence. I bring with me an understanding that sexual violence – whatever its particular form - is, by its very nature, emotionally, physically, spiritually, mentally, and sexually violent.

Of the thirteen individuals who showed an interest in my research, ten participants followed through to an interview. One of my participants asked questions regarding how long I would keep the audio recording, and I pointed to my ethics documents which states seven years. Upon sensing some uncertainty about me storing the recording, I offered to delete the recording after transcribing everything. The participant agreed. Conversations took place both before and after the tape recordings; a number of my participants wanted to know what, specifically, I was looking at in terms of lived experiences, or talked with me about current events, such as the Bill Cosby rape allegations. The interviews ranged from 23 to 59 minutes in length, and all were transcribed soon after recording. A number of my participants opted to use their own names instead of pseudonyms.

One of the ways by which I tried to build rapport between myself and my participants was to disclose that I, too, had experienced sexual violence. A number of my participants already knew this. Interestingly, the possibility of me disclosing my experience was seen as an issue initially by the Research Ethics Board. There was some concern around whether or not, by disclosing, my participants would feel as though I was trying to lure or coerce them into the research process. I reworded my proposal to share more of the reasoning as to why I thought it would be beneficial for me to locate myself as having experienced sexual violence, and they pushed back again. Finally, I wrote a formal appeal regarding this decision and e-mailed it to the Research Ethics and Administration Officer, and stated that in fact, me *not* disclosing that I have experienced sexual violence would be on par with me contradicting my thesis (given the focus

on lived experiences). I also outlined that my participants would find out eventually anyways because of my use of auto-ethnography in my thesis, which they would ultimately be able to access and read. This then raised a more problematic issue of my participants potentially feeling as though I had withheld my own experiences, yet asked them to share theirs. My appeal was accepted, and at the beginning of each interview, I shared that I, too, have experienced sexual violence.

The interview itself consisted of three sections. The first section was introductory, and asked my participants about their social location (age, gender identity, ethnicity, and so forth). The second section was a general discussion of sexual violence and victim blaming. In this section, I tried to gain an understanding of how my participants understand a lot of the language that is used to talk about their experiences, such as if they identify as a victim, survivor or something else, and how they understand victim-blaming, whether they think it occurs, and if so, why they think it occurs. In the last section, I asked, more explicitly, for my participants to tell me as much (or as little) as they were comfortable with about their experience(s) with sexual violence. In total, there were 26 open-ended questions, in addition to any follow-up questions that I asked.

### *Space*

I had started thinking about the space in which the interviews would take place early on. Initially, I was just concerned about the physical location. I knew that I did not want the interviews to take place in my office space (the Women's Studies T.A. office), because of the room's location on campus. The room is in an area of campus that some people refer to as being "the dungeon". Because of the sensitive nature of my interviews, I decided that it would be

problematic for interviews to take place in such an isolated space. It was important to me that the participants feel comfortable and safe not only during the interviews, but also when they left after having shared their experiences. Towards the end of the term, I read an article which stated:

We wanted women to have control in creating that setting, so we offered them the choice of being interviewed in our project offices at the university or at a location of their choice in the community, wherever they felt most comfortable . . . [and] whenever possible, we had coffee or snacks before starting the interview” (Campbell et al. 2003. 258-259).

This article completely reframed the way that I thought about space. I had previously only focused on the importance of the physical space on campus. I had completely overlooked the possibility of empowering the participants to choose their own location for the interview. From this, I decided that I would aim to have multiple spaces on Lakehead University campus as options (the Sociology Graduate Students’ office in the Ryan Building, a tutorial space in the library, the Gender Issues Centre, and Pride Central), and the participants picked from those options based on the times that they were available to be interviewed and the times that the spaces were available. Further, reading Campbell’s article made me realize that I could do a lot more to ensure that the actual room(s) in which I was conducting the interviews were comfortable. For me, this included a decision to make sure that I had a kettle set up so that participants (and myself) could choose to make tea before the interview and, if needed, at some point in the middle of the interview. It also meant ensuring that I had a box of Kleenex available. Having tea and Kleenex available in interview spaces was an important means of creating a comfortable space and environment of trust. Further, the tea and Kleenex also represented an

acknowledgement of the emotional nature of the interviews.

### *Names VS Pseudonyms*

Typically, in order to maintain confidentiality, researchers only identify participants by a pseudonym of the participant's choosing. I was influenced when reading *Carnal Crimes* by Constance Backhouse (2008), who writes that "To maintain the anonymity of the people involved contradicts the nature of this work" (4). It made me wonder if my automatic assumption that my participants would want a pseudonym was actually contradictory to the work that I was hoping to do. Would I be taking away my participants' agency by stripping them of their ability to opt to use their own names? It was this reflection that made me wonder if I would like to give my participants an option to use a pseudonym, alongside an option to use their own name (or a form of their name). People who have experienced sexual violence are among the most silenced in our society, and to outright tell someone that they have to connect their experiences to a name that is not their own might be another form of silencing them. It seems to me that a person should have the freedom to choose how they are named. I would be doing more harm than good if I made that decision on behalf of my participants. Therefore, participants were free to use whatever name (real or fictional) that they chose. Those who have used their actual names have provided written consent.

### *Interviews*

Given my goal of understanding lived experience(s), interviews were an important mode of research. I followed the guidelines that were set out by Lakehead University's Ethics Review Board, as required by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving*

*Humans*. My initial method of recruitment was poster. After two months of the posters being up, and only conducting five interviews, I amended my Ethics to be given approval to recruit using word-of-mouth. This allowed me to ask the coordinator of the Gender Issues Centre on campus to post my recruitment poster on social media. I got another two participants by contacting individuals who had previously disclosed aspects of their experiences at a Take Back the Night event. My other three participants are peers/coworkers who knew of my research and approached me to offer themselves as possible interviewees. Each of my participants read and signed forms, including a Cover Letter with Resources (See Appendix A)<sup>13</sup>, a Consent Form (See Appendix B) and an Interview Consent Form (See Appendix C). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from my research study at any point, during or after the interviews, prior to completion. Similarly, I informed my participants that they could revise (add for context, remove, edit) their transcribed interviews, which they were all sent within a week of individual interviews.

The document that my participants were given upon showing interest in my research had a resource page attached to it. It was important for me, as someone researching a sensitive topic and asking my participants to relive aspects of their trauma<sup>14</sup>, to make sure that the people who allowed me to interview them knew that there was support available to them. Some of the resources that I provided were ones with which I was familiar, either because I had used them myself (RAINN, Good2Talk) or because they were available on campus (Student Health and Counselling, Gender Issues Centre). A number of my participants had already been engaged with the counselling process at the time of their interviews. Some of the participants who were not already in counselling spoke about wanting to enter counselling, but feeling as though there were

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<sup>13</sup> This form was e-mailed to participants once interest was shown in my research, and again given to them at the interview.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix F

barriers to actually doing so.

### *Data Analysis (Coding)*

I used thematic coding to examine my data. One by one, I read through my interviews and started writing down themes that were brought up by multiple participants. As I wrote down themes, I would associate them with a number. When a particular theme came up in an interview, I would then write that number in the margin of the printed interview that I was coding. I went through each interview twice this way to ensure that I had not missed any themes or overlooked a place where a participant spoke to a theme in any way. It did not take long for me to realize that I was trying to work with too many themes. I initially had 25 themes that I was working with, and I spent a lot of time trying to sort through what themes were most important. After more deliberation, I was able to bring it down to 12 themes. For a number of the themes, there were also subthemes. For example:

Theme 1: Blame

Subtheme A) Self-Blame

Subtheme B) Blame by Others

Subtheme C) Fear of Blame.

Other themes, such as ‘Victim’/‘Survivor’/Something Else appear as stand-alone themes, with no subcategories.

### *Auto-ethnography*

Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that describes and analyzes (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno). It treats



research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Ellis et al. 2010:1). Using auto-ethnography, I locate myself in my work as someone who has experienced sexual violence personally. Two speeches that I wrote, which speak to my experiences with sexual violence, are detailed. Because of my two speeches being written at different points in my life, they are contextualized quite differently using two very distinct social, political and academic contexts.

Auto-ethnography has been criticized by some academics as a method that lacks the ability to diversify the perspectives represented in a particular piece of work. The goal of auto-ethnography, however, is not to put a multitude of opinions and perceptions in a single piece of work; in this thesis, the goal of auto-ethnography is to illustrate the ways that these theories relating to voice and sexual violence are illustrated by people's lived experiences. The goal is to challenge us to "invite readers to 'read with' and 'read themselves into' stories, or to juxtapose them with the stories of their own lives, no matter how different or displeasing" (Berry, L and Patti, C.J 2015: 266).

Using auto-ethnography, I hope to create a bridge between the theories that exist on sexual violence and the realities of people's lived-experiences. It is not my intent to assume that my experiences are representative of other people's experiences, but rather I hope to show that sexual violence is a real problem that exists beyond the pages of academic articles. Auto-ethnographers "vulnerably lay ourselves bare and at the service of something bigger – unique and often overlooked understanding concerning the complex problems that riddle the world" (266). That is, while the stories that auto-ethnographers share are their own, the hope is that readers will be able to see, and better understand, their own lived experiences through the author's reflection on his or her experiences.

### *Being Kind*

It was Susan Turell's article about Activism and Academia that influenced my final interview question: "what can you do to be kind to yourself?" The article talked about how self-care is taught to facilitators throughout a rape-crisis intervention program. This made me consider the importance of self-care beyond a counselling context. It was only while in treatment in Winnipeg – more than five years after being sexually violated - that I was asked what I could do to be kind to myself. I was not only being asked, but also being given permission, to do something loving for my spirit. As mentioned above, a goal of my interviews was to provide the opportunity for my participants to be able to reclaim their own voices. While I asked my participants what they could do to be kind to themselves, I also asked myself that same question.

### *Limitations*

My interviews went well overall, and everyone I interviewed cared greatly about the topic of sexual violence. Most of my participants engaged, at length, about current issues relating to sexual violence after the recorder was switched off. I am confident that this research lays a solid foundation for further research regarding the lived experiences of individuals who have been impacted by sexual violence. With that being said, there were a number of challenges that I met while working on this thesis:

1) Though I was able to interview ten people, I had an incredibly difficult time recruiting individuals to participate in my research. As mentioned above, of my ten participants, I had previous contact with seven of them. Each of those seven individuals, prior to asking to be a participant, knew that I had been sexually violated.<sup>15</sup> For many participants, it was more

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<sup>15</sup> A number of them did not know my entire story at the time of interview, by any means. But they knew, at the

comfortable to talk to someone whom they knew personally, but this knowledge also brought challenges. In my interview with Rori, for example, when I asked whether (h)er<sup>16</sup> sexuality had been impacted by experiencing sexual violence, s(h)e responded by stating “Yeah. Absolutely. Um... I can...I don’t... I don’t know oh... how much of this I want recorded. . . I’m fine. But it’s like... I’m going to see you again later! (laughter)” The reality of having a collegial relationship with Rori played into (h)er willingness to participate in my research. But, it also made (h)er feel some level of discomfort with answering one of the questions in full. My positioning as an insider, in this particular instance, became a burden. For most of my participants, however, it was actually beneficial to have positioned myself as an insider. During several of my interviews, participants would say things like “you know?” And while in some respects, I *do not* know, and *cannot* know<sup>17</sup>, I also was able to use that as a cue to nod, or say “sure”, which often seemed to comfort my participants and encourage them to continue sharing. Similarly, although I cannot fully understand anyone else’s experiences with sexual violence, there are aspects that I *can* understand because of having experienced sexual violence as well. For example, about a year ago I was trying to explain the concept of “being triggered” to my partner, and no matter how many times I tried to explain the feeling, I was never able to get across to him how I feel when I am triggered by something. It was not until talking with a friend who has also experienced sexual violence, and hearing how she explained the feeling of being triggered to her partner, that I was able to explain it to Brian in a way that made sense to him.

2) I conducted interviews only with student-identified individuals, and the interviews were all

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very least, that I had the experience of being violated.

<sup>16</sup> In an e-mail, Rori outlined her pronouns as follows: “As someone who is read as female, and was assigned female at birth, the use of s(h)e [and (h)er] most adheres to my external identification, while still adhering to the reality of my fluidity.”

<sup>17</sup> While I believe it is important for people who have experienced sexual violence to have peer support, I also believe that it is important to acknowledge that no one experience is like another.

done in Thunder Bay. Certainly, an individual's social location influences the way(s) in which the person experiences and processes sexual violence. It would have been beneficial for the interviews to have been conducted in multiple geographical locations, with a wider array of participants. For example, I might have had a wider representation of both older and more marginalized individuals had I advertised at a Shelter, or even at the Thunder Bay Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse Counselling and Crisis Centre. While I would have liked to have extended my research in this way, to start doing interviews outside of the Lakehead University community would have created additional challenges in gaining ethics approval. Similarly, I had no car at the time that the interviews were being conducted, nor did I have a budget for to cover the cost of travel.

3) The very method of transcribing was problematic at various points in my thesis. While, certainly, it is important to transcribe recordings of interviews, the reality of me having to make decisions about punctuation on behalf of my participants is, in essence, me having to take part in some degree of interpretation. It was difficult for me to have to make decisions about how to edit the experiences of my participants in sorting out punctuation. To correct for this limitation, I provided participants the opportunity to read over their transcripts and provide feedback, which many did.

4) Having to use a coding system also became a challenge. Because my thesis aimed at understanding how my participants understand their own lived-experiences with sexual violence, trying to categorize their experiences with other people's experiences was difficult. The very act of categorizing my participants' statements into themes felt, in a very uncomfortable way, like I was symbolically taking away their unique voices and personal experiences with trauma.

## *Summary*

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, this research used a mixed methods design which combined in-depth open-ended interviews with ten university students who had experienced sexual violence with reflections from two different speeches that I have given at distinct points in my healing. This produced two data sets: the interviews as well as my auto-ethnography. While there were few challenges with the interviews themselves, I did have some issues with both recruitment and obtaining ethics approval. I worked through each of these situations then by keeping the simple goals in mind of sharing my participants' lived experiences.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INTERVIEWS

This chapter outlines of the findings from my research interviews, which aimed at answering the following questions:

- 1) How do individuals who have experienced sexual violence understand their experience(s)?
- 2) What is the importance of ‘voice’ for people who have experienced sexual violence?

The themes that emerged are as follows: (1) definitions of sexual violence; (2) consent; (3) identification as victim/survivor/something-else; (4) blame; (5) lack of faith in the justice system; (6) rape myths; (7) violence as continuous; and finally, (8) the need for education.

As noted in the previous chapter, between September and December of 2015, I interviewed ten university students between the ages of 19 and 64 who identified as having experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. One participant identified as a male, eight as female, and one as fluid. Overall, locating myself as also identifying as someone who has experienced sexual violence was of great value. Many of my participants were comfortable enough to use varying degrees of sarcasm in the interviews, particularly when being asked about their experiences around victim-blaming. While the participants knew differing amounts about my personal experiences, I found it easy to establish a rapport with my participants, and they all shared extensively about their lived experiences with sexual violence.

### *Definitions of Sexual Violence*

I wanted my first question to help me to understand how my participants understand the very concept of sexual violence. One participant, Luna, shared a broader definition of sexual violence:

Um, sexual violence is a big concept to me. It encompassed...a lot of different things, and it's not necessarily.... For me... I think, when a lot of people think of sexual violence, they think of rape. For me, I think of it as more... power imbalances in society. And... it's not necessarily, what happens to an individual and what hurts them and their sexual being or...their sexual behaviour in the future. It comes back down to gender and... and... I guess... violence based on gender. . . So, things that encompass sexual violence. Just...general oppression? And more specifically, things like sexual assault, um... comments, catcalling when walking down the street, the fact that I don't have equality as a woman in terms of government, or wages, or all of these kinds of issues... I categorize as sexual violence.

For Luna, sexual violence begins with oppression (which, she later conceptualized as “a power imbalance. When you have one authority, oppressing another, and reducing them to not be at the same level”). In her understanding, inequality is the foundation of sexual violence. Another participant, Rori, also offered a more holistic definition of sexual violence:

I think sexual violence is, um, a transgression of...of space. I think, I think that it can happen from a distance and it can happen emotionally, psychologically and it can happen physically. It's just a transgression of space. And...and a transgression of time.

Rori understands sexual violence to be an intrusion to an individual's ability to be in control of themselves (either in terms of autonomy over their physical body, or regarding their feelings and mental health) and their surroundings, as well as their ability to spend their time as they choose

(as opposed to doing things like counselling).

Another participant, Julia, shared her understanding of sexual violence:

Sexual violence can be something as small as...taunting words. Or suggesting that because you're a female you're some sort of cum-receptacle. And that happens everywhere, especially in Universities. Everywhere. And that's where it starts. That's where sexual violence begins. And then obviously there's the other end of the spectrum. To someone actually acting on that.

For Julia, sexual violence exists on a spectrum, ranging from sexist and slut-shaming attitudes and comments to someone actually violating another person.

Another participant, Alex, echoed that sexual violence often starts small:

Umm. Kind of any unwanted touching, and maybe even as far as to say any unwanted sexual attention. You know, a small violation I guess. Sexual harassment on the street is a violation.

Like Alex, Jamie shared her understanding of sexual violence as existing on a continuum:

Um... I see sexual violence as... someone who experiences something sexual in nature without their consent. Like...it could be anything from harassment, like a snide



comment, or an inappropriate look or touching that was unwanted. Or... like something that's...something like rape.

Similar to Jamie, Sue shared an understanding that encompassed a continuum of experiences that sexual violence could entail:

Sexual violence...uhh... can happen to anyone, male or female. And it..um..can be, involve a lot of things. Like unwanted touching or, maybe saying something to someone that is inappropriate. Or making someone feel threatened or trapped, like they cannot get out of the situation. And...what else? There is a lot but...just kind of something on your body that is not wanted and not asked for. You know?

Like Sue, a number of my other participants spoke directly to the need for consent in sexual activity, and how a lack of consent constitutes sexual violence. According to Cailley:

Um, basically any un-consensual sexual act. Does that make sense?

Similarly, M shared:

Any unwanted sexual behaviour that's put upon someone. Umm...yeah. I guess that's really the best way I can describe it.

Each of my participants defined sexual violence slightly differently. For some, sexual violence

exists on a continuum, ranging from unwanted attention to rape. For others, sexual violence includes not just a violation of body, but of space and time. Regardless of the particular nuances, there is one thing that most of their definitions had in common: a lack of consent.

