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“I’ve Never Told Anyone”: A Qualitative Analysis of Interviews With College Women Who Experienced Sexual Assault and Remained Silent

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the decision made by some college women who are raped to *tell no one*. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 college women between the ages of 19-24 who had never shared their sexual assault with anyone prior to speaking to the researchers. This study provides a systematic investigation of the factors underlying women’s decisions to remain silent. The knowledge and understanding gained from these in-depth interviews offer insight for individuals and institutions to support these students and for the development of future efforts encouraging women survivors to tell someone.

Keywords

sexual assault, rape, college women, reporting, qualitative study

Introduction

Sexual assault is an ongoing problem on college campuses, not only in terms of the sheer number of assaults but also due to the lack of reporting and the reasons women give for not telling others. According to the *Campus Sexual Assault Study*, approximately 20%, or one in five college women, were sexually assaulted in college (Krebs

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et al., 2007, 2009). In the Krebs et al. (2007, 2009) study, sexual assault was broadly defined as unwanted sexual touching, oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex, or sexual penetration with a finger or object. Most of the women indicated they knew the man who assaulted them as an acquaintance, classmate, friend, or (ex)boyfriend (Krebs et al., 2007). More than half were sexually assaulted while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs (Krebs et al., 2009). Similar results were found in a study examining sexual assault and sexual misconduct on 27 college campuses; the researchers reported that 24% of college women experienced some type of sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2015).

When looking specifically at the incidence of rape, a study from the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that a quarter of college women will be victims of attempted rape or completed rape before they graduate (Sampson, 2002). When examining rates of completed rape experienced up to this point in their life, Koss et al. (1987) found that 15% of the nearly 3,200 college women surveyed in their national study reported they had been raped. Similarly, in a more recent study by Caron (2015), of more than 3,800 college women who participated, 13% or one in eight reported they had been raped.

Although the majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated against women, it is important to acknowledge that men and those identifying as transgender, genderqueer, and nonconforming have also experienced sexual assault. In their *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct*, Cantor et al. (2015) found rates of sexual assault experienced by college women and college students identifying as transgender, genderqueer, and nonconforming to be similar (12.6% and 12.7%, respectively) while rates for college men were lower (3.1%). The present study focused on college women's experiences.

Few Report Their Sexual Assault

Despite the rise of the #MeToo movement ("Me Too" Movement, 2018) and several decades of educational outreach campaigns by sexual assault organizations encouraging survivors to tell someone—for example, to call a hotline, seek out a counselor, find a supportive friend, or report their experience to the authorities—far too often the person tells no one. This leaves universities in a dilemma in terms of needing to address the problem of sexual assault on campus by providing services but not knowing which students are in need of such services.

The *Not Alone* report issued in 2014 reiterated the need for universities to protect students by offering supportive services for sexual assault survivors and preventing such violence (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). The report emphasized the need for universities to comply with Title IX, the Clery Act, and the Violence Against Women Act, which mandate that universities outline how they will support survivors and how they will address the penalties for perpetrators (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). However, for universities to provide the needed support, they need to know the extent of the problem.

Research has revealed that sexual assault is an underreported crime. Of the thousands of rapes that occur on college campuses across the United States, very few are

ever reported to the campus police or university officials. For example, Fisher et al. (2000) found that while approximately two-thirds of college women who are victims of rape tell someone—often a friend, but usually not a family member or college official—fewer than 5% of victims report their assault to police. Other studies have also found that the majority (80-94%) of women do not report the assault to university authorities (Cantor et al., 2015; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Spencer et al., 2017).

Women's hesitancy to report their assault to the police is well documented. According to the *Campus Sexual Assault Study* (Krebs et al., 2007), 87% of rape survivors did not report the crime to either campus police or local police. Furthermore, while sexual assaults by strangers are underreported, sexual assaults by persons known to the victims are virtually not reported (Koss, 2011). Based on surveys of college students, as well as intake observations made by staff at sexual assault service agencies, the majority of all rapes involve a male perpetrator known to the female victim (Fisher et al., 2000).

As a result of this underreporting, sexual assault continues to be a largely hidden phenomenon (Koss, 2011). Women raped by men they are dating, or whom they know, are referred to as "safe victims"—safe, that is, for the rapist (Koss, 2011). These women are ideal candidates for victimization because they are unlikely to report the rapes. They do not report it to the authorities, and nearly one-third of victims tell no one, not even their best friend (Fisher et al., 2000).

Why Women Do Not Report

Researchers have found a wide range of reasons why women do not report their assault. Many of these studies have focused specifically on college women and why survivors did not report their sexual assault to the police. For example, numerous studies have found that college women say they are not willing to report the assault because they are embarrassed about the details of the rape (e.g., "I was drunk") and blame themselves (Binder, 1981; Du Mont et al., 2003; Fisher et al., 2003; Krebs et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2007). Other women said they did not know how or where to report the assault (Bohmer & Parrot, 1993; Krebs et al., 2007).

Many survivors also noted that they expected others to react with disbelief, in the same way they have seen them react to previous stories of sexual assault (Fisher et al., 2000; Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Krebs et al., 2009; Sampson, 2002). Closely related to this reason for nonreporting is that some college women felt there was not enough proof to be believed (Benson et al., 1992; Fisher et al., 2000, 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2007). Other women felt the man involved had too much status for their story to be believed (Guerette & Caron, 2007).

Some women said the reason they did not report is that they feared that they would get in trouble, or the man who assaulted them would retaliate if they said anything (Bachman, 1998; Brubaker, 2009; Fisher et al., 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Sampson, 2002). Other college women said they did not report because they did not want others (i.e., family or friends) to find out what happened to them or be labeled a "victim" (Bachman, 1998; Binder, 1981; Guerette & Caron, 2007; Sampson, 2002).

These barriers to college women reporting their rape do not appear to have changed over time. A recent study examined why women do not report their sexual assault to campus authorities and found many of the same reasons (Spencer et al., 2017). In their study of 220 college women, Spencer et al. (2017) found that the most common reasons for not reporting included: "It was not a big enough deal," "I didn't know who to report to or that I could report," "It wasn't related to the university," "I was afraid," "Because I was drunk," "Too ashamed to report," "I didn't want to get him in trouble," and "Felt as if I would be blamed for putting myself in the situation."

Additional studies have examined the lack of reporting by women outside the college setting, including women in the military, public school teachers, and sexual assault survivors in an emergency room setting. One study of 205 servicewomen found that the majority (75%) of military women did not report their assault (Mengeling et al., 2014). The most common reasons for nonreporting by women in the military parallel those found in studies of college women, including embarrassment and not knowing how to report. Other common reasons included fear it would negatively impact their career, lack of confidentiality, not being believed, and self-blame. In a recent survey of K-12 female teachers on why they remain silent about their sexual assault, it was found that they did not think the incident was serious enough to report, they did not think anything would be done, and they feared negative workplace consequences or retaliation (Prothero, 2018). In a study of 958 women examined at a sexual assault clinic associated with an emergency room, researchers found that those who knew their assailant and who had no physical injuries were least likely to report their rape to the police (McGregor et al., 2000). In a similar study of 424 women presenting at a sexual assault clinic in an emergency room, not reporting the assault was related to not wanting the man who raped her to get in trouble, having a prior relationship with the man who assaulted her, and feeling that the police would blame her or be insensitive (Jones et al., 2009).

As research on sexual assault on college campuses reveals, not only are there many survivors but most are unwilling to report their sexual assault to the police or other campus officials or even to tell a friend. Their reasons for nonreporting range from fear of being blamed by others or not being believed to their own self-blame and lack of faith in a system that is supposed to assist victims of crimes. These perceived barriers to talking about sexual assault make it more difficult for universities to respond but also for women to seek support from others.