### *Consent*

Interestingly, each of my participants spoke to different aspects of the legal definition of consent. Cailley, who was violated once by someone with whom she was drinking, shared the following understanding of consent:

Um... like... “yes, I want to do this”, you know what I mean? If they’re drunk like, that’s probably a “no”. Like that’s probably a bad idea. Like... both people should be sober. That’s...like so that you can be in the right state of mind to make actual decisions.

For Cailley, it was important to note that consent cannot be given by someone who is intoxicated.

Alex, on the other hand, shared a personal experience where consent was not understood by a partner of hers:

So um... I had a boyfriend from, I guess.... For a few years. And he was very manipulative. And if I didn’t feel like having sex, then he would um, like complain and complain and complain and then sulk about it and if that didn’t work he would try to physically get it and if I said no then he would just go until I was silent and then he would just take my silence as consent. Or... well, obviously it wasn’t consensual.

Alex later spoke to the need for consent to be actively given and verbalized, and how her experience with being sexually violated has changed how she approaches consent in her own relationships:

Um... Uh. It should be something that's verbalized for sure. Like I feel like it's something that you know. Like if you're pressuring someone into it, you know. It's something you have to ask for, and you have to know that the person is okay with it. Um. And I feel like I'm extra sensitive about it. Like now I ask people "hey can I kiss you?" and it's like, sometimes that's like "of course" and maybe it's weird. But I want people to feel comfortable and safe with me.

For Alex, the way to aid in changing rape culture is to perpetuate a different type of culture; a culture of consent.

#### *Identification as Victim/Survivor/Something Else*

After a person experiences sexual violence, there is often a question about how to talk about the experience and name themselves. While some people respond with "you were a victim of crime and need time to heal", others want the person who experienced sexual violence to acknowledge that they, by a function of still being alive, are a "survivor". I wanted to better understand how my participants identify, and what I found was that everyone identified in some unique way, and often their identification went beyond a victim/survivor binary. As Jamie shared:

Um, I've never really thought about it. Like... um. Like, being called a victim probably, I find it really downsizes me. Like, and being called a survivor... like it was kind of traumatic what happened but I know people, like when I think of a survivor I think of someone who survived like a war or battle or cancer or something. So, I'm not really sure... I guess I'm just someone who has experienced it.

Jamie had not previously thought about how she identified, and in her answer, left her identification as "someone who has experienced it".

When I asked about how Tao identifies, he shared Jamie's sentiment, though for a different reason:

I wouldn't want to give the perpetrator that honour to say a thing. . . I've been through it, I've lived through it. And...uh... yeah, it's just something that just came through and passed by and I don't give it the time to uh...give them the satisfaction of me having to think about it. I don't think they deserve that.

Like Jamie, Tao did not want to identify as either a victim or survivor. For both of them, the preference was to leave sexual violence as something that they have gone through, instead of a part of their identity.

This was also echoed by Rori, who responded in the following way when I asked if s(h)e identifies as a victim, survivor, or something else:

Person. Mostly because, I think 'survivor' places a lot of my identity on an event. And because I identify as fluid, it's something that is just one of many things that make up who I am. And 'victim' implies...that... I'm in, I'm still in some direct relation to that event, and in a way...in a way that I need support. And although I need support, I need support for school and friendship and things that aren't as weighted as that to me, and to put weight on that and to identify with that is limiting? But also, doesn't help me move on or move away from it.

Rori has chosen to distance (h)erself from being in direct relation to the experience of sexual violence. For (h)er, the idea of "victim" implies the need for support (which is similar to the characteristics of the word that some other participants of mine expressed), and s(h)e feels as though there are other things that are more pressing in (h)er life for which s(h)e needs support.

A number of my participants, much like Rori, expressed similar ideas of what it means to identify as a victim. When I asked Veronica how she identifies her experience, she stated:

Survivor. . . because victim.... People look down on victims. I feel like it's something I endured, something I went through....it's something I survived.

This negative idea of victimhood was also expressed by another participant, M, when I asked how she identifies:

Um. I actually have a really hard time with that question. Because I still don't really

know what I want to be referred to as. I don't really like the term "victim" because I feel like it makes me look weak. But I don't really like the term "survivor" either. I'm kind of like, still trying to figure that out. It's been years, but I'm still unsure about what I want there. . . I find the term victim, like... I find it really belittling in a way.

While M isn't sure how she wants to be identified, she knows that she does not like characteristics that are so often associated with victimhood.

Another participant, Alex, shared both M and Veronica's thoughts about the negative associations with the term victim:

I see myself as both. I feel like there are a lot of negative connotations with victim. And I don't...there shouldn't be anything wrong with being the victim of a crime. It's not your fault, you know? So kind of... I'm no longer a victim, I'm a survivor. And like...whatever someone needs to say for themselves. I think it's pretty bad to shit on that label so... I would say survivor usually but I have no problem using "victim". . . I used to prefer the term "survivor" and now I find both terms equally relevant. Like, I feel like even though someone is assaulted and then they are sitting at home and crying by themselves, they still survived. They're still coping with it, even though they're by themselves. They're still a survivor.

For Alex, although there are negative connotations with victim, she recognizes the importance of owning that term for some people. But ultimately, she says that she is a survivor. Further, in her opinion, it makes sense that people who experience sexual violence would, on some level,

identify with survivorhood because of the fact that they are coping with their experiences. Alex's interpretation of survivorhood was echoed by Sue's response to my asking her how she identifies:

I think I would prefer at this point in my life to be considered a survivor, 'cause I've kind of done a lot of work on myself and you know, trying to keep moving ahead.

This was contrasted by Luna, who like other participants of mine, struggles to identify with either word. When I asked Luna if she sees herself as a survivor or a victim, she responded by saying:

Something else entirely. I prefer to be a 'person who was sexually assaulted'. I don't like victim, because it reduces my power. But, survivor isn't right, because it implies that this is finished. And it isn't. I survive this every day. I am surviving it. Survivor means that it's done and over with, and I don't think that it can be or ever will be on some levels. Victim, I just don't...like I don't recognize it. I don't like that I'm the victim in this. And I recognize the role it's had in all of my life but I don't like.. I don't think it's necessary. It's just not what I want to be referred to. . . [but] I never want to be a survivor of it. I never... I don't think I will be. I don't think that this is something you heal entirely from. And... it's... the.... The way my sexual assault has influenced my life, in such a way, it's...unfortunately its part of my identity. . . And I don't know... I don't think I will ever be a survivor. So. I think that's why I'm saying I don't want to be?

For Luna, the reality of having to deal with her experiences of sexual violence on a daily basis makes her feel that terming herself a “survivor” would be disingenuous. For her, much like my other participants, “victim” is a means of reducing power, but “survivor” seems to indicate some form of finality to the experience.

When I asked another participant, Julia, how she recognizes herself in relation to her experiences, she said:

Oh something else entirely, yeah. . . I like to call myself an Overcomer. Because I’ve gone through so, so much. Like I’ve come so far. I like to acknowledge that for myself. I’ve taken responsibility for what I can change and I’ve let go of what I cannot. So that’s why I call myself that. . . the only way I can battle these things is to stand strong, tall, proud and be humble and truthful and like, honest with myself. Like, I’m going to stand proud.

For Julia, neither usual label fits her experience. Like Sue and Luna, the way that Julia describes her identity as it pertains to her experience with violence is based on how far she has come. The idea of “overcomer” is a way that Julia can recognize the experience, but also recognize her healing.

For each of my participants, the way that they identify is largely tied to where they are on their journey to healing.

*Blame (Others Blaming, Self-Blame, Fear Of Blame)*



Understanding the way that my participants conceptualize victim-blaming was an initial goal of my thesis. I expected that all of my participants would have a lot to say about the ways that we experience and internalize blame. Three sub-themes emerged as I looked through my interviews. Sub-theme one is “others blaming”. This theme, which is more widely understood as victim-blaming, was discussed at length by all of my participants. The next sub-theme is “Self-Blame”. When this theme emerged, I could not help but feel saddened by how so many of my participants, much like myself, internalized the blame that was being projected by others. That is, how do we blame ourselves for our experiences? The final subtheme, fear of blame, speaks to how the fear of being blamed plays a significant role in why many feel discomfort around disclosing their experiences.

*Blame by others:*

The most common way victim-blaming is discussed in both academic literature and popular media is in the context of others blaming the individuals who have experienced sexual violence. My participants all spoke about some of the ways that they have seen victim-blaming by others, or how they have personally experienced it. A number of my participants experienced blaming by friends of theirs who also had some form of a relationship with their offender.

Cailley shared the following about how a friend of hers responded:

I did tell my one friend. But she had kind of a...like a biased opinion because she was friends with the guy. So... she was like... “well you did kind of lead him on, flirting with him and stuff”

Similarly, Julia shared:

And it really pisses me off because my boyfriend, I told him... like my today boyfriend, I told him and he's like "he's a good guy" and it's like... what the... fuck you. He is not a good guy. He's not.

Another participant, Luna (who is a Master's Psychology student) shared of her experience:

When I told my best friend, who is from the town, she like... actually this is a.... she didn't believe me. Like she questioned it. She's friends with him, but she was my best friend. And they had talked about it, which is invasive and awful. But she's like "are you sure that happened? I'm sure he didn't mean to." Like, yeah. I'm sure he didn't mean to put his dick in me while I was passed out. And she's like "well you know, he's just a drunk asshole sometimes" and blahblahblah.

Veronica also shared the effects of her friends' remarks on her:

I partied with this guy. So it was my fault. I put myself in a situation where I was in a hotel room with him, so all my friends said... anyone I told, said it was my fault.

For each of these individuals, the reality of their friends not believing them is painful. In Julia's case, if the person who violated her is a "good guy", what does that mean about her? Trying to defend the character of someone who has sexually violated another is akin to degrading the

character of the individual who has disclosed their experience. The statement by Luna's friend, "well you know, he is a drunk asshole", is on par with "you should have known that this was a possible outcome of getting drunk with this guy". Each of these individuals were blamed by someone they considered a friend. Their friends, who should have been the first to offer a listening ear, instead perpetuated rape culture further by suggesting that the individuals had some role in their own violation.

When I spoke with another participant, Rori (who was in (h)er final year of a Master's degree in Education and Women's Studies), I asked about how s(h)e understands victim-blaming:

It's almost like a way of negating somebody's experience. And a way of taking authority over someone else's narrative. And placing oneself inside of someone else's story.

This feeds into the answer that Rori later gave when I asked if part of the reason s(h)e had not disclosed to (h)er parents was due to a fear of being blamed:

Right. Yeah. Or blame someone else who was designated responsibility. So at the end of the day, it was still my fault. Because they're busy adults, and I'm the kid, and I snuck off. I was just being a risky kid or whatever. Yeah. So.

For Rori, whose family has actively refuted what s(h)e remembers experiencing, the very act of trying to remember (h)er experience involved some degree of victim-blaming because of the way that (h)er family has tried to deny that what s(h)e experienced was real. Further, even if Rori's

family was not trying to actively negate (h)er experience of having been sexually violated, s(h)e is certain that (h)er family's reaction would be that it was (h)er fault because s(h)e snuck off. S(h)e believes that (h)er parents' perspective would be that if s(h)e had not been a "risky kid" and snuck off, she would not have been violated.

*Self-blame:*

Participants interviewed in this study blamed themselves for a variety of things regarding their experiences with sexual violence. For Cailley, a Psychology student, her self-blame manifests in feeling as though she put herself in a position to be vulnerable by having alcohol in her system. When talking about how she might have felt better supported by others, she said:

"Um... just like. Don't judge me. That's a good start. I mean, I know I was drunk and like...I was.... I made that choice that night, to get drunk, and I blame myself a bit for that."

Even though Cailley had previously shown knowledge that consent cannot be given if you aren't "in the right state of mind to make actual decisions", she still was speaking about the situation as something that, to some degree, was "her choice". Cailley is not alone in feeling some level of uncertainty about her experience because of the presence of alcohol. Veronica, another Psychology student, shared how she had been partying with two male friends, one of whom had previously been in a relationship with her best friend. Therefore, she had known him for multiple years, but nonetheless he violated her. Reflecting on how her friends turned on her because she "slept with her friends boyfriend", she said:

“I internalized all of that. For years and years and years. I beat myself up as somebody who slept with somebody’s boyfriend.”

Even though now Veronica can recognize that she did not sleep with a friend’s boyfriend (at one point in our interview she pointed out that “a) they weren’t technically together at the time, and b) I did not sleep with him. He raped me”, for years, she internalized the blame that her friends were projecting onto her.

For another individual, Jamie, a student in her Honours Bachelor of Commerce degree, the blame that she experiences is largely tied to broken relationships. Similar to Veronica, the person who violated her is someone who was in a relationship with a friend.

Amber called me, and told me to tell her exactly what happened. And she told me “why would you ever let him do that? You said you’d never do that to me” and...she’s like, you know I love you, but I can’t forgive you.” And she said we can’t be friends. And that was it. And I haven’t talked to her in...since then. And it sucks. I haven’t... been that close to someone in my entire life and I just can’t believe... I ruined it. I... like I...can’t believe I let him do that to me. And I said no to him like, a thousand times. And in the end, I did say yeah. Like, I let him come to my room. And... but it was only so he’d just leave after. And..um.... like, he...he wasn’t going to leave until he did what he came to do.

Jamie's language shows her struggle with blame. While she knows that she did what she had to do in order to survive a particular situation, she struggles with having internalized the blame that Amber directed at her. Jamie's statement of "I ruined it" is an indicator of her internalizing the responsibility for the broken relationship with Amber. This is echoed in the statement "I can't believe I let him do that to me". In Jamie's mind, if she had not "let him" do what he did, she would still have her best friend in her life. This is not the only broken relationship that Jamie feels responsible for, however. She was also violated by an employer, who her mother knew, during an out-of-town conference. Reflecting on a conversation with her mother, she said:

It's weird I was just talking to my mom, just the other day about it, and she said how much like, she misses him too. And she said that, she had totally cut him off. And she told me like, how much she misses their conversations or whatever. And I kind of like.... I know she didn't intend to make me feel bad, like my mom isn't like that. But I think she was just expressing how she feels. But I feel really bad too. Because I ruined that relationship for her. Like...yeah... I got her to hate someone because of what he did to me.

Again, Jamie is blaming herself for the fact that the relationship between her mother and her former employer is over. For Jamie, it is easier to forgive her mother and rationalize the blame that her mother is putting on her than it is to recognize that it was her employer who ruined that relationship by violating her in the first place, not her by disclosing her experience to her mother.

Another participant, Julia, shared the following when I asked her how she understands victim-blaming:

Well...I guess in some ways, it depends on the circumstance because I've gone through abuse on so many levels. Um. I'm... I'm not totally sure what victim-blaming means. But when I hear it, I think of how we always think it's our fault. Or the person who is hurting you, says "its your fault because blahblahblah".

She continued her explanation by sharing how she blames herself:

But... No. So...you see where the confusion is in my head? I feel a little bit responsible because I could have moved. Like physically, I could have moved my body. I'm mobile. Unlike some folks who aren't mobile. Um.. but I still... I still... it's definitely against myself. The victim-blaming, it's against myself.

For Julia, there is a recognition that victim-blaming exists both with regards to how individuals blame themselves, as well as how they are blamed. The very fact that she is able-bodied is enough to make her feel responsible for her violation. She recognizes that she blames herself, and is conflicted between her actual understanding that sexual violence is never the fault of the person who is violated, and the privilege she has as a result of being physically able to move.

*Fear of blame:*

A number of my participants expressed a fear of being blamed. Tao (an engineering student), shared a complex understanding of victim-blaming. When I asked him if he has experienced victim-blaming in any capacity, he responded:

I don't believe I went through the victim-blaming just because...um. I knew it wasn't my fault. There was no reason for me to think that. It just never crossed my mind.

However, a short time later during the interview, when talking about why he did not disclose his experience of being violated by an aunt to his family, he stated:

Because they're family. And they would know. And they would hate her. She's an aunt. And I wouldn't want my family to self-combust or hate. It's not just her now, they've got a kid. So I would hate for my family to take it into their own hands and try to solve it for themselves.

For Tao, the reason that he has not disclosed his experience to his family is because of a fear of what his family would do in response to knowing that this aunt violated him. While Tao does not think he has ever gone through any blaming because he knows what happened was not his fault, he is essentially saying that he does not want to tell his family about being violated by his aunt because he would feel responsible for what they would possibly do.

Sue, a woman in the fourth year of her Honours Bachelors degree in Women's Studies, shared:

Um. When you get a bad response, you know, it kind of makes you... cautious of when you, who you tell.



All of these individuals had told someone about their experiences, only to be blamed. There is now a question, for them, as to who they *can* trust enough to share their experiences. When I asked Luna to explain her understanding of victim-blaming, she shared the following:

It's specifically putting onus on the individual who was sexually assaulted, to...that it was, it implies that it was their fault. That they did something, in some capacity, and that they deserved what they got. . . Victim-blaming, I think it's a huge component of what happens, and I think it's a huge reason that people don't report.

Much like Luna stated, victim-blaming (or a fear of being blamed) is a primary cause of individuals not reporting their experiences.

*Lack of Faith in the Justice System:*

Not one of my participants reported their experience with sexual violence to the police. Most of my participants expressed feeling that the justice system, should they have brought their experience with sexual violence forward, would have failed them. Luna shared:

Poor police response and training, um... if you're reporting, it often has to be within 24 hours in order to get a rape kit done<sup>18</sup>, and you...so in that time, you have to 1) piece together what just happened to you, 2) recognize it as sexual assault, go to the...whatever clinic...I don't know if they have SAN here, sexual assault nurses, but get a kit done, talk to a police officer, contact the right people. That's a lot of things to do when you're still

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<sup>18</sup> While it is important to acknowledge that this perception of Luna's shaped her experience, it needs to be noted that the Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK) exam can be administered as much as 72 hours, sometimes even a week after the violation has taken place.

in shock. Or trying to just cope. And in terms of going into a police station, if you have any kind of negative experience with police officers in the past, they're not the most comfortable people you want to divulge this to. People that I've spoken with in the past... and this was before it happened to me... they're saying, you know, police ask a lot of personal question, they need to know where his hands were, were you intoxicated...and all these questions... I get that they have to do their reports, but they're not asked in the most thoughtful way. And there is victim-blaming involved, whether intentional or not. . .

Later, when I asked Luna if she had reported either of her experiences with the police, she reflected:

I did not. I almost regret not reporting the second time. The first time is too muddled in my mind and like...I don't know. The second time... you always think you made progress, and like... "the system will not oppress me again". But I didn't. I was like "no. I'm not... I'm not strong enough to go through with the court system".

As Luna shares, simply knowing what the process is for reporting an experience of sexual violence to the police is enough to be a deterrent. The number of questions that are asked of a person who has just experienced a traumatic event is off-putting. Much like my participants have shared, some people fail to even recognize that what they have just experienced is sexual violence. When I asked Veronica if she had reported her experience to the police, she shared:

No, I did not. Again... um... going back to because, it took me so long to realize that's what happened. Um... I'd like to think that if I went now, he would be persecuted. But I don't think that's the case. And I'd rather not go through that process for that not to happen.

For Veronica, not only was the decision not to report her experience based on not recognizing that what she had experienced was sexual violence, but it is also her belief that even if she were to bring the charges forward now, her violator would not be brought to justice. Veronica is certainly not alone in stating that her reason for not reporting was due to not wanting to go through the process of answering all of those questions that Luna spoke about, only to (potentially) not have justice served.

Another participant, Jamie, echoed Veronica when she shared that after being violated during a trip to Barrie for a conference, she called her mother who suggested that they go to the police. She did, and was informed that because she was violated in Barrie, she would have to go back to that city. For Jamie, this was not something she was willing to do given her belief that nothing would be done about her violation.

My mom took me to the police station and she was like "who fucking cares? Look what he's done to you" and I went, and they said... they couldn't do anything because it happened in Barrie. I'd have to go talk to the Barrie police. And I was like... I didn't want to do that. And it feels like they wouldn't even do anything because he'd be long gone. Like, I wasn't going to waste a trip to Barrie, like 7 hours from home, for something they wouldn't do anything about.

Lack of faith in the justice system is also often based on personal interactions with members of law enforcement. For example, when I asked Alex about why she chose to not report any of her experiences to the police, she said:

Uh... 'cause I don't like the police? I don't know. I never... I never consider them allies. They're not people that I trust. Um... I've never had awful experiences with them, but I've never had good ones. I remember one time, I was at a friend's house and her mother was really drunk, and she was acting dangerously, and so my friend and I called the police. The police came over, and we were young, about 16 and 18, and we were in our pajamas and not wearing bras or anything, and they were questioning us and I remember when she stretched I noticed that one of the cops was looking at her stomach, and then she was telling me that they were staring at my breasts when we were talking. Like, what the fuck?

Because Alex had already had an experience of being objectified by the police, the thought of going to them for help with regards to her experience of sexual violence was simply not an option.

In Rori's situation, the people who were around (h)er at the time of (h)er experience, who were the same people who played a role in negating (h)er experience and making (h)er feel as though s(h)e was just being a "risky kid", involved a number of people who were associated with the police department:

Well, if we are talking about where I grew up, when I was younger? Reporting to the police would have been...uh...awkward because 5 of the 25 people that lived in that place were high ups in the police department. So, it would eventually get back to them and so, because they were there...they were a part of the people negating my experience. So, that's a no go. In my teens...why didn't I report, or would I? I didn't because...I didn't feel like I had enough of a story, but also my parents were there and they didn't report. So, I felt like "well, maybe it's just me there making it up", even though I felt, I feel betrayed because it was only like a year ago that my sister told me that they thought this person was weird...or was acting weird. So...yeah...I.... a lot of people around me were also in the police, so...it's...yeah.

As Rori shared with me, the reasons for (h)er not reporting were multi-layered. Firstly, s(h)e lived in a space with a number of "high ups" in the police department, and it was those same people s(h)e lived with who told (h)er that what s(h)e believes s(h)e experienced was false. Secondly, the amount of effort that was put towards negating (h)er experience was enough to have (h)er question whether or not s(h)e had "enough of a story". This thought of Rori's came out a few times during the interview, not least of all when s(h)e told me that s(h)e was not going to participate in my research because of not being sure that (h)er experience of violence qualifies as "enough".

For another participant, M, it was a fear of not being believed that kept her from going to the police. It was because M had been labelled "dramatic" by her friends that she could not trust her experiences with the police:

I didn't. Um. . . And I talked about it at the time with my counsellor about getting a restraining order. I don't know why I didn't go to the police. I guess I had this fear of... not being believed. And this fear of being judged by my circle of friends and being seen as dramatic. I've always had this impression that people think I exaggerate and people think I'm dramatic, and so... I've just...I didn't go to the police for that reason. Which is just...it's silly. I don't know though... I don't know that it would have done anything.

M, who has been made to feel as though she is “dramatic”, projected what she has heard from her circle of friends onto what her experience with the police could possibly entail. Much like Jamie, however, M shared an uncertainty as to whether or not, even if she had gone to the police, they would have “done anything”.

This fear is related to rape myths. Not only do people who have experienced sexual violence internalize blame because of these myths, but they also face victim-blaming and fear going to the police because of these pervasive, but false, beliefs.

#### *Rape Myths (Dramatization/“Believe Me”, Others)*

Rape Myths, as stated earlier, serve the purpose of making those who experience sexual violence feel as though they played some role in their violation, and those who have not experienced sexual violence feel as though they will not because they are not “slutty” enough or “a drunk”. The belief that individuals who have experienced sexual violence are lying or making the situation up, which is a common rape myth, was discussed at length by my participants. Similarly, many of my participants spoke to their desire to be believed.

*Dramatization/"believe me"*

A number of my participants have been called (or at least made to feel) dramatic by their friends and family. More specifically, these comments about how they were being dramatic actually led a number of my participants to feel as though they were not being believed. One participant, M, shared her frustration about not being believed by her friends:

Um, my friends...didn't really believe me, they kind of shrugged it off. Even though he admitted to what happened. And not that it should even matter but when it happened, the third time was the worst time and we were sober. We weren't drinking or anything. Not that it should matter, but... just in the sense that like, we both remember everything perfectly. And his story has always changed but mine remains the same, yet I'm the one that wasn't believed, or was dramatic. . . . And I just...convinced myself that... I thought I was crazy or I thought I was dramatic just because that was like... it was the impact from the people who treated me the way I was treated.

This was countered, later in the interview, when M talked about her experiences over the past year in counselling:

Um.. but, since I've started seeing a counsellor again in January, I've found it really helpful just to talk through what happened and just to...finally have someone see and understand how I wasn't validated.

For M, the simple truth that her experience mattered has been powerful as she journeys to healing.

This idea, about the importance of validation regarding how a person understands their experiences with sexual violence, was echoed by Veronica:

Yeah. Like I said, at that point, everyone blamed me. Everyone made me feel as though...maybe I made it all up, and maybe it was all in my head. And that he did not rape me, and that it was my fault. That I had sex with my friend's boyfriend. That I ruined my friendship with her. And I super internalized all of that, and believed it for really a long, long time.

Shortly after, I asked Veronica what would have been helpful for someone to have said or done in response to her disclosing that she had been violated, and she stated:

Believe me. That has got to be the biggest one. Believe me. [It would mean] that what I said was validated. That... that... that I was right. That I wasn't crazy. That I wasn't being over-emotional or over-sensitive. That... what I experienced was real.

Veronica, like many of my participants, had at some point internalized the disbelief of others so much that she started to actually second-guess if she could trust her memory of her experiences. We also saw this, earlier, when Rori shared that s(h)e didn't think that s(h)e had enough of a story to go to the police, or to participate in my research in any valid way.

Sue also experienced something similar:



I talked to my friend. You know my girlfriend. And I told her what happened. And she said “I think you exaggerate things sometimes Susan.” And you know... I...I... it happened, you know? But...these are the kind of things that happened. Little things. But they really make big imprints on you.

Much like M, Sue found validation through the process of counselling:

I think when I got counselling for my sexual abuse when I was a child, then you start...when you have a counsellor and they are close to you and you trust and they tell you that you aren't crazy you believe them.

Not only has Sue found healing through counselling, but also being a part of campus-based activism has been important:

Yeah. Well, I mean, believe me. You know? When people think I'm exaggerating or you know? . . . I like when they had that carry the mattress campaign because I could physically feel myself being lifted onto that mattress and being carried. That's how it affected me. It made me feel good that people would sign a piece of paper and say that they supported us, even if they didn't know me. Those kind of things. Being believed.

But, um. But, to just say “I'm sorry that happened to you. I'm here for you. I believe you. What can I do to help you?” You know?

The campaign that Sue was talking about was “Carry That Weight”, which is a movement that was born out of Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz’s lived experience. Emma experienced sexual violence on her campus, and after being inadequately supported by Columbia University, decided to carry her 50 pound mattress everywhere that she went on campus until her offender was expelled. The Gender Issues Centre took part in the International Day of Action. On the day that students took part in Carry That Weight, we collected more than 300 cards on which not only students, but also staff and faculty, pledged to adequately support people who experience sexual violence<sup>19</sup>.

### *Other rape myths*

Being accused of dramatization is not the only way that my participants expressed feeling blamed or not believed. When I asked participants if the media has, in any way, impacted how they understand their experiences with sexual violence, they said yes. Tao shared the following:

Yeah. I think it’s bullshit that all media and movies and society in general think that it’s not possible for men to be abused. They always say the woman is the victim, and it’s not.

As I mentioned previously, in my “Note On Gender”, men can (and do) experience sexual violence. Statistics are actually quite close (some suggest that 1/7 males experience sexual violence before the age of 18). And while most males experience sexual violence by another male (often older), it certainly is possible that a woman can violate a man.

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<sup>19</sup> Those pledge cards later served as the backdrop during the speeches for Take Back The Night.

Julia experienced a related rape myth when she went for counselling:

There's a center (name omitted), I went there for counselling and the lady, the counsellor... I could see it... She was trying to convince me that my father abused me in some way. Like I would see that. And going back to the memory, just by the words she said, not the shadow I painted them in, she said "how does your father treat you?" and "does your father treat you this way?" but never once did she say anything about my mother being drunk and being a delinquent, and not having clothing for me or helping me when I needed help. It was always "man, man, man". And it was like... it was never him. He didn't support me. I didn't get a lot of support from him. But he never hurt me.

While Tao expressed the reality that men *can* be violated, Julia wanted to share her experience with her counsellor, who falsely assumed that her father had violated her. While, certainly, men are most likely to be offenders, it is problematic to assume that *all* men are predators. As Julia shared, her father was by no means there for her... but he also did not sexually violate her.

Another participant, Alex, spoke to the common myth about who sexual predators are when I asked her why she thinks victim-blaming occurs:

It's easier to blame the victim and believe the perpetrators are creepy strangers that live in bushes and stuff. But they're parents and boyfriends.

That is, it is easier to blame individuals who experience sexual violence than to actually consider

the reality that the people who offend are our neighbours and family members. Statistically speaking, offenders are rarely unknown to the person who is being violated. This myth of the fear of strangers was echoed by Sue, who also recognized that her personal space was not safe:

And we can't even go out at night. I take the bus and, uh, it comes right to my door but I'm even scared going out at night alone. Sometimes I'll just take a taxi home, you know? It's dark, it's not safe. It doesn't matter what age you are. And it...it often happens with someone that you know, you know? It's not a stranger that attacks you, it could be anyone that you work with.

Sue, like Alex, shared the problem with the myth of “stranger danger”. She also articulated the reality that violence occurs throughout the lifespan. Even for individuals who have not experienced sexual violence, the truth about how we have been socialized to use “the buddy system” if we have to leave our houses in the evening is problematic. Sue, like many others, does not feel comfortable going out at night because of how the dark makes her feel unsafe. Similarly, preventative responsibility often rests on individuals who are at risk of sexual violence.

Luna shared that she had been out drinking with a group of friends in her hometown, and started feeling triggered after someone she was with lied to her about what drug they were giving her, so she went home. Once she was home, someone she thought was a friend called her and said that he had nowhere to stay, so she offered a couch in her house. Then this person, who she thought was a friend, violated her:

That one was... the worst part was that I was home safe. Like I had done everything I

possibly could and... but apparently not.

It is beyond problematic that Luna, and my other participants, think that there was something that they could have done to avoid being violated. For Luna, her first experience with sexual violence had made her sensitive to ensuring her security, but she still internalizes some of the blame for what happened by thinking that there was something else that she *could have, should have, would have* done to ensure her safety in her own home.

#### *Violence as Continuous:*

Violence continues long after the initial experience of sexual violence. For some, like Luna, the continuation of the violence comes in the repetition of thoughts about what they could have done differently. For others, the triggers that we experience may last for the rest of our lives. The very fact that we have to relive our experiences, especially for those in advocacy roles, is a continuous violation.

Rori described the difficulty that s(h)e has watching movies that depict any relationship between an adult and child:

Ummm...well definitely, I can't watch anything... for a very long time, when I started talking about it, I couldn't watch an adult with a kid. Doing anything. Like some...the Pursuit of Happyness, the Will Smith movie with his son... great movie, but I thought he was a predator the entire time. I couldn't watch um...anything that had to do with an adult being around a kid. Not just in social media though, I couldn't look at parents, I couldn't look at family structures... I still don't want to have kids. I just don't trust the

environment around family structures. On TV, in social media. For a long time. And I'm better now. But still. And I obviously can't watch, or maybe not obviously, but I can't watch instances of assault. Particularly to children. And for some reason, that's something that's really popular in media.

Because Rori's experience with sexual violence happened when s(h)e was a child, (h)er distrust around the family structure is triggering. This distrust in the family structure extends beyond popular media; during the interview, Rori also disclosed that s(h)e does not want to have a family.

Similarly, Sue expressed the triggers that someone would feel having to be in the same space as the person who violated them. Reflecting on thinking about the individual at Lakehead University campus who reported her experience with sexual violence to the *Chronicle Journal* newspaper, Sue shared:

Like, it wasn't until last year I think, the student wrote that letter to the editor of the paper that she was raped by a classmate and the professor refused to move her to another class. Which, you know, wouldn't have been that big of a deal. But I'm sure every time she went to that class, she felt raped every day every day. . . And for her to come forward, she's a very brave woman. To do that.

To think about someone feeling violated every single day that they are not given adequate support is beyond heartbreaking.

This idea that violence continues throughout life was echoed by many participants.

According to Julia:

[S]o I'm not suffering sexual violence in my relationship right now, however it's there. . .  
Like, I don't... I struggle with that every single day. I don't... this is like, years and  
years after these things have happened.

For Julia, even though the actual physical violence is not ongoing, she continues to face violence regularly because of how her offender is regarded by her current boyfriend.

When I asked Julia if her experiences with sexual violence have had any sort of impact on her sexuality, she shared that, had she not been violated by a female at such a young age, she believes she would identify differently:

Definitely. Definitely. I think... I think if I was more comfortable with women I would feel equally about both. I would be queer I think. I say queer because my buddy, she... that's what she calls herself. I don't know, I'm hetero. Um, but... like, you just care for people, it doesn't matter who they are. And you know what, I still care for people. If you're wonderful, you're wonderful. I don't care what you look like. So it would be feasible to fall in love with somebody that's... but because some bitch wanted to diddle... I don't know, I didn't think about that until you asked. I might actually be interested. But I don't want to... it grosses me out now.

Julia believes that if it were not for having been violated at a younger age by another woman, she might identify as someone who is open to the possibility of loving anyone, regardless of their

gender identity.

Sue echoed that she has experienced difficulties in relationships after being violated:

And when you're abused like that, like the way it affected me was that I could have really good sex one day and the next day he could do the same with me and it would totally trigger me. So you know. It's ruined my relationships all my life, I never really had a good relationship. And so I've gotten to the point of why bother, you know? It's... I'm happier on my own.

For Sue, the ability to have a relationship has been effected by her experience with childhood sexual violence. She, like many others who have been violated, struggles to have a “normal” sexual relationship.

Similarly, Luna shared her frustration around having to disclose her experiences with sexual violence to partners, because of the possibility of triggers, as well as how her experience with sexual violence impacted her sexuality for years after:

Yeah. It is. I have to have a conversation with every partner, about... “hey, just so you know, I've been sexually assaulted before and this might be hard for me” or whatever. It's different with every person. Sometimes it might be a quick conversation if it's like, a one night stand. Or if it's a longer relationship, I take more care and do it in more of a personal manner. Sexually, it's really frustrating. Like, I screwed up...my... I look back on my sexual history and I look at before sexual assault, and after sexually assault... and when people are... I don't know how many people I've slept with before because I



stopped counting after I was raped because like...do you count that? Like...just those things. Well, technically it was intercourse, but it wasn't wanted...so I don't know. So I just stopped counting. After a while, I just stopped caring a lot about intimacies of sex. And I know...people have told me that a lot of the time, they don't want to engage in sexual behaviour after, but for me like... it's almost like... that happened and I put it in a box and I was like, "I can fuck anyone, who cares? What's going to happen to me?" And that really sucked. Because I look back and it's like... I had no self-esteem. I had no sense of self-worth. I was doing things that... I look back now and it's like, those weren't my values. That's not who I was. But it's like...well...why? They were just going to take it. I don't know. That really sucked.

Luna had shared earlier in the interview about an experience where she was triggered during her birthday celebration with her boyfriend. She also deals with having to have conversations with partners about the possibility of being triggered during sex. The other issue that Luna brought up, interestingly, was her frustration with not knowing how many sexual partners she has had. What makes this frustration so interesting is the fact that, if it weren't for the problem of slut-shaming, most people would likely not be concerned about the number of individuals with whom they have been sexually active. Later, when I asked Luna about how someone could be more helpful after a person who experiences sexual violence discloses their experience:

But... more education. And sometimes it's exhausting. I hate having to go through this process. Like, how many guys... or how many people who have sexually assaulted people, have to sit down with their partner and be like "yeah, so just so you know..."

this might happen”. Like who...that just doesn’t happen. I get my birthday night ruined, because I got...because I can’t drink...without safely maybe...like I might revert back to trauma. And that doesn’t seem fair to me at all.

### *Need For Education*

Throughout the interviews, there was one set theme that emerged regarding my participants’ belief that education around sexual violence is imperative. Specifically, a number of my participants spoke to the reality of themselves, and certainly those around them (friends, professionals and so forth) not understanding sexual violence. I have also allowed for a “general” subtheme to cover issues brought up by my participants that didn’t fit under the main subtheme.

### *Didn’t know what happened was sexual violence:*

The fact that more than half of my participants spoke about the fact that they didn’t recognize what they had experienced as sexual violence speaks, very clearly, to the fact that education is needed. According to Cailley:

But I didn’t really like.... I guess that’s a different question. At the time I was like, I don’t know...if that classifies as rape or... I don’t know. I’m still not entirely sure.”

When I asked Cailley why she struggles to classify her experience as “rape”, she responded:

Mostly because at the time I didn’t know like...what rape and sexual assault was. It was pretty black and white. Like, sex against your will...rape. But like...that gray area in

between. I don't know. Does that make sense?"