This lack of disclosure of interpersonal violence is a major source of concern when considering the mental health of the survivor. Several studies have examined the importance of disclosure to a victim's mental health, and it has been shown that a lack of support may impede her recovery from the trauma of sexual assault (Dworkin et al., 2017; Patricia et al., 1999). Other studies have examined the reactions of friends to such disclosures to understand how to help them respond more effectively (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Banyard et al., 2010; Dworkin et al., 2019; Orchowski et al., 2013).

The current study goes beyond examining why college women do not report the rape to the police or campus officials. It focused on the one-third of women who do not even tell a friend, family member, or counselor (Fisher et al., 2000). The purpose of

this study was to gain a greater understanding of the decision made by some college women who are raped to *tell no one*. These women are difficult to identify, and no previous studies have been published on this group of sexual assault survivors. Through in-depth interviews, this study investigated the factors underlying women's decisions to remain silent. Their silence persists despite current efforts by the #MeToo movement as well as decades of work by sexual assault organizations to destigmatize rape and encourage women to not only tell someone but also to report their assault to authorities. This study attempted to give a voice to women who feel they cannot speak.

Method

Participants

Announcements were made in classes, and email announcements were sent to several university discussion boards and conferences on campus inviting college women aged 18 years or older to participate in an interview if they had experienced a sexual assault more than a year ago and had never told anyone. The "more than a year ago" criterion was selected to ensure that enough time had passed for a woman to have had ample opportunity to tell someone but to have chosen to remain silent. The recruitment email indicated the study was "an investigation of why college women remain silent after being raped." The convenience sampling method was employed due to the sensitive nature of the study and due to the difficulty in identifying women to participate in the study.

A total of 17 women contacted the researchers to participate in the study over a 5-year period, from September 2014 to May 2019. Two were not interviewed once it was determined they had previously told someone about their assault. The final sample consisted of interviews with 15 college women between the ages of 19-24 who had never shared their sexual assault with anyone prior to speaking to the researchers. More than half ($n = 8$) were interviewed between September 2017 and May 2019, following the high publicity of the #MeToo movement. All identified as heterosexual, and all but three identified as White (Caucasian). Each woman described her sexual assault experience as rape involving forced vaginal penetration by a male perpetrator. All were enrolled at a public university in the Northeast (enrollment approximately 12,000 students) at the time of the interview. The assault occurred at least a year prior to the interview. Some of the women ($n = 3$) had transferred from another university where the sexual assault had taken place.

Interview Procedure

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the university. Demographic questions (i.e., current age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) and details about the assault (i.e., age at the time of the assault, relationship with the perpetrator, location of the assault, use of alcohol or other drugs, and if medical attention was sought) were followed by a series of open-ended

questions to understand her decision not to tell anyone (e.g., What influenced your decision not to tell anyone?, What kept you from telling anyone?, Were you aware of professionals you could have turned to?, Who did you consider telling?, and Do you regret not telling someone?). Per the Human Subjects guidelines, no identifying information was obtained about the perpetrators. The interview protocol is available from the researchers.

Interview Technique

College women who met the criteria and expressed interest in participating in the study were provided with a copy of the consent form before an interview was scheduled. Consent was implied when they agreed to arrange an interview after reviewing the consent form prior to the interview and was reviewed again with each participant before the start of the interview session. Both researchers are trained in interviewing and have extensive experience in notetaking; one is a licensed therapist and the other is a former police investigator. In all but three interviews, both researchers were present for the interview with the participant. Interviews took place face-to-face in a private office and lasted approximately 1.5 hr, during which time-extensive notes were taken, including direct quotes.

At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to review their responses for omissions or clarifications by reading back the notes taken on participants' responses to various questions. Participants were assured that any and all responses would be kept confidential. No names were included in the typed data report; a pseudonym was assigned to each interviewee. Any names of others or identifying information mentioned during the interview were deleted or changed. They were also given referral information to both campus and community resources if they wanted to speak to someone directly as a result of participating in the study.

Interview Analysis

Notes from each interview were transcribed without any identifying information, and the original handwritten notes were destroyed. Responses to interview questions were analyzed using established methods of qualitative inquiry including coding and categorizing processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both researchers read the first five interview transcripts. The researchers created initial coding categories or themes. These were then compared, differences discussed, and coding categories refined. With each subsequent interview transcript, additions of new codes were determined via consensus. No new themes emerged after approximately 12 interviews were completed, suggesting content saturation was achieved. Results are presented in the next section.