Cailley's confusion regarding this particular experience is because she believes that her experience is in the "gray area", where she had initially flirted back with her offender, but later on, when the physicality of the encounter went beyond what she was comfortable with, she said "no".

The reality that it often takes time to recognize that what has happened was sexual violence was echoed by a number of my other participants. M shared:

Um... after, kind of...coming to terms with what happened again it took me a long time to accept it. Or to even understand it, because it was my boyfriend that did it so I couldn't really wrap my head around it.

Sue, a 64 year old woman, shared that when she experienced sexual violence at the hands of her grandfather, she didn't actually know what it was. But it isn't only my participants who struggled with defining sexual violence, and knowing what it means. Sue, again, shared an experience where she told a medical professional about her experience:

She minimized it and said "well he didn't have intercourse with you". And she said it was nothing, you know?

Sue is not the only person who has had their experience minimized. As mentioned, Rori has been struggling for some time with negotiating (h)er memory of what happened and (h)er family's

negation of that experience. When I asked Rori why s(h)e did not disclose to certain individuals, s(h)e shared:

The people that I chose not to tell... I just didn't think that I had enough of a story. I... because. And I was negotiating... trying to figure out if I should participate in your thing because I wasn't sure if I had enough of story. I wasn't sure if my story was like, all the other stories that have been termed "sexual assault stories", I remember very little of it. I know I have... emotional memory. But I don't have points in my head to say "that happened". Like sequential memories. I don't. And the authority in my life, at that time, completely negates it. So I don't want to tell anybody. And I was thinking of going to therapy but I don't know that I have enough of a story. Like will I be wasting their time? To say 'oh I don't remember'? And... that's why I didn't tell. And won't tell.

While Rori knows that something has happened, s(h)e has a fear of (h)er experience not being "enough" because s(h)e cannot remember certain aspects of (h)er trauma.

*General:*

Beyond the need for education around what sexual violence actually *is*, my participants shared a number of other reasons that education regarding sexual violence is necessary. For example, when I asked Sue why victim-blaming occurs, she responded quite simply:

Uh... why? Um... I don't know. It's a hard one. I don't understand it. You know? I guess lack of education? Um. But, um. I... don't know. I don't know why.

For Sue, the reality of people not being educated on sexual violence is difficult to comprehend. A number of my other participants, shared that perhaps a part of the problem is that education on sexual violence is not accessible to everyone. Luna suggested:

And like... for me, I also, to conceptualize it... if I don't know the answer to something, I need to look it up in a book. I need to know. And I needed to really understand it from an academic point of view, and I think that was really helpful for me. . . And I read up on all the stats, and all the studies, and like...reasons why this is the case in psychological literature. So now I know a lot about it, and it's one of my research interests for sure. Yeah. So, those were helpful for me

Similarly, Veronica shared:

It was a long process. . . I was chatting with some of my newer guy friends, and I told them what happened, and they just kind of looked at me wide-eyed, and they were like "you... that was rape". And I was like...that was a click. All of a sudden a switch went off, like "holy crap. I was raped." And I must have said it six times after this. And... it was... it was hard. And then Women's Studies helped me realize...fully realize what happened.

For Luna, academia has helped her to understand and conceptualize her experiences with sexual violence. And being a student in Women's Studies is what Veronica credits as helping her fully

recognize what she has experienced. Another participant, Rori, spoke to how we do not know how to deal with power:

I don't think that we have a decent or ethical way to deal with the fact that a lot of people might not know, might not accept, or might not understand that they hold a lot of unchecked power. . . . But it occurs as instances of expressing power. Either a carelessness to understand it, or an inability to grasp such a like, pervasive yet un-talked about and unseen thing.

This statement by Rori is interesting; s(h)e is making the statement that a significant part of the problem with rape culture is that there are a lot of people who “might not know, might not accept, or might not understand” the amount of power that they have. This speaks well to Jamie's experience with asking the Human Resources personnel to help her file a sexual harassment complaint:

I went to the Health Centre and I went and talked to the Human R... or the um.. the personnel. And the lady was up, who took like my resume. And I talked to her and asked if they had a sexual harassment complaint sheet, and she said “you know you can get this from your boss right?” and I was like “that's who this is about” and she just, her jaw dropped and she just stared at me. And she was like “hold on” and she called the health director, like his boss. And she um...um... she was in a meeting, so she kept calling her and calling her and paging her, and eventually she came and, like, the big boss...she came to the office and asked what was going on, and I told her I had to file a

sexual harassment complaint on my supervisor. And I asked if there was something I had to sign, and she was like “hold on” and she whips out the like, personnel policy and flips through it and I guess she’s never had to deal with that, in that organization. Like the Health Director, the big boss, she didn’t even know the steps to proceed. She had to flip through it, and she was trying to find the papers and it was just an all day process to get things moving on that case.

Neither the Human Resource personnel at the Youth Centre where Jamie worked, nor the Health Director, were knowledgeable enough about their own sexual violence policy to be able to help her file her complaint.

*Conclusion:*

While each of my participants understands sexual violence slightly differently from one another, each of them understood consent to be an important factor to ending rape culture. With that being said, my participants also expressed that consent is still a widely misunderstood concept. Similarly, a number of my participants spoke to the reality of not immediately recognizing their experience as sexual violence, as well as the need for education. My research articulates two complex problems: firstly, there are a variety of ways that sexual violence is experienced and coped with. Second, we have failed, thus far, to have a societal understanding of not only some of the nuances of sexual violence (such as how to define consent), but also of how to respond adequately to individuals who have experienced this form of trauma.





## CHAPTER FIVE: AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL FINDINGS

*“Unlike most, whose decision to study a research area is by choice, for a crime victim, there is no choice. Yet it is in that lack of choice that a crime victim-researcher fully comprehends the subject matter”* (Winkler, 2002, p. 128).

The decision to use auto-ethnography in this work was born from an assignment in my Theory and Methods in Women’s Studies class. I had hoped that in order to better understand how my participants would feel being interviewed, I could have someone interview me using preliminary questions. I realized that being interviewed was not possible due to time constraints (the assignment was due in just over a month, and it would take about that long to prepare a sound ethics proposal), so I decided to use auto-ethnography to specifically examine two speeches that I had given at different points in my life, both pertaining to my lived-experiences with sexual violence. While some of the language in the speeches is not language that I identify with anymore, I have left the speeches in their original form to maintain authenticity.

### *Background*

The first speech, which was given at SlutWalk Winnipeg in 2012, was the first time I spoke about my experiences. I was a co-planner of the event, and when we started considering speakers for the event, I volunteered to share my story. Roughly a year before this, I had shared my story in an article for the University of Winnipeg student paper, *The Uniter*, and found healing in doing so. I had also taken several courses that focused on social change that year, and more than any time before believed that words had power. After this event, I continued to co-

plan with SlutWalk, but started to focus more on my academic knowledge of sexual violence. The truth is, after having done most of the media for SlutWalk 2012, I found that I had a lot to learn about intersectionality. I stumbled when asked about the movement contributing to “White Feminism”, and I didn’t fully understand a question that I was asked during an interview about politics.

Around this time, I also began volunteering with the Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), and delivering their “No Means No” program to grade 6 students across Winnipeg. After graduating in 2014 with a degree in Sociology and Psychology, I applied for, and got, a job working in Zimbabwe. During some down-time, I started looking for jobs to apply for when I got back to Canada, and realized that I was not qualified for the types of jobs that I wanted. My answer to this issue was simple: get more qualified. I started looking into different graduate programs, and found the one at Lakehead University to be most fitting. It was one of few programs that shared, right on their website, that in addition to academic achievement, relevant lived-experiences would be taken into consideration. I applied, and got in.

Around the middle of my first semester, I found myself spending more time in the Gender Issues Centre. The space was some perfect mixture of energizing and comforting, and I felt safe there. Around that same time that I began getting to know the centre Coordinator for that year, Jayal Chung. I shared my experience with Jayal, and talked about how it felt as though being in Thunder Bay was symbolic of me coming full circle; I was now studying sexual violence in the city I which I had first been violated. Not long after, I was invited by Jay to be a part of a planning meeting for Take Back the Night, and she confirmed me as a speaker within a day. I wrote my speech for Take Back the Night in my dorm room over the course of several weeks (which differed from my SlutWalk speech, which I wrote most of while sitting at a park in

Winnipeg), and perhaps sensing some of my anxiety, Jayal regularly asked how she could support me. While at the time I understood this to be a function of her job, I now understand that offer to be something more significant: support. The simple knowledge that someone was willing to let me share my story at an event that was so personal to them made me feel that my story, even ten years later, was validating. I remember very little about the night of the 2014 Take Back the Night event. I remember that, instead of wearing something that I thought *looked* good (I knew there would be media presence) I wore a t-shirt from To Write Love On Her Arms<sup>20</sup>. Instead of spending time with my parents, who drove in from two and a half hours out of town (and drove back that same night because my dad worked in the morning), I paced back and forth beside the podium while everyone else took in community resources and watched the pre-event power point presentation. I remember very little about the event itself, beyond that at one point, I looked up and saw, at the exact same time, my mom and dad, Jayal, and Dr. Chambers (my thesis supervisor). I remember crying. After the event, I went back to my dorm room and, for the first time in several weeks, fell asleep without any sort of sleep-aid.

### *Definitions of Sexual Violence/Rape/Sexual Assault*

In both of my speeches, I use “rape” and “sexual assault” interchangeably. There is no rhyme or reason as to why I use one over the other. In the first speech that I gave, which was in 2012 at SlutWalk Winnipeg, I started the speech with:

Five years ago, I might have used these statistics to define my entire life. Not today. I am more than a statistic. I am more than sexually assaulted. My name is Sherrie-Lee

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<sup>20</sup> TWLOHA is an organization that directs individuals to mental health support. It was through them that I came across RAINN. It was also through TWLOHA that I began to consider the importance of hope and redemption.

Chiarot; I am a sister, a daughter, and a granddaughter. I am a student, a classmate, a woman of faith, a friend, and an employee. I am everything that I choose to be. And I'm here to tell you that I never chose to be sexually assaulted.

I used "sexually assaulted" a total of nine times throughout the speech. Similarly, I used "raped" seven times throughout the speech. Nowhere in either of the two speeches did I use "sexual violence", which is what I now understand the experience to be.

### *Consent*

While neither of my speeches provide any sort of definition nor explicit discussion of consent, the first speech, which was essentially my story and my experiences with victim-blaming, ended up being titled "There is No Such Thing as 'Implied Consent'". This title, which was actually put to the speech a month after the event<sup>21</sup>, speaks to the way that consent was perceived to have been given in a variety of contexts. When I wrote the speech, the goal was not to discuss my experiences around consent. The goal was to simply tell my story. I wanted to tell people who have experienced sexual violence that it was not their fault, but mostly, I wanted to share my experiences. Even when I titled the speech, I did not realize how much my words spoke to the idea of consent. It seems obvious that an assertion of "I did not choose to be sexually assaulted" is a statement about a lack of consent in that particular situation. Similarly, when I state that "before, and during, I said 'no'", I am very directly speaking to consent. When I read the speech now, however, I see the idea of consent more broadly. I see the comments that the police officers made regarding the security of my Facebook account as a comment regarding

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<sup>21</sup> I initially had not included a title beyond "SlutWalk 2012", but when I decided that I would include the speech on my resume, I added one.

consent. What they are saying is, essentially, that by me not having a more secure Facebook account, I was allowing (or in other words, consenting to) being contacted by anyone who wanted to contact me. When I write, towards the end of the speech, about recognizing that none of what happened was my fault, I am ultimately making a statement of “I did not consent”.

*Identification as Victim/Survivor/Something Else Entirely*

“I’ve always believed that everything happens for a reason. And figuring out the reason for being sexually assaulted was never easy. But it was also never intentional. I have a blog that I regularly write in; about forgiveness, and faith, and learning to love again. I have come to realize that this is what I’m meant to do. I am Sherrie-Lee Chiarot, and I am not a victim. I am a survivor, and I believe that I am meant to let the world know a simple fact: there is NO such thing as ‘implied consent’.”

That excerpt, from my SlutWalk Winnipeg speech, shows me refusing the language of victimhood. My understanding of ‘victim’ had the words “loser” and “needy” attached to it, and an idea of a perpetrator continuing to have power over me. In my SlutWalk speech, the word “victim” appears three times, and the only instance of the term in relation to me as a person is the assertion above; “I am not a victim”. In my Take Back the Night speech from 2014, the word “victim” appears twice, and I never use it to describe myself. On the other hand, the word “survivor” appears only once in my SlutWalk speech. In my Take Back the Night speech only two years later, the word ‘survivor’ appears twice, but I never use it to refer to myself.

Interestingly, the timing of that second speech was around the time that I began to deny *both*

words, and instead was referring to myself as “a person who has experienced sexual violence”.

As mentioned, the way that I have since referred to myself has changed several times throughout the duration of my time engaging with literature on sexual violence.

*Blame (Others Blaming, Self-blame, Fear of blame)*

Blame is a constant reality for people who experience sexual violence, and I certainly am no different. In both my SlutWalk Winnipeg and Take Back the Night speeches, I shared:

“Before, and during, I said: “no sex”. He didn’t care. . . But at that point, I made myself believe that because I liked him, and because according to him my “body language said I wanted it”, that I wasn’t raped. He would never do that to me. It was my fault that this happened. I held on to that for five years.”

In both of my speeches, I note that David’s only response to any question I asked over time was to assert that it was a simple “miscommunication”. He used this means of denial, for years, to put the blame on me for what I experienced. The statement that he made on Facebook, about me being “bitter about a simple misunderstanding”, further exemplified his intention of putting the blame on me for his actions.

In both of my speeches, when I speak to my experiences with the police officers, I make direct mention about feeling blamed:

“The police, on the other hand... came to me and after I told them what had happened, they questioned me about how private my profile settings were. I felt like they were

telling me that if I didn't have a Facebook, I wouldn't have been contacted. I felt like they were placing on me, an expectation to live the rest of my life possessed by a fear of this rapist coming back into my life. I felt blamed.”

The police officers, who I expected to “serve and protect” me, instead questioned me about my social media privacy settings and then commented about how my profile was not secure enough. What they were saying, essentially, is “if your Facebook profile security settings were better, David wouldn't have contacted you, and we wouldn't have to be here”.

### *Lack of Faith in the Justice System*

Both of my speeches shared the exact same narrative regarding my experience with the legal system.

In January of 2010, the person who assaulted me contacted me on Facebook. The message said “long time no see”. After a few hours, I replied to him. I hoped he would apologize for hurting me. Far from repentant, he replied telling me that he contacted me because he had “stumbled on my profile and had nothing better to do”. I was being harassed. I believed that because of our past, I could take SOME form of legal action against him; harassment, or a restraining order. His messages continued over the next three days; “is ignoring me any way to treat your long lost love?”, and “You still bitter about a simple misunderstanding?” That's what he called his sexually assaulting me. A simple misunderstanding. The next day I received another message, saying that he was “sorry to bother me” and “just hoping things are going well”. He told me to “take care of

myself". That day, I went to the law courts to inquire about legal measures. A counsellor talked to me about what was going on, and said that because there was no physical threat, she didn't think I would have much luck with a restraining order. Because there was no physical threat. This sickened me; I don't know how much more pain I could physically go through than being sexually assaulted at age 14. Further, his words were just as manipulative and hurtful as his actions. She told me that I could call the police, and they would be able to issue him a verbal warning. The best thing that she did for me, was direct me to the Laurel Centre; a place that has since played a vital role in my healing. The police, on the other hand...came to me and after I told them what had happened, they questioned me about how private my profile settings were. I felt like they were telling me that if I didn't have a Facebook, I wouldn't have been contacted. I felt like they were placing on me, an expectation to live the rest of my life possessed by a fear of this rapist coming back into my life. I felt blamed. They said that because he had said "sorry to bother you", it was an indication that he had recognized that his presence in my life wasn't wanted, and that if he was ever to contact me again, I now had grounds to charge him with harassment. This was painful to hear; the only way I can take any legal action against this rapist, is if he contacts me again. They then told me that because I didn't know his contact information, they couldn't "guarantee anything" in terms of getting ahold of him, but that they would look into it when they got to their office, and give me a call. I called them for a few days straight, asking if they had gotten ahold of him. They always told me that they hadn't, but they were working on it. The police told me that once they got ahold of him, they would let me know. . . I'm still waiting for that phone call. (Chiarot, 2012; 2014).



These frustrations come up, still, when I think back to how I have been rejected by the justice system. These feelings are furthered by the difficulty I had even getting in the door of the building. I had brought my purse with me because I had gone to the Court alone (despite a friend offering to come with me), and in my purse was an item that security told me that I could not bring inside the building. When I told security that I had walked 20 minutes (in the snow) to get to the building and had no one there that I could ask to just hold my purse, the security guard's response was "there's nothing I can do about that". This meant that I had to walk 20 minutes back to my dorm, empty my purse of the items that I did not need, and walk another 20 minutes back to the Court, all the while panicking that I would get another Facebook message from this person. When I got back to the Court, I went inside and was given paperwork to do for a restraining order (which is what I had asked for). While I was doing the paperwork, a court counsellor came and spoke with me. She directed me to the police (who she said would be able to issue a verbal warning). When they finally arrived at my dorm (several hours after I had called them and asked that they meet with me), among the first things that they brought up was that my Facebook profile was not adequately secure. They also asked me for David's<sup>22</sup> information, and then told me that they would try to contact him, but could not "guarantee anything" because I was not able to provide full contact information (even though I was able to provide his full name, birth date, birth location, his father's name and location, his brother's name, as well as the fake Facebook profile through which he contacted me). Essentially, all I was missing was a phone number and current location. I called the police afterwards to follow up, and they still had not been able to find him. My frustration at the time of writing those speeches was (and still is)

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<sup>22</sup> This is not the individual's real name, but rather, the name that his fake profile was under.

feeling that if they had spent any small amount of time looking for him, they could have found him. The truth is, even ten years later, when someone adds me to Facebook that I do not immediately recognize, or I get a call from a number that I do not recognize, I find myself in the beginning stages of a panic attack. While they told me that if he contacted me again I had “grounds to charge him with harassment”, they failed to recognize that they were, essentially, telling me that I would have to endure another traumatic event in order to have any peace. Occasionally when I think back to that point in time, I wonder if there might have been something else going on in the city at that particular point in time that would have required “all hands on deck” in terms of police presence. I know that these thoughts are me trying to justify the dismissiveness of the police officers with whom I met. I know that realistically, if the violation had been towards a male peer’s car instead of my plus-sized (and therefore not-possibly-sexual body), the police would likely have done their due diligence towards ensuring that justice was provided.

### *Continuation of Sexual Violence throughout Life*

This theme, how sexual violence continues throughout the span of life (as opposed to ending when the physical/emotional violation ends) was not a theme at the start of my analysis. It only became a theme when, at the National Day of Remembrance and Action to End Violence Against Women, a memorial for the Montreal Massacre at Ecole Polytechnique, the Gender Issues Centre coordinator, Stephanie Simko, brought up the idea. She said:

“Lately, I’ve been thinking about how this violence is not just one act of violence on one day, but how it is part of a much greater and deeply entrenched process of violence that is

part of all of our histories; these are histories which reinforce and reproduce fear, disconnection, dehumanization, and distrust. The world needs a lot of love right now... a lot of love, patience and relationship building is needed all the time” (Simko, 2015).

After the memorial, I went to my office and read through, again, all of my interviews and realized then that a number of my participants (eight of ten) had made statements that were directly about how they are still having to deal with the repercussions of having been violated. It certainly did not require a lot of thinking on my behalf to come up with a number of ways that this is true of my experience also. While I had spoken before about my experiences with sexual violence, my first Take Back the Night speech was significant in its own way. The speech was done, after all, in the city in which I was first violated. Further, while at SlutWalk, I had my parents and brother, as well as friends, coworkers and mentors of many years in the audience, at Take Back the Night, I only had my parents and a family friend (and a few people from Lakehead University who have since become friends, but at the time I had only known them for a handful of months). Leading up to the Take Back the Night event, I had many nights of unrest, and a headache that was severe enough to make me go to the hospital. All of this played into how I started my speech:

“It seems important that I use this platform I’ve been given to be honest. And the truth is that I almost didn’t do this speech. The truth is that I have spent the last few weeks feeling like I have been asking too many questions and dealing with too many triggers in the past two months to stand up here and share a message with the goal of educating and empowering. . . Being in Thunder Bay has been more difficult than I expected. Regularly,

I find myself acutely aware of the possibility of the person who raped me nine years ago being in the same grocery store as me. Some days, I see the books on my shelf that have the word “rape” in the title and my chest starts to get tight. There are days that I struggle to read an article or do an assignment because the words on the page are just blurs. There are mornings where I wake up from a nightmare, and the reality of having to leave my house takes conscious effort. But then Emma Watson’s words came to me: “If not me, who? If not now, when?” It has occurred to me that I will always ask questions, and I will always experience triggers.”

I regularly have to deal with the realities of the things that I have experienced. I study, by choice, sexual violence. By including auto-ethnography as a methodology, I study my experiences with sexual violence. Initially, I wanted to include my own auto-ethnography as a starting point and a way to be genuine; if I’m going to ask participants to share their lived experiences, how can I not? How can I ask people to relive their traumatic experiences and not be willing to relive my own? This comes with a certain amount of re-traumatization. I recognize, often, that I have put myself in a position to be repeatedly triggered. But if not us, who? If not now, when?

*Need for Education:*

From my perspective, education around sexual violence needs to be multi-faceted. That is, while I certainly believe that it is important to educate individuals about the importance of “yes means yes” and “no means no”, I also think that we have got to start by simply calling things what they are. I do not recall, in elementary or high school, being told about sexual violence. I was told, instead, that “sex is bad unless you are married”. In elementary school,

sexual relations weren't talked about whatsoever. In high school, while our Phys-Ed teacher certainly tried, he fell short. I remember once, in an effort to open dialogue, he asked us all to write down questions that we had on pieces of paper, without our names, and then telling us that he and another teacher (who also taught Phys-Ed) would answer our questions in front of the whole class. I remember feeling anxious, and asked to get up to go to the washroom. When I came back, the two teachers were at the back of the room, looking at papers that had already been turned in and pointing to students. Perhaps because of the anxiety and distrust that I already had for anyone who wanted to talk about sex in any capacity, I automatically assumed that they were trying to figure out which students wrote what questions. Most of the questions that were asked during that class were about terminology. I remember one classmate, who asked "why are there so many names for a penis?" And while I cannot remember what the teacher answered, I find it interesting to think that, even in high school, we are already confused by the plethora of names and terms and labels that exist to describe one particular item or situation.

When I was first violated, I did not have the language of "sexual violence". I was not aware that I had been "raped" and I can say with certainty that, at that age, I would never have put "sexual" and "assault" together. In my speeches I assert that I didn't think I was raped at the time because I believed David's comments about body language. However, when I think about where I was in my own thinking when I had been having those conversations with him, I didn't think that I was raped.<sup>23</sup>

The experiences that I have written about in this chapter are certainly true of where I was at those particular points in my life. Over time, however, my understandings of several aspects of

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<sup>23</sup> Quite frankly, I did not know what rape was when I was that age.

the experience that these speeches are about have changed drastically. Further, as I have become more knowledgeable on the subject of sexual violence, I have come to understand other experiences of mine in new light.

## CHAPTER SIX: SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTION

I began all of my interviews by asking my participants basic demographic questions, such as where they grew up and what they were studying. While the point of this was to gain demographic data, it was also done so that my participants could get more comfortable with the process of being interviewed before being asked questions of a more personal and difficult nature. This was of particular importance, given that most of my participants showed more interest, at least initially, in “sharing their stories” with me than “being a participant” in my research. Most of my participants relaxed quickly, and many interviews had the tone of a conversation as opposed to a question-and-answer session. Often I nodded and used words like “sure” to indicate that I heard what they were saying. I intentionally tried to avoid statements such as “I understand”, because I understand that I do not (and cannot) understand what my participants have been through. Participants often shared information that answered questions that I had not yet asked, or that prompted me to ask follow-up questions.

This chapter will integrate my interviews with my own auto-ethnography. That is, after a discussion of how my participants spoke to the different themes that emerged, I will share from my own lived-experiences by examining several speeches that I have given in the past. Further, I will include a brief reflection on how, particularly as a result of this research, my understandings of several of these themes has developed.

### *Definitions of Sexual Violence*

My participants each described sexual violence in a different way. Further, most of my participants’ conceptualization of sexual violence were akin to the way that they, themselves, have experienced sexual violence. Interestingly, all of my participants who have experienced

sexual violence in multiple contexts understood sexual violence to exist on a sort of continuum, ranging from general oppression, to unwanted and inappropriate comments, to rape. It was also interesting that the individuals who provided broader definitions of sexual violence had all taken Women's Studies courses<sup>24</sup>. One participant, Rori, near the start of the interview, even went as far as to state that s(h)e had to try to make (h)er "academic brain log off, so I can tell you a real story". Similarly, Luna, who understood sexual violence to be a consequence of general oppression, shared throughout the interview that sexual violence is one of her research interests.

Several of the reflections that my participants made are true of different points of my experiences as well. When I reflect on my two speeches and look at how I understood sexual violence at those particular times, I am not surprised that I did not actually conceptualize how I understood sexual violence anywhere in the speeches. Instead, much like my participants who had not spoken at length about their experiences before, I gave descriptor words. I knew that it "wasn't my fault" and that "there is no such thing as implied consent", but I had not taken the time to think through, even at the time of my second speech, how I conceptualized sexual violence. When I think back now, I distinctly recall being confused when, after telling my parents about the experience I had when I was fourteen with a family-friend, my dad said "so it was petting?" While at the time I was confused and frustrated, believing that I had said everything that I could, I now think back and recognize that I may have said that it was "sexual assault", which my dad likely understands in the legal sense (meaning, non-penetrative). My understanding of what sexual violence involves has been challenged and changed over the past couple of years, not least of all as a result of the wisdom of the individuals I interviewed for this thesis. It was through these interviews that my understandings broadened enough to help me

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<sup>24</sup> This is particularly interesting given one of the other themes that emerged, "Need For Education".



through a difficult exchange in November. The following is an excerpt from a letter that I wrote immediately following an experience that I had with sexual violence during a trip to Toronto with my husband:

Sometime around 11:30pm, I started feeling sick and decided that I would turn in for the night, and came to where you were sitting and said goodnight. I came upstairs, but then started feeling okay and wanted to enjoy the rest of the evening so I came back down. I got in the elevator, and there was a guy in there who stared at my body, then said “nice ass” and then hit additional numbers on the elevator which made it take us longer to get down to the main floor. He complained, out loud, when someone else got in the elevator on floor 11 about how that person shouldn’t be there (or something of the sort). When we got to the main floor he looked at me again and said “nice dress”, then waited for me to get off the elevator before him. The second I got off, I stood with my back against the wall and texted you that I was coming to you.

The truth of the matter is that, had I not been doing this research, I might not have considered this sexual violence. I would have felt those same feelings of violation, but instead of placing the blame on the person in the elevator, I would have probably blamed myself for wearing a fitted dress. This experience came the day after I transcribed Alex’s interview, in which she spoke about sexual violence as unwanted sexual attention. That same day, I also interviewed Rori, who spoke about sexual violence as a transgression of space and time. Without those interviews, I likely would not have been able to understand my experience on the elevator in the same way that I do. Even as someone who had experienced sexual violence previously, my understanding

was limited to my experiences and my experiences had all been physical until that night on the elevator. It makes sense that, given that my participants each understood sexual violence based on their own experiences, they would each define the term slightly differently. Given that this is so, it makes sense that how to name the experience (sexual violence, rape, sexual assault, etc.) is a contested issue in the literature.

### *Consent*

Similar to the ways that my participants understood sexual violence, they all understood consent slightly differently, and I was able to find connections between how each of my participants understood “consent” and their own lived experiences. In fact, how my participants understand consent was not a question of mine (as per Appendix A). It became a question that just naturally found its way into the interviews because of the fact that, in conceptualizing sexual violence, most of my participants made their own connections to the fact that a key component of sexual violence is that, unlike sex, there is no freely given consent. For example, when M said “any unwanted sexual behaviour”, the word “unwanted” speaks to a lack of consent. Jamie more directly defined sexual violence as “something sexual in nature without consent”. Similarly, Cailley defined it as “any un-consensual sexual act”.

As I mentioned, when I started to speak about my lived-experiences with sexual violence, I consistently used language about consent. My first speech, which was entirely based on how I had come to understand that my first experience with sexual violence was not my fault, focused on the different ways that I was told that I had given consent (to be violated, to be contacted on social media afterward’s, etc). My understanding of consent has since developed. I now understand consent to be more nuanced. In fact, it was understanding legalities around consent

that solidified my (now) knowledge that the sexual violence I experienced at fourteen years old was not (and could not) have been my fault: due to the age difference between myself and my violator, regardless of my body language (or any other miscommunication he has claimed over time), I actually could not, legally, have given consent for sexual activity.

### *Identification as Victim/Survivor/Something Else*

For most of my participants, the question of victimhood/survivorhood was complex. While there is a long-standing debate between what specific word should be used to describe people who have experienced sexual violence, almost all of my participants spoke of their understanding that identification as a victim/survivor actually exists on a continuum. For the most part, my participants all shared that, at some point, they had identified as “victims”. For most of my participants, however, they now identify as a “survivor”, or as something else entirely. For example, Julia shared throughout the interview that she has felt victimized at various times in her life, but that at this point she sees herself as an Overcomer instead. She shared that the identity of “Overcomer” means that she chooses to hold her head high, and hopefully inspire others to do the same. Further, many of my participants struggled to identify with either word. Jamie, for example, shared that she felt that being called a victim “downsized” her lived-experiences, but did not consider herself a survivor because that imagery was associated with someone who had survived “a war or battle or cancer or something”. Other participants saw themselves as both victim *and* survivor. For example, Alex stated that while she usually identifies as a survivor, she sees herself as both, and sees a problem with the need for people to identify as one or the other. A similar sentiment was shared by Rori, who simply wanted to be acknowledged as “person” because s(h)e feels that discourse around

victimhood/survivorhood is divisive instead of inclusive.

My own identification has certainly existed on a continuum, and has changed multiple times over the past several years. In my first speech, as mentioned earlier, my focus was entirely on asserting my own survivorhood. Prior to that speech, I certainly understood myself to be a victim. It was when I started speaking publicly that I started identifying as a survivor. When I search my memory for *why* I made that switch, I am unable to recall a distinct moment in time or experience that made me feel that “survivor” fit me better, but I have no doubt that some of the switch had to do suddenly being a “public face” of sexual violence. I hoped that if I asserted myself as having survived the experience (which has a connotation of strength), then others would see that they did not have to embody “victim” as it is typically understood. That is, I too understood “victim” to be a word with connotations of neediness and helplessness. In the past year alone my understanding of how I identify as a person who has experienced sexual violence has gone through significant changes. There was a point at which I simply wanted to be known as “a person who has experienced sexual violence”. In identifying as “a person who has experienced sexual violence”, I felt that the “person first, sexual violence later” would capture the essence of “survivor”, while still acknowledging that I have been victimized. While I still use this language on occasion, I have also started to think about how I experience the idea of “victim”. At the 2015 Take Back the Night event, I started my speech by saying “I feel as though I am a survivor most days, but sometimes this world that we live in makes me feel like a victim”. For me, this was a way of acknowledging that the reasons that I still feel victimized are because of how *others* make me feel. Something that I have struggled with for a long time is self-blame, and a significant step in my healing has been learning to place blame where it belongs. Not long after Take Back the Night, I began reading Cathy Winkler’s text *One Night: Realities of Rape*, in

which she describes herself as a Victim As Survivor and Advocate (VISA). For me, identifying as a VISA has made sense. It makes sense that, during this point in my life, I recognize myself as both a victim and survivor, but also as an advocate. While some see the label of “victim” to have connotations of “needy” and “weak”, I have come to accept the reality that sometimes, because of what others have done to me, and because of the way that people who have experienced sexual violence are regularly treated both in our personal lives and through media portrayal, I *am*, sometimes, made to feel weak and needy. With that being said, I am also a survivor. I have to survive every day. It is because of how closely I identify with these realities that I am able to be an advocate. While I do not – cannot – fully understand the lived experienced of others, I can work to help them eventually become advocates themselves.

Something else of which I have become more cognizant is the spaces in which I identify myself as having experienced sexual violence. In the past, I would often only refer to myself in the context of having experienced sexual violence if I was speaking at an event (such as SlutWalk or Take Back the Night), or if I was in counselling. More and more, I find myself identifying in a broader variety of places as someone who has experienced sexual violence. I recognized this initially when I was in a meeting with several other individuals (half of whom I had never met) to revitalize the campus material on sexual violence and, when we were going around the table sharing what brought us to the group, I shared what I had planned. I shared that I was writing a thesis on lived experiences of sexual violence, and that part of the reason for the revitalization of the material was because of an activity that I did with the class for which I was a Teacher’s Assistant while I was teaching the section on “Locating Gendered Violence”. But what I did not expect was that I would close my introduction with the group by saying “I also identify as someone who has lived the experience of sexual violence”. Since then, I have been thinking a

lot about why it seems so strange to identify myself as having experienced sexual violence when I first meet people.

I am a person who has experienced sexual violence, much like I am someone who is married and someone who loves dogs and volunteerism. Those characteristics of my life are as important to know about me as the reality of my experiences with sexual violence. The truth is difficult to be honest about, but being a person who has experienced sexual violence is more central to my life than my love of dogs because of the significant ways that those experiences have impacted my life. So why, when I am sharing about who I am, has it never occurred to me to disclose that I have lived the experience of sexual violence? I do not have to think very hard to recognize that the primary reason that I do not share this aspect of my life in the same way that I share others is because of the fact that it makes other people feel uncomfortable. I do not talk about it, not because I am ashamed or uncomfortable, but because other people have no idea how to respond to my experiences. And the more that I have thought about that over time, the more frustrated I have become.

We (people who have experienced sexual violence) have got to be more willing to share our lived experiences. The rest of the world will not suddenly become comfortable hearing the truth about sexual violence; we have to make them listen. Only when we speak will others listen, and only when others listen will they learn. This is the only way that the experiences and realities of sexual violence can move from taboo to widely understood.

### *Blame (Others Blaming, Self-Blame and Fear Of Blame)*

#### *Others blaming*

As I previously mentioned, victim-blaming is most commonly perpetuated by other

individuals who are attempting to engage with someone who has experienced sexual violence. For a number of my participants, the blame that they have experienced was from individuals who were also friends with their violators. Those friends often tried to defend the violator with statements such as “you did lead him on by flirting” (Cailley), or “are you sure that happened?” (Luna). Generally speaking, we do not share traumatic experiences with people we do not perceive as understanding. In the contexts of Cailley and Luna, especially, these disclosures were made to trusted friends. For those friends to state that they were being overly flirtatious, or to accuse them of being liars, is a means of blaming. Much like Rori shared in (h)er interview, those questions that Cailley and Luna were asked were a means of negating their experiences.

In my speeches, I note a similar experience of blaming. I share a lot about the ways that others have blamed me over time. The example that I speak most at length about in the speeches was regarding my experience with the police officers who came to see me after I was contacted on social media by my violator. Much like my participants, I turned to individuals I thought I could trust, and was blamed. While I did not know the police officers previously, I had been led to believe that they would have my best interests in mind and help me regain a feeling of safety. The police officers, instead of asking me if I was okay, or needed support (they did neither), questioned me about the security of my social media. While it is unlikely that the police officers (as well as my participants’ friends) had malicious intent, or made those statements with a desire to perpetuate rape culture, the truth of the matter is that our words are powerful.

More and more, I find myself needing to verbalize “it was not my fault” if I feel blamed whatsoever, even if it was not the other person’s intent to make me feel blamed in any way. Much like my self-blame, the feeling of being blamed by others manifests in everyday situations. For example, not long ago, my husband casually pointed out that the floor was full of dog hair. I

internalized this as him blaming me for not doing the vacuuming, and immediately got defensive. While it was not my husband's intent to tell me that it was *my* fault that the floor had a lot of dog hair on it, because of the way that I have been blamed for so many other things in my life, I often hear blame when it is not the intent. While, certainly, we are all subject to interpreting these every-day experiences as a form of blame, I have been made aware by many people in my life that I do this excessively. It is my best guess that my tendency towards assuming I'm being blamed is in direct relation to having experienced (and been blamed for) sexual violence several times throughout my life. Not only are we blamed, but as we experience such blaming we come increasingly to fear it and therefore may talk even less about our experiences.