Results

Background Information

The age of the college women interviewed for this study ranged from 19-24 years. Prior to interviewing each woman about why she never told anyone, she was asked to

provide some background information about the sexual assault. All but one ($n = 14$) of the sexual assaults occurred while the women were in college, between the ages of 18-22. The one exception was an assault that took place when one of the women was 13 years old (Table 1).

Most of the women ($n = 14$) described the perpetrator as someone they knew prior to the assault, as an acquaintance ($n = 7$; e.g., friend of a friend, classmate, boyfriend's roommate, student supervisor), a friend ($n = 6$; e.g., through residence hall, athletics, student group, boyfriend's friend), or ex-boyfriend ($n = 1$). Only one stated the man who assaulted her was a "total stranger" (she met him that evening at a concert).

The location of the assault varied, with many ($n = 6$) stating that the assault took place in their apartment or residence hall when they were home alone, while others ($n = 6$) stated that the assault happened at his place (i.e., his apartment, fraternity house, or hotel room). Other locations included his car, outside a party, and at an off-campus apartment of their mutual friends where both were attending a party.

Most women ($n = 13$) interviewed said that alcohol or other drugs were involved at the time of the sexual assault. However, in those situations in which alcohol or other drugs were being used, only half ($n = 7$) believed this was an important factor in their assault. Specifically, some ($n = 3$) made a point of saying that they had too much to drink ("I remember being so drunk," "I was very drunk," and "I was wasted and passed out"), while others ($n = 3$) pointed out that it was the perpetrator who had too much to drink ("He was so drunk I'm not sure he knows what he did to me," "He was intoxicated," and "Just he'd been drinking"). In addition, one woman reported being drugged prior to the sexual assault.

In terms of the physical impact and seeking medical treatment after the assault, two women sought STI testing, and one also sought a pregnancy test. Four of the women took emergency contraception. Nine of the women did not seek medical attention. However, many of the women ($n = 9$) talked about the physical pain they experienced during the sexual assault ("It hurt a lot." "It was very painful." "I was crying and telling him he was hurting me." "It was excruciating. I was sore for days.").

The women were also asked about the emotional impact. The participants discussed a range of responses, with anger ($n = 5$) and feeling depressed ($n = 5$) being most frequently mentioned. They also described experiencing fear, anxiety, sleep disorders, and feeling suicidal. Some women talked about wanting to disappear or isolate themselves, while others described the impact it had on their sexual relationships. Several women ($n = 3$) said that a direct result of being sexually assaulted was that they now held negative views of all men. Some examples of quotes from women that highlight the emotional impact include:

I became extremely promiscuous. It was my way of controlling guys, rather than having them control me. (Angie)

I was fearful that somehow he would tell people he "hooked up" with me that night (not the truth of forcing himself on me) and I was ashamed. I think I became angry with myself—and felt I was in a corner. There is no way to report this. There is no way to tell

Table 1. Background Information About the Sexual Assault (N = 15).