### *Self-blame*

The majority of my participants spoke to the different ways by which they blame themselves. For a number of my participants, a main cause of their self-blame is related to broken relationships. For both Jamie and Veronica, for example, their offenders had some sort of a relationship with people with whom they were close (for Veronica it was a friend, and for Jamie it was both a friend and her mother), and they have been blamed for the demise of those relationships. For others, the self-blame manifests as a result of feeling as though they put themselves in a position to be violated, and now they feel responsible, in varying ways, for their experiences. For example, Cailley shared that she "made that choice" to get drunk and that she blames herself for that choice. Similarly, for Julia, the blame exists on the premise of the privilege of being able-bodied. Because of her reality as an able-bodied person, because she "could have moved . . . unlike some folks who aren't mobile", she feels as though she did not do everything that she could have done to get out of the situation that she was in. But the truth, for



both Cailley and Julia, is that they played no role in their violation. Much like has been previously discussed, there is no such thing as “sex” without consent. This is a fact that, as my speeches show, it took me some time to recognize.

When I look back on my two speeches, I recognize that I did not really share anything about blame. With that being said, I definitely did internalize a lot of the blame that others were placing on me. For example, there was a long period of time during which I wondered if what had happened between my violator and myself was, indeed, a “simple misunderstanding”. I spent years trying to think through, over and over again, the details of that day. For years, I had lengthy periods of questioning if what I had experienced was sexual violence as I had come to understand it, or if there was some way that I had consented. Even after speaking at SlutWalk and my first Take Back the Night, I had moments of questioning that particular experience. The only way that I have gotten rid of that doubt, and that blame, is by reminding myself that there is no such thing as “implied consent”, and that I said “no”.

Similarly, when I think back to other experiences with sexual violence I had following my initial experience at 14 years old, I have sometimes blamed myself for my risky behaviour. For example, when I think back to those particular experiences when I was violated by someone whom I met on an adult dating site, there have been times when my immediate thought is one of self-blame. Thoughts such as: “well, if I hadn’t put myself in such a vulnerable position, that wouldn’t have happened” did, until now, keep me from sharing those experiences. But much like how I have had to remind myself that body language is not a substitute for consent, I have had to work towards reminding myself that agreeing to meet up with someone I met online also does not equate to consent. With that being said, the ways that self-blame exists in my life are not so much connected to sexual activity anymore. Back in November, when I was violated on the

elevator, I could have questioned if my dress was too tight or if I had had too much to drink... and maybe years ago, I would have blamed myself for those things. I did those things – briefly – but was able to quickly move past them and accept that I had no fault in what transpired on that elevator. Self-blame still exists in mundane and every-day experiences, and it is something that I still work to overcome.

### *Fear of blame*

I had not thought of the idea of being fearful of blame until I was re-reading my interviews. For a number of my participants, victim blaming (that is, others blaming them) has manifested in a fear of being blamed. Primarily, it is being blamed by others that led them to not want to share their experiences with law enforcement. This makes sense. Much like Luna spoke to in her interview, not only is victim-blaming a significant component of rape culture, but it also contributes to not reporting the violence.

When I look back on my speeches, the statement “I am still waiting for that phone call” sticks out. That statement is in reference to the police saying they would call me after issuing a warning to the individual who sexually violated me at fourteen years old. I think that, had it not been for a fear of being blamed, I would likely have tried to figure out more aspects of the contact information for myself instead of relying on the police. We had mutual friends to whom, had I not been so afraid of being blamed and shamed, I could have reached out. I also, at that time, was still in contact with his brother. Similarly, with my brother being an IT professional, I probably could have found out what city the Facebook messages were being sent from. If I had not been so afraid of being blamed, I might not have had to mention that I was “still waiting” in the first speech, and I certainly would not have had to make such a statement in the second.

What is also important to note is the information that I left out of both speeches because of my fear of being blamed. At the time of my first speech (SlutWalk), I had not recognized myself as having experienced sexual violence beyond that first time. At the time of the Take Back the Night speech that I gave in 2014, I had made this realization. In a speech that I made this year at Take Back the Night, I disclosed that I have actually experienced sexual violence two additional times<sup>25</sup>. When I think back to why I did not disclose those experiences, it comes down to my fear of being blamed. One of those experiences was on a second date with someone I had met on an adult dating site. I had consented to some intimacy, but quickly became uncomfortable and said “let’s stop and watch a movie” and the person did not. Another experience was at a club, where I told the person I had just met that I did not want to engage beyond oral sex, and the person raped me. Multiple factors played into why I have never publicly talked about these experiences. First, it is difficult for people to understand why I was engaging in such “risky” behaviour. I was a “bible school student” who was being intimate with a number of people. Much like I mentioned in both of my speeches, after being violated for the first time by someone who I thought had romantic feelings for me, I began to equate sex with love. In my mind, I wanted love, and therefore I had to have sex. Second, because both of those experiences existed in the context of me engaging in “risky behaviour”, I had not equated them to acts of sexual violence initially. My thought was, unfortunately, that what happened to me in those instances was an unfortunate consequence of my choices. Finally, after I gained enough confidence to become my own advocate, and after I began to understand my experiences as sexual violence, I still had to face the reality of how the general public would understand my experiences.

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<sup>25</sup> With that being said, the more holistic of an understanding about sexual violence that I have come to an understanding of, the more I recognize other instances of sexual violence in my life.

### *Lack of Faith in the Justice System*

As I mentioned previously, there was not a single participant of mine who had disclosed their experiences of sexual violence to the authorities. In fact, a number of participants cited the fact that they did not think anything would be done to bring their violator to justice. For Luna to have said “the system will not oppress me again” is a direct statement of her belief that the system (that is, the justice system) would not adequately deal with her experience of being violated. My participants feel as though even if they did take the necessary steps to charge their violators, their voices would not be heard. This is a problem.

Both of my speeches share my experiences both with going to the court and, consequently, being told that I likely could not get a restraining order. They also both share my experiences with being blamed by police officers for not having an adequately secured Facebook profile. The statement that I made in my speeches about how I am “still waiting” for the police to contact me is a statement of frustration and annoyance. Today, I struggle with how I view the justice system. While I have no doubt that it is, problematically, a beyond-flawed system, I also have, more and more over time, encouraged friends who share their experiences with sexual violence with me to report their experiences to the police. I feel very stuck between knowing how broken the justice system is and seeing the potential in that system to be a key factor in people’s healing. Luna shared that after her first experience with sexual violence, she had thought that if it were to happen again she would be more comfortable being her own advocate, but when that happened she did not go forward. I feel similarly. While I would like to believe that I could (and would) be my own advocate, I have been violated numerous times and have never reported anything to the police. Truthfully, although I was certainly violated in the elevator

while in Toronto, it never crossed my mind until writing this discussion chapter that I could have reported my experience. With that being said, when I reflect on if I would have actually reported the experience (and further, why I do not report it now), I am reminded of my conflicted feelings about the justice system. While I recognize that I did nothing wrong or even remotely provocative, I am certain that my (and my husband's) behaviour would have been called into question. Both of us would possibly have been questioned about how much we had been drinking up to that point, and I might have faced questioning about going upstairs and then down. I might have been asked why I did not just get off the elevator on the next floor (even though it is a well-known fact that people respond to trauma and triggers in a variety of ways; in that particular instance, I froze and my only thought was "get to Brian"). Brian might have been asked about where he was and be called into question for not going upstairs with me when I initially went because I was not feeling very well (even though he had actually offered, and I told him to stay and enjoy the party). Further, even though my experience certainly could qualify, from a human rights perspective, as sexual harassment, it would turn into a "she says/he says" question regarding interpretation of meaning. While on a theoretical level I want to believe that the justice system exists to stand beside and support those who have been victimized, on a practical level, I am aware that the justice system fails, largely, to do what it exists to do.

*Rape Myths (Dramatization/"Believe Me", Others)*

*Dramatization/"believe me"*

As mentioned, I did not foresee so many of my participants expressing issues around others perceiving their sharing of their experiences as "dramatic". With that being said, it is easy to understand how the need to be believed by others (and the problem of not being believed)

would come up so many times. A number of my participants shared the importance of being believed and validated. For a number of my participants, being called “dramatic” or being disbelieved by friends and family played a significant role in them not being comfortable enough to share their experiences. For many of my participants, receiving validation was significant to their healing. For M, being labeled as “dramatic” by the very people she thought would stand beside her was something that she internalized deeply, to the point of questioning her own memories around her experience. For M, speaking to someone who validated her was a significant step towards her healing. This was echoed by many participants. Sue, Veronica, and Rori also explicitly shared the importance of being both believed and validated. It makes sense that my participants have been so deeply affected by being called over-dramatic, particularly given that most of them explicitly shared a lack of faith in the justice system. One of the more common ways in which individuals who experience sexual violence are challenged in both the justice system and the “court of public opinion” is for their stories to be picked apart minute detail by minute detail. Any discrepancy or inconsistency results in others dismissing their experiences. Similarly, the fallibility of memory is often used as a means of discrediting people who have experienced sexual violence.

Neither of my speeches addressed the issue of dramatization or needing to be believed. I have never been questioned nor challenged when I have shared my experience. However, after reflecting on the dominance of this theme in my interviews, I began to wonder why this did not resonate with me in any way. I recognized: in my speeches that I have only ever spoken directly to one experience of sexual violence. That particular experience of sexual violence is also, perhaps, the most “straight-forward” for several reasons, not least of all that our age differences made it so that I could actually *not* legally consent to sexual activity with him. Also, prior to an

interview with the University of Winnipeg student paper and shortly thereafter SlutWalk, I had not spoken about my experience. Before writing (vaguely) in my most recent Take Back the Night speech about having had “more experiences since (the first)”, even those closest to me had not heard about those “other” experiences. While I have not experienced the sort of disbelief I have just discussed, there have been times when others have insinuated those things in the years since. After being violated at 14 years old on a trip back to Thunder Bay (which is where I spent my childhood), I spent almost a decade having severe anxiety any time my family took a trip back to the city. While well intentioned, my mother constantly would simply say “oh Sherrie-Lee, you don’t even know if he lives there anymore”. For me, this was internalized as being called overly sensitive. The truth of the matter is that it didn’t matter if he still lived in Thunder Bay or not. What mattered is that I would be spending the night in the same room at my Nonni’s house in which he had told me he liked me. What mattered is that I would be passing, multiple times during the visit, the park where we had gone and sat on the swings talking. What mattered is that he *might* still be there, and I *might* see him. The truth of the matter is that triggers are not always based on something as concrete as seeing the person who violated us. Triggers can range from something like being offered a food that the two people had together (it took me a little while to be able to stomach cantaloupe again) to being in a certain location, to a certain smell that resembles the person’s cologne (or perfume). Certain favourite songs suddenly become unbearable (it took me almost 8 years to be able to listen to a Linkin Park song in full again, even though for an extended period of time they were my go-to band). I do not think that my mother meant to trigger me, nor do I believe that it was her intent to discount my feelings and emotions around coming back to Thunder Bay. I do, however, think the simple reality is that like so many others she did not understand the impact of making me feel as though my emotions were invalid.

### *Other Rape Myths*

Beyond being seen as overly sensitive, dramatic and dishonest, there are a number of other “rape myths” that have proven themselves to be incredibly damaging. Often, one rape myth feeds into another. For example, Julia had an experience at the counselling centre where she felt as though she was being pressured into feeling that her father had done something wrong (as she says, “it’s always man man man”). This is indicative of the myth that would have everyone believe that only men violate, and only women get violated. This myth was also discussed by Tao who shared his frustrations around the “bullshit” myth that it is not possible for men to experience sexual violence. Something notable is that the majority of my participants spoke to the problematic belief that individuals who sexually violate are “the creepy men in the alleyway” when the reality is that, for the most part, violators are known to the individuals they violate. Similarly, each of my participants knew the individuals who violated them.

It makes sense that, at SlutWalk, the sign that I carried with me said “there is no such thing as implied consent”. This myth that consent can be implied (through body language, in this particular situation) is addressed in both of my speeches. The person who violated me when I was 14 years old said afterwards that my “body language” was asking for it, and that what happened was “a simple misunderstanding”. As I discussed earlier, as per the *Ewanchuk* case, Justice L’Heureux-Dube made it clear that “implied consent” does not exist unless the accused has taken necessary steps to ensure that consent was enthusiastically given. That is, it makes perfect sense that in the context of my marriage, a wink from me, a nod from him and a tender touch that is both given and received by both my husband and I is adequate enough to not have to have a conversation around “are you sure?” and “can I do this?” However, in the context of



being around someone with whom I had never been intimate before, there was not enough done on his part to ensure that my body language was indicative of what I wanted in that moment. When I think about some of the rape myths that I have encountered beyond what I have mentioned in the speech, my first thought goes to how my Nonni, for nearly a decade after I was violated, referred to the person who violated me at 14 years old as “the nice Italian boy” (even though he was not actually Italian). Despite myself and my parents telling her what had happened and asking her to just stop bringing him up entirely, she continuously referred to him as “the nice Italian boy”. For my Nonni it has been difficult to understand that the people who violate are not always the “creep in the ally”; they may be the people who appear “nice” and “cultured”.

Regarding my other experiences with sexual violence, it is my knowledge of rape myths that has prevented me from sharing those experiences in any of my speeches (and for the most part, with other friends). When I was talking through the reasons for me never having shared the other experiences that I have had, I found myself very aware of the fact that those other experiences weren't as “clean”. While, as I have shared, there are some myths involved in that first experience and certainly there have been extended periods of shame and blame, I was too young to have legally consented to sexual activity with someone his age. The other experiences that I have had certainly present more possibilities for rape myths; I was in provocative situations at those times (particularly given the experiences with individuals whom I had met via adult websites), I never left with any bruising or cuts or other visual signs of “physical harm” (as if being sexually violated is not physical harm on its own), and at the time in my life when I was sexually violated more frequently (by different men), I had various sexual partners. What is interesting is that, for me, the less “clear cut” experiences are the ones involving individuals who

were “stranger” to me than the individual who was the first to violate me.

### *Violence as Continuous*

It is perhaps not surprising that all of my participants spoke to the ways that they continue to experience after-effects of their violation(s) years (and for some, decades) after it actually happened. My participants shared varying accounts of how they continue to experience the violence of their sexual violation. As I previously mentioned, for some of my participants, the way that the violence continues to exist in their lives is as a result of triggers (that is, some stimuli (a smell, a sound, etc.) that transports a person back to the event of their original trauma), and for others it was related to the amount of reflection that is involved in advocacy roles. For example, Rori (whose experience with sexual violence is a result of a family member) has also had (h)er experiences negated by other family members. It makes sense, then, that s(h)e struggles with media’s depiction of parent/child relationships (especially when, so often, those relationships are portrayed as strained). Similarly, Rori’s experience with sexual violence has left (h)er not able to “trust the family structure”, which extends as far into (h)er life as not wanting to have children. Similarly, Julia stated in her interview that had she not had the experience at a young age of “some bitch wanting to diddle”, she would likely be queer. However, even thinking about being with another woman “grosses” Julia out. Julia recognizes that it makes sense, in terms of who she is, that she could be attracted to another woman; but she also recognizes the unavoidably high potential for herself to be triggered in that context.

For other participants, having to acknowledge their experience is a form of continued violence. As Sue pointed out, students who experience sexual violence on campus often have to struggle through triggers around space; it is no secret that many campuses do not adequately deal

with instances of sexual violence, and a result of this may be that a student has to walk in a classroom after being violated and see their violator. As Sue suggested, regarding the assumed feelings of someone who had experienced sexual violence on Lakehead University campus: “I’m sure every time she went to that class, she felt raped every day every day”. Further, given the issue of non-disclosure, it is quite likely that the number of individuals who have to experience the re-traumatization of seeing their offender repeatedly is staggering. While it may be easy enough, from a distance, to question why people who experience sexual violence often do not report their experiences, once we remember statistics around how many sexual violators *actually* end up experiencing any sort of consequence for their actions, in addition to the prevalence of victim-blaming, it becomes pretty clear why, especially in the context of a university or college campus where alcohol is often a factor, some opt to suffer in silence.

For others, such as Sue and Luna, the way that the violence has continued throughout their lives is with regards to how it has impacted their relationships. Luna specifically spoke to the frustration she feels in having to disclose that she has been sexual violated. For her, having to continuously disclose this aspect of her lived experience is a form of continuing sexual violence.

Much like how most of my healing has existed in the context of community, so have many of my revelations about sexual violence. As mentioned previously, this theme (violence as continuous) did not exist for me until a friend and fellow activist spoke to violence as a continuous process during a memorial held to remember the lives of 14 women who were murdered at Ecole Polytechnique. While the theme always existed in the content, and certainly I had lived this continued violence, I had never reflected on it. After she shared her closing remarks, which included the statement that “this violence is not just one act of violence on one day, but how it is part of a much greater and deeply entrenched process of violence that is part of

all of our histories” (Simko, 2015). Much like Sue and Luna, my speeches each speak to my reality of weaving myself in and out of unhealthy relationships. Similar to Luna (and other participants), I became promiscuous after being violated for the first time. From my perspective, sex and love were one and the same; I desperately wanted love, so I started having sex and assuming that I was abundantly loved. The result, in my case, was being violated several more times. At the time, I would not have thought about those experiences in direct relation to having been sexually violated. I now, however, recognize that had I not been violated at such a young age by someone who I thought loved me, the differences between love and sex would not have become unclear. Both of my speeches spoke to this issue, and a speech that I have given since (the Take Back the Night 2015 event) shared directly that I had been violated beyond that initial time.

### *Need For Education*

#### *What is sexual violence?*

As mentioned previously, I was interested in the fact that more than half of my participants spoke to how they did not immediately recognize their experience as sexual violence. Further, some of my participants, even still, didn’t quite know how to place their experiences. Cailley and M both shared that their confusion exists because of their interactions with their violator; Cailley had flirted back, and M was in a relationship with the person. Similarly, some of my participants shared that they struggled to place their experience due to the violator being a family member. But it was not only my participants who struggled with placing their own experiences – others (friends, counsellors, family, and so forth) have failed to understand the experiences of my participants as sexual violence as well. Sue, for example,

shared that a medical professional minimized her experiences by stating that “it wasn’t intercourse”. Similarly, Rori has continuously had (h)er experience negated by (h)er entire family, to the point that s(h)e was not even sure that (h)er story is valid enough to see a counsellor.

In both of my speeches, I acknowledge that I did not immediately recognize what I had experienced when I was 14 years old as “rape”.<sup>26</sup> Like M, I did not understand that someone with whom I was in a relationship (or thought I was) could hurt me in that way. It did not make sense to me that someone could tell me that they loved me one minute, and then do this thing called “rape” the next. As mentioned previously, beyond this initial experience, there are other experiences that, prior to this research, I had not understood to be sexual violence. I am not entirely certain if these revelations about the reality of those experiences would have come to me in any other way. However, it makes sense that, much like my participants, the more that I revisited these experiences that, previously, I had buried, the more clearly I understood them. Much like I mentioned previously, there was a period of my life during which my understandings of love and sex were misguided and blurred. Prior to this thesis research, I had only ever understood one experience from that time period to have been another instance of sexual violence (though, I never would have claimed it as such publicly or reported it, for fear of victim-blaming and slut-shaming). Like many others, I suppressed the experiences I had when I was going through a time of promiscuity and never let myself revisit those memories. More often than not, whenever memories of that time of my life came up, I would find ways to occupy my mind in some other way. These flashbacks have known no time of day or location. I recalled one experience walking home from counselling, another while transcribing a participant’s interview,

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<sup>26</sup> I use the language of “rape” instead of “sexual violence” here to indicate the language that I had in my vocabulary at that time.

and another woke me up with a panic attack the morning after the Jian Gomeishi trial. I am not entirely sure why I had not previously acknowledged these experiences as sexual violence; perhaps fear-of-blame played a role. It is, however, tragic that it took up to 5 years for me to acknowledge some of these experiences for what they are. And when I think about the reality of this lack of connection (between experiences and naming them for what they truly are), I am cognizant of the reality that there are many others, like me, who struggle with how to place their own experiences.

*General:*

The need for education extends beyond just understanding what sexual violence is. It was interesting to see the ways that my participants each spoke to how different some aspect of their experience would have been if the individuals from whom they sought support had been better educated. For Sue and Julia, the professionals (counsellors and doctors) they saw would have been significantly more useful had they not negated their experiences. In Jamie's experience, the reality of having to spend all day waiting for the Director of her workplace to find the policy on sexual violence was problematic. For Tao, the myth that men do not experience sexual violence has been a source of frustration. For others, the process of understanding sexual violence from a different (academic, political, etc.) perspective has been important. For Luna, for example, the ability to look up statistics and studies about sexual violence, and review psychological literature, has been helpful. Beyond that, Luna also has developed a research interest in sexual violence. Similarly, while Veronica's initial understanding of the reality of her experience with sexual violence was important, she states that it was Women's Studies that helped her to fully realize what had happened.

The importance of education was stated several times in both of my speeches, albeit indirectly. My critique of the way that the police officers dealt with my experiences was, in essence, a call for change in how they handle individuals who experience sexual violence. As Maya Angelou has stated: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better”. Change requires education. The police officers (and other professional and personal supports alike) will not be able to better support individuals who have experienced sexual violence until they are educated about how to do better. Beyond my speeches, I regularly find myself more and more certain of the need to educate. My certainty of the need for education comes from talking to people who have not spent time engaged with issues of sexual violence. Following the verdict regarding the Jian Gomeishi trial, my partner (who, prior to me, had never spent any time engaging with issues of sexual violence) and I had a discussion about the “messiness” of sexual violence. Brian struggled to understand that “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” gets complicated when traumatic memories are involved. It was only after several discussions, and me sending him additional reading on the subject, that he came to understand how traumatic memories work.<sup>27</sup> It is seeing these changes, and hearing about them, that gives me hope.

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<sup>27</sup> The article that he found most helpful was “Should We Believe Survivors? A Primer on the Neurobiology of Trauma” by Sarah Ogden Trotta, posted on everydayfeminism.com on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS AND WAYFORWARD

*“[T]ell surv...fellow survivors who haven't come to talk about it that it helps so much just to talk about it. Even if you haven't gone to the police. Just talk about it. Talk to somebody. Anybody.” - Veronica*

### *Conclusions*

Recently, I shared pieces of this thesis at a Feminisms conference at Lakehead University. Around that same time, I began thinking about how I would conclude this thesis. The truth of the matter is that I do not know that there is a valid conclusion to this work. As most of my participants shared, either directly or indirectly, sexual violence is an issue that, even if we are over a decade removed from our experience, continues to impact our lives in some way. To suggest that there is any way for me to have a definitive end to this work would be to contradict, in some way, the reality that this is just the beginning of understanding lived experiences of sexual violence.

There is no overly scientific answer to any of this. There is no equation that I can give anyone so that we can know how to best address all individuals who have experienced sexual violence. A new friend, Jane, while sharing her story recently said “sexual violence feeds off our silence”. My best advice is this: listen to as many voices as you can. Do not contribute to a culture of silence. Humble yourself and ask people how they want to be acknowledged, and how they want their experiences to be recognized. As my research suggests, everyone understands their experiences differently and it could be damaging to assume that we understand others' experiences (or to insert our opinions into their lived experiences). At the conference that I mentioned earlier, an attendee approached me during a break and asked me the following question: “in a room full of people with different experiences, how do I best address the issue of sexual violence?” My response was to share the same quotation by Dr. Maya Angelou that I shared earlier in this thesis: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know



better, do better”. I suggested that he use the term “sexual violence” (which is what recent literature acknowledges the experience as), but – and this is important – I also told him that he must explain to the folks in the room why he is choosing to use the language that he is using, and be willing to acknowledge the experiences of individuals in the audience as they desire.

My participants, much like myself, reserve the right to develop in our understandings and interpretations of our lived experiences. Even since starting my interviews not long ago, the way that I see my experiences has changed – it makes sense that my participants be given that same opportunity. Instead of being accused of having lied about what we have experienced, it would be better to recognize that language is a vehicle, and an often-fallible one at that. Often we “cannot think of a word” to describe something we are feeling, or do not have the vocabulary to express how we are feeling (especially as it relates to trauma, which can have some degree of manipulation or coercion). As we heal, and as our understandings of issues such as sexual violence become more fine-tuned, so then will the ways that we understand our experiences.

### *Way-forward*

Much like I have mentioned, I do not know that this work can actually ever come to a conclusion. There are stories that still need to be shared. While I am grateful for the variety of experience that is represented in my thesis research, I am aware that there are more experiences that this work does not even begin to capture. It is important that all of us continue to invite people to share their experiences. As activists and scholars, it is important to facilitate spaces for these stories to be shared. As a society, it is important to understand how much of a phenomenon sexual violence actually is. It is important that we listen to those stories. It is vital that we do not try to “fix” people who have experienced trauma, but instead that we walk alongside those

individuals in whatever capacity they see fit. It is important that we give a damn.

My hope is that this work can be a starting point for a larger compilation of lived-experiences. My hope is that we will allow the people with whom we come in contact down the line to be the experts on their own experiences. My hope is that we can learn to respect those experiences for all that they are, and all that they may come to be. My hope is that we can learn better, and do better. I know that we can. And so we will.

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## **Appendix A: Cover Letter with Resources**

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a Graduate Student in the Master's of Arts program in the Department of Sociology and Women's Studies at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. As part of my thesis, I am conducting research on the ways that victim-blaming is perpetuated and further, how victim-blaming has impacted people who have experienced sexual violence. My hope is that this research will contribute to gaining a further understanding of the ways that victim-blaming in its various forms impacts different aspects of the lives of people who have experienced sexual violence. This study is being supervised by Dr. Curtis Fogel (Sociology: Lakehead University, Orillia), and Dr. Lori Chambers (Women's Studies: Lakehead University, Thunder Bay).

My research is qualitative in nature. That is, my interviews seek to deal with more than just statistics related to sexual violence. I hope to analyse the descriptions that my participants provide of their lived experiences. I have prepared a series of questions about your lived experience with sexual trauma (specifically victim-blaming). The interview will take approximately one hour (with flexibility for additional time). Following the interview there will be a free-writing exercise, where you will be given as much time as needed to write anything you might feel more comfortable expressing written than orally. With your consent, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. You will be e-mailed (or otherwise provided) a copy of your transcribed interview for you to read over and have a chance to add, alter, or have any information removed. Your identity will remain anonymous. At the beginning of the interview I will ask you to provide me with a chosen pseudonym. If you wish to forego a pseudonym, you must provide written evidence consent waiving your confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview, you will also be provided with a resource list.

Because many of the questions will be of a personal nature, there could be risk of physical or psychological harm. However, should you feel triggered at any point during the interview, you are free to either temporarily or permanently withdraw. At the start of the interview, you will be provided a document outlining resources available both on campus at Lakehead University, as well as in the community. Please keep in mind that you are a volunteer and have the right to withdraw at any time prior to the publication of my thesis. You are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. All information you provide will remain confidential and be securely stored for five years upon completion. The only point in which I will not be able to keep your information confidential is instances in which you disclose self-harm or harm towards others, or due to subpoena. If you wish to receive a summary of the project following its completion, you may request that.

Please feel free to contact me at [schiarot@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca) or 807 630 0700. If you have any

further questions concerning this research project, please contact me or my advisors Dr. Curtis Fogel at (705) 330-4008 ext. 2646 or [cafogel@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:cafogel@lakeheadu.ca), or Dr. Lori Chambers at (807) 343-8218 ext. 8218 or [lchambe2@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:lchambe2@lakeheadu.ca). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics and Administrative Officer, Sue Wright at (807) 343-8283 or [swright@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:swright@lakeheadu.ca)

Thank you for your time and cooperation,

Sherrie-Lee R. Chiarot  
Graduate Student at Lakehead University  
(807) 630-0700  
[schiarot@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca)

### **RESOURCE SHEET**

Thank you for taking part in my research on sexual violence and victim-blaming. If at any point during the interview or afterwards you start to feel triggered or uncomfortable, please use the resources on this list. If you have any questions directly relating to the study, please feel free to contact me at (807) 630-0700 or [schiarot@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca)

**Police:** 911

#### **Lakehead University:**

**Thunder Bay Security:** (807) 343-8911

**Student Affairs:** (807) 343-8522

**Student Health and Counselling Centre:** (807) 343-8361

**Gender Issues Centre:** (807) 343-8879, [gic@lusu.ca](mailto:gic@lusu.ca)

#### **Community:**

**Thunder Bay Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse Counselling and Crisis Centre:**

385 Mooney Street//Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5L5

Tel: (807) 345-0894

Toll Free: 1-866-311-5927

Email: [tb counselling@tbsasa.org](mailto:tb counselling@tbsasa.org)

**Thunder Bay Counselling:**

Tel: (807) 684-1880

Email: [community@tbaycounselling.com](mailto:community@tbaycounselling.com)

Walk In:

12:00 pm – 8:00 pm (last session begins at 6:30pm) at the following locations:

-1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month at Thunder Bay Counselling Centre - 544 Winnipeg Avenue

-2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of every month at Children's Centre Thunder Bay - 283 Lisgar Street

**Thunder Bay and Area Victim Services:**

1200 Balmoral Street//Thunder Bay, ON, P7B 5Z5

(807) 684-1051

[tbavs@tbaytel.net](mailto:tbavs@tbaytel.net)

[www.victimservicesontario.ca](http://www.victimservicesontario.ca)

**Good2Talk (Student Helpline):**

1 (866) 925-5454

[www.good2talk.ca](http://www.good2talk.ca)

**Other:**

**RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network):**

<https://ohl.rainn.org/online>

1 (800) 656-HOPE

**Assaulted Women's Helpline:** 1 (866) 863-0511

**Men's Services for Male Survivors:** 1 (866) 887-0015

## Appendix B: Consent Form

My signature on this sheet indicated that I agree to participate in a study by Sherrie-Lee R. Chiarot on the ways that victim-blaming is perpetuated and further, how victim-blaming has impacted people who have experienced sexual violence. It also indicates that I understand the following:

1. I am a volunteer and can withdraw from the study at any point prior to publication.
2. Because many of the questions will be of a personal and sensitive nature, there could be risk of psychological harm.
3. I will be asked questions of a personal nature, but I am under no obligation to answer questions that I am uncomfortable with.
4. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, or ask to have my data withdrawn.
5. I understand that the information I provide will be kept confidential. The only point in which my confidentiality will be broken is in instances of disclosure of either self-harm or harm towards others, or subpoena.
6. I understand that I have the right to use the pseudonym. If I choose to use my name, I forego the anonymity and confidentiality that a pseudonym offers. I understand that if I choose to use my actual name, I will be required to give written consent to this extent.
7. I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded and that no one except Sherrie-Lee Chiarot, Dr. Lori Chambers and Dr. Curtis Fogel (for the purpose of my thesis) will have access to the rape-recordings nor free-write documents, and that they will be stored for 5 years in a location accessible only by Sherrie-Lee R. Chiarot and Dr. Chambers and/or Dr. Fogel.
8. I understand that I will receive a copy of my transcript to review and edit (including deleting aspects) as I see fit.
9. I will receive a summary of the project, upon request, following the completion of the project.

I have received explanations about the nature of the study, its purpose, and procedures.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

I understand and consent to my interview being audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I understand that I can either choose to use a pseudonym or give Sherrie-Lee Chiarot permission to use my real name (or some version of it).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The pseudonym that I choose to use is: \_\_\_\_\_

OR

I give Sherrie-Lee Chiarot permission to use my name (or this version of it):

\_\_\_\_\_.

## **Appendix C: Interview Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Lived Experiences with Sexual Violence and Victim-Blaming

**Researcher Team:** Sherrie-Lee R. Chiarot (M.A. Student: Sociology and Women's Studies: Lakehead University, Thunder Bay), Dr. Curtis Fogel (Sociology: Lakehead University, Orillia), and Dr. Lori Chambers (Women's Studies: Lakehead University, Thunder Bay).

Current literature suggests that people who have experienced sexual violence are often blamed for their victimization. As a part of my thesis, I am researching the ways in which people experience victim-blaming and the impact that it has on them. This form provides all the information that we think you, as a participant, will need in order to make an informed decision. You should not sign this form unless you are sure that you understand everything on it.

### **A. PURPOSE:**

I am conducting interviews which will contribute to my thesis in order to gain insight on the lived experiences of people who have experienced sexual violence. In particular, I am interested in learning about the multitude of ways in which being blamed by others (police folk, family, society in general, etc.) has impacted your life.

### **B. PROCEDURES:**

My research is qualitative in nature. That is, my interviews seek to deal with more than just statistics related to sexual violence. I hope to analyse the descriptions that my participants provide of their live experiences. Following the interview, there will be a free-writing exercise, where you will be given as much time as needed to write down anything you might feel is more comfortable to express through writing than orally. The interviews will be primarily qualitative in nature, and follow an open ended flow. Each interview will take approximately one hour (with flexibility for additional time as needed). During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experience with sexual violence, including information on whether you reported your assault, possible feelings of shame/guilt/responsibility, and any of the ways in which you have experienced victim-blaming or felt burdened by rape myths. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, but your identity will remain anonymous. You will receive a copy of the transcript to review and make any changes or additions (including removing certain comments) that you would like before the data is analyzed. The results of your interview will be used in my (Sherrie-Lee R. Chiarot) thesis, as well as potential conference papers and scholarly publications in journals.

### **C. RISKS/BENEFITS:**

Although I don't anticipate that you will experience risks related to the research, because of the sensitive nature of the study, there is the potential for psychological impact (such as triggering).

In order to minimize this, I will be checking in with you throughout the interview with regards to their comfort in continuing. Prior to the start of the interview, you will be provided a document outlining counselling and support resources available both on campus at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, as well as in the community. In addition, I will follow up with you in the week following the interview to see whether there are any questions of concerns. Should you feel triggered at any point during or after the interview, you are free to not answer specific questions, or withdraw from the study.

While there are no direct benefits to you associated with participating in this interview, some people who have experienced trauma have stated that sharing their story is a form of empowerment. Further, your willingness to share your experiences will contribute to ongoing efforts to increase understanding about the way that rape culture and victim-blaming impacts the lives of people who have experienced sexual violence.

#### D. CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your confidentiality will be respected. The only point in which my confidentiality will be broken is in instances of disclosure of either self-harm or harm towards others, or due to subpoena. No information that identifies you will be made public or published unless you indicate otherwise. The audio recording(s) will be kept on a password protected computer and the transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's/project coordinator's office for 5 years. You will be given the option at the beginning of their interview to use a pseudonym. Those who wish to forego a pseudonym must provide written consent waiving their confidentiality.

#### E. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Please keep in mind that you are a volunteer and have the right to withdraw at any time. You are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. All information you provide will remain confidential and be securely stored for seven years upon completion. If you wish to receive a summary of the project following its completion, you may request that. You will be e-mailed (or otherwise provided) a copy of your transcribed interview for you to read over and have a chance to add, alter, or have any information removed.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form.

#### CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS:

If you have any questions about this thesis or interview, please feel free to contact me at [schiarot@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca) or 807 630 0700. If you have any further questions concerning this research project, please contact me or my advisors Dr. Curtis Fogel at (705) 330-4008 *ext.* 2646 or [cafogel@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:cafogel@lakeheadu.ca), or Dr. Lori Chambers at (807) 343-8218 *ext.* 8218 or [lchambe2@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:lchambe2@lakeheadu.ca). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics and Administrative Officer, Sue Wright at (807) 343-8283 or [swright@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:swright@lakeheadu.ca)

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

**My signature on this consent form means the following:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read the information on this form (or the information has been read to me) and I have had a chance to ask any questions about the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the study and have been told that I can change my mind and withdraw from the interview at any time prior to publication without penalty, and may choose not to answer (or upon review of my transcripts, add, alter or remove) answers.

\_\_\_\_\_ The risks and benefits of the study have been explained to me.

\_\_\_\_\_ The digital recording and transcripts of the interview(s) will be securely stored at Lakehead University for a period of 5 years.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand that I will receive a draft of the transcript to review and a final copy of the transcript and, at my request, a copy of the research findings.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand that I will remain anonymous in any publication or public presentation of the research findings unless I indicate otherwise.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand that I have the right to use the pseudonym. If I choose to use my name, I forego the anonymity and confidentiality that a pseudonym offers. I understand that if I choose to use my actual name, I will be required to give written consent to this extent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## **Appendix D: Interview Questions**

### **Introduction:**

1. Do you have a preferred pseudonym? (If you wish to use your own name, you may, but you will need to provide written consent for me to use your name that acknowledges your decision to do so).
2. What do you do? Are you a student? If so, what is your major?
3. Where were you born?
4. How would you describe your ethnicity?
5. How old are you?

### **General Discussion of Sexual Violence and Victim Blaming:**

1. How would you describe sexual violence in your own words?
2. Do you prefer to be referred to as “victim” or “survivor” or something else? Does how you choose to be referred to change ever?
3. Are you familiar with the concept of victim-blaming? If so, how would you define victim-blaming in your own words?
4. Do you think that people who have experienced sexual violence are ever made to feel as though their experiences are their fault? If so (or if not), can you say more about this?
5. Why do you think victim-blaming occurs?

### **Their Experience:**

1. I’m wondering if you could tell me as much (or as little) about your experience (or experiences) with sexual violence as you are comfortable with.
2. After your own experience of sexual assault, did you disclose to anyone that you had been assaulted?
  - a. How did those people respond?
  - b. How did that make you feel?
  - c. Did anyone that you disclosed to make you feel as though your assault was your fault? If so, can you describe this instance and how it made you feel?
3. Did you NOT tell specific people?
  - a. Why not?
4. Did you report your sexual assault? Why or why not?
  - a. How did the police/hospital folk respond to your report?
5. Have you gone to counseling? How was that experience?
6. Do the things that you see on social media or in the news ever make you feel like your experience was your fault?
7. Often sexual violence has an effect on a person’s sexuality. I’m wondering if this is true of your experience? If so, how did those around you react to this change?

8. Were there certain things that were done on any level (personal relationships, community resources, law enforcement, or otherwise), that you found helpful?
9. What are some (additional?) things that would have been helpful for people to have said to you in response to your disclosure?

**Before Leaving:**

1. Are there any other important aspects of your experience(s) that we haven't already talked about that you're willing to share?
2. What is something that you can do to be kind to yourself today?

## Appendix E: Recruitment Poster

### PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study regarding their lived experiences with sexual violence and victim-blaming.



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#### Lived Experiences with Sexual Violence and Victim-Blaming

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As a participant in this study, you would be asked to meet for an individual interview where you would describe your experiences with sexual violence and victim blaming. Your participation would involve an interview of approximately 1 hour, as well as a free-write exercise.

For more information on this study, or to volunteer, please contact Sherrie-Lee Chiarot, Graduate Student, Sociology and Women's Studies, at [schiarot@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca) or (807) 630-0700.

This study has received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Research Ethics Officer, Susan Wright ([swright@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:swright@lakeheadu.ca) or (807) 343-8283).

<a href="mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca">schiarot@lakeheadu.ca</a> (807) 630-0700
<a href="mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca">schiarot@lakeheadu.ca</a> (807) 630-0700
<a href="mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca">schiarot@lakeheadu.ca</a> (807) 630-0700
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<a href="mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca">schiarot@lakeheadu.ca</a> (807) 630-0700
<a href="mailto:schiarot@lakeheadu.ca">schiarot@lakeheadu.ca</a> (807) 630-0700

## Appendix F: Resource Document

Thank you for taking part in my research on sexual violence and victim-blaming. If at any point (during the interview or afterwards) you start to feel triggered or uncomfortable, please feel free to use the resources on this list. If you have any questions directly relating to the study, please feel free to contact me (807) 630-0700/schiarot@lakeheadu.ca).

### **Police: 911**

#### **Lakehead University:**

**Thunder Bay Security:** (807) 343-8911

**Student Affairs:** (807) 343-8522

**Student Health and Counselling Centre:** (807) 343-8361

**Gender Issues Centre:** (807) 343-8879, [gic@lusu.ca](mailto:gic@lusu.ca)

#### **Community:**

##### **Thunder Bay Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse Counselling and Crisis Centre:**

385 Mooney Street//Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5L5

Tel: (807) 345-0894

Toll Free: 1-866-311-5927

Email: [tbcounselling@tbsasa.org](mailto:tbcounselling@tbsasa.org)

##### **Thunder Bay Counselling:**

544 Winnipeg Avenue//Thunder Bay, ON, P7B 3S7

Tel: (807) 684-1880

Email: [community@tbaycounselling.com](mailto:community@tbaycounselling.com)

#### **Walk In:**

12:00 pm – 8:00 pm (last session begins at 6:30pm) at the following locations:

-1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month at Thunder Bay Counselling Centre - 544 Winnipeg Avenue

-2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of every month at Children's Centre Thunder Bay - 283 Lisgar Street

##### **Thunder Bay and Area Victim Services:**

1200 Balmoral Street//Thunder Bay, ON, P7B 5Z5

(807) 684-1051

[tbavs@tbaytel.net](mailto:tbavs@tbaytel.net)

[www.victimservicesontario.ca](http://www.victimservicesontario.ca)

##### **Good2Talk (Student Helpline):**

1 (866) 925-5454

[www.good2talk.ca](http://www.good2talk.ca)

#### **Other:**

##### **RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network):**

<https://ohl.rainn.org/online>

1 (800) 656-HOPE

**Assaulted Women's Helpline:** 1 (866) 863-0511

**Men's Services for Male Survivors:** 1 (866) 887-0015

## Appendix G: SlutWalk Winnipeg 2012 Speech

### **There is No Such Thing as ‘Implied Consent’** SlutWalk, Winnipeg, MB: Speech. October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

1 in 3 females, and 1 in 6 males, experience sexual assault before the age of 18. 78% of the time, the perpetrator is somebody who the victim knows and trusts. Both of these statistics hold true for the first time I was sexually assaulted. Five years ago, I might have used these statistics to define my entire life. Not today. I am more than a statistic. I am more than sexually assaulted. My name is Sherrie-Lee Chiarot; I am a sister, a daughter, and a granddaughter. I am a student, a classmate, a woman of faith, a friend, and an employee. I am everything that I choose to be. And I'm here to tell you that I never chose to be sexually assaulted.

Our families were friends. He was “seeing” a friend of mine, and she wanted me to meet the new guy in her life. He turned out to be a charmer, and knew exactly what to say. I fell for him. Soon after he and I met, my friend moved on to another relationship. He told me every single thing that I could possibly want to hear. One summer, when I was 14, I was back in Ontario. I went to see him at his house. He raped me. Before, and during, I said: “no sex”. He didn't care. He did not care that I said I didn't want it, and he did not care that I trusted him, and he did not care that I would be hurt. I was hurt, emotionally just as much as physically. I trusted him. And I thought I loved him. But at that point, I made myself believe that because I liked him, and because according to him my “body language said I wanted it”, that I wasn't raped. He would never do that to me. It was my fault that this happened. I held on to that for five years.

I continued speaking to him for several years after. I questioned him about it a few times, and he always said that he thought I was okay with it because of my body language. He thought I would be okay with it because I had feelings for him. This caused several issues in our friendship and eventually, after ending up in a Crisis Stabilization Unit, my parents contacted him and told him to leave me alone. When I got out, I told him to stop contacting me, too. Even at this point, although I knew I was raped, I would never admit it. Because that would mean that I now have baggage. And it would mean that I was used. I was in denial.

It wasn't until age 19 that I accepted that I was raped. I always knew it was a part of my story, but I never sat with “being raped”; I wanted that thought out of my mind immediately. I was able to say that I was raped to friends and family, but I never truly admitted it to myself. I remember when it hit me; I was reading a book for school called *The Shack*. A handful of pages into the text, around the first mention of Mac's “great sadness”, I became acutely aware that I wasn't “taken advantage of”, and it wasn't “misread signals”... I was raped. It took me two years to be able to finish the book. Interestingly enough, author William P. Young was sexually assaulted himself.

In January of 2010, the person who assaulted me contacted me on FaceBook. The message said “long time no see”. After a few hours, I replied to him. I hoped he would apologize for hurting me. Far from repentant, he replied telling me that he contacted me because he had “stumbled on my profile and had nothing better to do”. I was being harassed. I believed that because of our past, I could take SOME form of legal action against him; harassment, or a restraining order. His messages continued over the next three days; “is ignoring me any way to treat your long lost love?”, and “You still bitter about a simple misunderstanding?” That’s what he called his sexually assaulting me. A simple misunderstanding. The next day I received another message, saying that he was “sorry to bother me” and “just hoping things are going well”. He told me to “take care of myself”. That day, I went to the law courts to inquire about legal measures. A counselor talked to me about what was going on, and said that because there was no physical threat, she didn’t think I would have much luck with a restraining order. Because there was no physical threat. This sickened me; I don’t know how much more pain I could physically go through than being sexually assaulted at age 14. Further, his words were just as manipulative and hurtful as his actions. She told me that I could call the police, and they would be able to issue him a verbal warning. The best thing that she did for me, was direct me to the Laurel Centre; a place that has since played a vital role in my healing.

The police, on the other hand... came to me and after I told them what had happened, they questioned me about how private my profile settings were. I felt like they were telling me that if I didn’t have a FaceBook, I wouldn’t have been contacted. I felt like they were placing on me, an expectation to live the rest of my life possessed by a fear of this rapist coming back into my life. I felt blamed. They said that because he had said “sorry to bother you”, it was an indication that he had recognized that his presence in my life wasn’t wanted, and that if he was ever to contact me again, I now had grounds to charge him with harassment. This was painful to hear; the only way I can take any legal action against this rapist, is if he contacts me again. They then told me that because I didn’t know his contact information, they couldn’t “guarantee anything” in terms of getting ahold of him, but that they would look into it when they got to their office, and give me a call. I called them for a few days straight, asking if they had gotten ahold of him. They always told me that they hadn’t, but they were working on it. The police told me that once they got ahold of him, they would let me know. It’s two and a half years later... I’m still waiting for that phone call.

In the years after being sexually assaulted, I had a need for male attention. I didn’t care who it came from. And because I didn’t know how to handle what happened to me, I found it difficult to form meaningful relationships face-to-face. So, I took to the internet, and joined several websites. I attracted every single type of guy; but the ones who might have had good intentions, I pushed away. They wanted to take time, and get to know me, and not rush into anything. But I needed to rush into everything, or else I wouldn’t feel the love that I was looking for. I trusted

all the wrong people. I couldn't trust my counselor throughout high school enough to tell her what had happened, nor my family, but I would trust male after male after male. Forming friendships is difficult, but forming intimate relationships is even harder. I have always loved love, but learning to love people was another matter. Having been sexually assaulted twisted my belief of what love is. In my search for love, I was hurt over and over again; emotionally, physically, sexually, mentally, and spiritually. But I wanted love, and for several years, I didn't care what that meant in the long run.

I have come a long ways. Today, I sometimes laugh when I sign a card "love Sherrie", because for me, that is a victory. After every e-mail to my best friend, I sign off with a heart; I love her unconditionally, and it has absolutely nothing to do with sexuality. Every time I say "love you" with ease; to my parents, or my grandparents, or a friend, I am relearning that love is so much more than what sexuality taps into. Love is unconditional, and friendly, and warm. Love is patience, and forgiveness. Love is everything that the males I used to seek out were not, and everything that the people I now surround myself with exude from their souls.

The characteristics of love that I've just described, I've also had to work on finding in me, for myself. I've had to forgive myself, and learn to love myself unconditionally. I've had to learn patience, and I've had to learn that I am more than an object of a persons sexual desire. I have had to learn that I have to be a loving person, and love myself, before I can find that love in somebody else. I've had to learn that this was never my fault.

Perhaps the hardest part of my journey has been coming to understand that this was never my fault. None of it. This realization has come after a couple of years at the Laurel Centre, and living in community. It comes after a trip to Africa where I saw people who were going through pain, radiate more joy and faith than I've ever known. It comes from seeing my family stick together through hell and back. Nobody asks for anything traumatic to happen to them. And I'm no exception.

I've always believed that everything happens for a reason. And figuring out the reason for being sexually assaulted was never easy. But it was also never intentional. I have a blog that I regularly write in; about forgiveness, and faith, and learning to love again. I have come to realize that this is what I'm meant to do. I am Sherrie-Lee Chiarot, and I am not a victim. I am a survivor, and I believe that I am meant to let the world know a simple fact: there is NO such thing as "implied consent".

This is my SlutWalk. But it's also yours. I stand here as Sherrie-Lee Chiarot but I represent all of the stories that took far too long to be told, and have yet to be told; stories of people who are suffering every single day because they are carrying a burden that isn't even theirs to carry, stories of people who are scared of revictimization and being blamed, and shamed. To those



people: I am so sorry that you feel like it was your fault. But if I can tell you one thing that is as true as the fact that I am standing here and speaking to you right now, and if you can walk away with one thing I say, it is that this was never your fault. My hope, and my wish, and maybe even my prayer, is that you walk away from today knowing that you are worthy; of love, of safety, of empowerment, of respect, and a voice... but also of knowing that this was never your fault.

## Appendix H: Take Back The Night 2015 Speech

Communities of Healing (Take Back The Night: 2014)

It seems important that I use this platform I've been given to be honest. And the truth is that I almost didn't do this speech. The truth is that I have spent the last few weeks feeling like I have been asking too many questions and dealing with too many triggers in the past two months to stand up here and share a message with the goal of educating and empowering. But then Emma Watson's words came to me: "If not me, who? If not now, when?" It has occurred to me that I will always ask questions, and I will always experience triggers. It has occurred to me that to not talk about it, and to hide, feels like giving up. So I'm here not because my journey to healing is done (because it never will be), nor because I have any answers. I'm here because here, with the rest of you, is the safest place to be. I'm here because "here" means being surrounded by people who I might not know perfectly, or at all, but who have the same goal (or are interested in exploring the goal) of ending rape culture. I'm here because I hope that together, we can effect change locally and globally.

I was born in this city. When I was 13 years old I moved to Manitoba. The summer that I was 14, I came back to Thunder Bay. I went to visit someone who I thought was a really good friend, maybe even a boyfriend. I told him "no sex" before and during, and he didn't care. I trusted him. When I was 14 years old, I may have even claimed that I loved him. I made myself believe that because I liked him, and because he later stated that my "body language said that I wanted it", that I wasn't raped. I held onto that for years. I spoke to him for years after, and any time I questioned him, I was told he thought that it was okay. Eventually, I found myself in a Crisis Stabilization Unit, which is when my parents told him to leave me alone. When I got out, I sent him a message myself telling him to leave me alone. At this point, though, even though I may have started to recognize that I was raped, I would never admit it. Because that would mean that I have baggage. And it would mean that I was used.

It was when I was 19, doing my Undergraduate degree in Winnipeg, reading a book called "The Shack", that the reality of my experience came over me like a tidal wave. A handful of pages into the text, around the first mention of Mac's "great sadness", I became acutely aware that it wasn't "misread signals"... I was raped. It took me two years to be able to finish the book. Interestingly enough, author William P. Young was sexually assaulted himself.

In January of 2010, the person who had raped me contacted me on FaceBook under a fake name. His message to me said "long time no see". Hoping that he would apologize, I e-mailed him back. Far from apologetic, he replied that he had "stumbled on my profile and had nothing better to do". His messages continued (even though I didn't reply) over the next three days. "Is ignoring me any way to treat your long lost love?", and "You still bitter about a simple misunderstanding?" That's what he called it; a simple misunderstanding. The next day I received another message, saying that he was "sorry to bother me" and "just hoping things are going well". He told me to "take care of myself".

That day, I went to the Law Courts building to inquire about legal measures. There, I was told that because there was no "physical threat", she didn't think I would have a chance with a

restraining order. Because there was no physical threat. Regardless of the fact that at 14 years old, I was sexually assaulted, and had not been contacted on social media by my rapist, there was no physical threat. There wasn't even a consideration of the emotional, spiritual, nor mental aspects of the situation. She told me that I could call the police, and they would be able to issue him a verbal warning. The best thing that she did for me, was direct me to a treatment facility called the Laurel Centre.

The police, on the other hand, questioned me about my privacy settings. I felt like they were placing on me, an expectation to live the rest of my life possessed by a fear of this rapist coming back into my life. I felt blamed. They said that because he had said "sorry to bother you", it was an indication that he had recognized that his presence in my life wasn't wanted, and that if he was ever to contact me again, I now had grounds to charge him with harassment. This was painful to hear; the only way I can take any legal action against this rapist, is if he contacts me again. They then told me that because I didn't know his contact information, they couldn't "guarantee anything" in terms of getting ahold of him, but that they would look into it when they got to their office, and give me a call. I called them for a few days straight, and was simply relayed that they were working on it. The police told me that once they got ahold of him, they would let me know. It's four years later... I'm still waiting for that phone call.

Being in Thunder Bay has been more difficult than I expected. Regularly, I find myself acutely aware of the possibility of the person who raped me nine years ago being in the same grocery store as me. Some days, I see the books on my shelf that have the word "rape" in the title and my chest starts to get tight. There are days that I struggle to read an article or do an assignment because the words on the page are just blurs. There are mornings where I wake up from a nightmare, and the reality of having to leave my house takes conscious effort.

I spent several years equating love to sex. I often think back to the things that I did trying to feel loved, and the hurt that I experienced through that process. I regularly think back to how desperate I was for another person's love, when the love that I really needed was from myself. My definition of "love" has changed greatly. Today, I say "love you" to my best friend, and it has nothing to do with sexuality. It has everything to do with the fact that I know that she knows me and my brokenness and that she still cares. She still texts me back when I send her a message at 2am asking if she is awake because I had a nightmare and just want to know that somewhere out there, I have a friend, even though she works in the morning. That's love.

Perhaps the hardest part of my journey has been coming to understand that this was never my fault. This realization has come because of the various communities that I find myself in. It comes after several years at the Laurel Centre and being with people who said "I understand" and knowing that those words weren't merely a pleasantry. It comes after having a family that reminds me of the importance of laughter. It comes after a panic attack during a church event where people that I didn't even know came to pray beside me. It comes after nights of listening to Thrice and hearing a lyric of "Stand and Feel Your Worth" loud and clear and believing those words to be true, and reading William James and recognizing that questions and uncertainty is okay. It comes after having a supervisor and mentor during my undergraduate degree who introduced me to feminism. It comes after being involved in SlutWalk in Winnipeg, and being surrounded by a group of people who supported me while for the first time, I tried to understand

the complexities of victim-blaming and slut-shaming. It comes after living in Zimbabwe for six months, where I saw people who were going through so much pain, radiate more joy and faith than I've ever known. It comes after taking courses here at Lakehead, as a Graduate student in Sociology and Women's Studies, with peers and professors who regularly sit with the pain that exists in the world, yet they remain hopeful about our power to effect change.

Emily May is quoted as saying, "It's easy to forget that change starts with anger, and that history has always been made by badassess." When I spoke at an event in Winnipeg in 2012, I had the goal of reminding survivors of trauma that it wasn't their fault. Today, I have that same goal. But my goal is also to ask everyone here to be a badass. Maybe you identify as a feminist, and maybe you don't. Maybe you're a survivor, in which case, I know that being here is hard and thank you for being so courageous. Maybe you are a family or friend of someone who has been victimized and you're here to support them. If you are, know that we appreciate your support, even if we can't find the words to say that directly. Maybe this is the first time you've encountered the ideas that are coming your way tonight and if so – welcome. I don't know your stories, but I know that you're here and by being here, I know enough about you to be glad that we're on the same team.

If not us, who? If not now, when?