Interviewee	Age at interview	Age at the time of assault	Relationship with perpetrator	Location of assault	Alcohol or other drugs	Physical impact: Sought medical treatment after
#1 Angie	22	21	Acquaintance: "He was a friend of my friends."	His bedroom at a fraternity house	Alcohol and Cocaine	STI test
#2 Bethany	19	13	Acquaintance: "He was the son of my dad's girlfriend."	His house	No	No
#3 Cassidy	20	18	Acquaintance: "He was a friend of my roommate."	Outside the party	Alcohol	Pregnancy test & STI test
#4 Darcy	22	19	Acquaintances: "I knew them as members of the fraternity."	A bedroom at their fraternity house	Alcohol "I remember being so drunk."	Took emergency contraception
#5 Emily	21	20	Friend: "He was a resident on my floor."	Her room in the residence hall	Alcohol	No
#6 Faith	21	18	Acquaintance: "He was my boyfriend's roommate."	His apartment	No: "Neither of us had been drinking."	No "I asked him to use a condom."
#7 Gina	20	19	Friend: "He was my date for the formal."	His place	Alcohol: "He was so drunk I'm not sure he knows what he did to me."	No
#8 Haley	21	19	Friend: "We are both student-athletes."	Off-campus apartment where the party took place	Alcohol: "I was sober. He was intoxicated."	No
#9 Isabelle	23	22	Friend: "We were in the same student group."	Her apartment	Alcohol and Marijuana	No
#10 Jennifer	21	18	Acquaintance: "I knew him from class."	Her room in the residence hall	Alcohol: "We both had been drinking quite a bit."	Took emergency contraception
#11 Kaitlyn	19	18	Friend: "He was my boyfriend's best friend."	Her room in the residence hall	Alcohol "I was very drunk."	No
#12 Lexi	24	19	Ex-boyfriend	Her apartment	Alcohol: "I was sober, just he'd been drinking."	Took emergency contraception
#13 Mikayla	21	18	Friend: "We dated a few times before."	His car: "He gave me a ride home from party."	Alcohol and Marijuana	No
#14 Nicole	24	19	Stranger: "He was a total stranger. We met that evening at a concert."	His hotel room	Alcohol: "He drugged me."	No
#15 Olivia	22	18	Acquaintance: "He was my student supervisor at my campus job."	Her room in the residence hall	Alcohol: "I was wasted and passed out."	Took emergency contraception

anyone that this happened without me being hurt. The thought of committing suicide crossed my mind early on. (Emily)

I dropped the class that I was in with the guy. I became more fearful and closed. I did not socialize as much and stayed in my room a lot more on weekends. I changed my appearance and did not feel like the free spirit and open person I had been. I changed a lot after that night. I felt I was not a good judge of people. (Jennifer)

I just became super depressed . . . and very anxious at work. I was not a happy person for a long time. I was not eating and I lost a lot of weight. I know my friends saw that, and my family, but they thought it was because I was having a hard time adjusting to college. I had a hard time warming up to guys after that and I have not had a sexual relationship since then. (Olivia)

Reasons for Not Telling Anyone That She Had Been Raped

The women were asked a series of open-ended questions to understand their decision not to tell anyone about the sexual assault. They were also asked if they considered telling anyone and to discuss why they never did. The top 10 reasons that emerged from the interviews with the 15 college women for why they have remained silent are discussed below, and direct quotations from the interview transcriptions are included to highlight the findings. Following the reasons for not telling is a section on whom they considered telling and why they did not.

All of the women identified more than one reason for not telling anyone about being raped. The number of reasons identified by each woman ranged from three to seven reasons. The results are presented from the most to least frequently identified reasons for not telling anyone, including (a) internal blame, shame, and guilt; (b) external blame and/or fear of humiliation; (c) wanting to pretend it never happened; (d) fear of losing control of the situation; (e) fear of not being believed; (f) I'm going to get in trouble; (g) I don't want the stigma, to avoid the label; (h) not wanting to get others in trouble; (i) fear of losing someone; and (j) fear of being hurt, safety (Table 2).

1. Internal blame, shame, and guilt. Nearly every woman ($n = 13$) spoke at length about how they blamed themselves for being assaulted. Many carried shame and guilt for their own behavior prior to the assault, including stating that they brought on the assault. They also discussed their guilt for not being able to stop him. Examples of how college women described this internal blame, shame, and guilt include:

I felt it was my fault and I asked for it by being flirtatious and wearing a short dress. (Angie)

I went along with it and did not do anything to try to stop him. It was my fault it happened. I let it happen. (Cassidy)

We ended up back at his place and I was planning to head home but did not have a ride and it was snowing. He said to just stay over—no big deal. We slept in his bed.

He forced me to have sex with him. I had consented to stay over. It was my doing. (Gina)

I should have been able to stop it. That is the bottom line. I didn't stop it, so therefore it had to be my fault. . . . I was the one who made the choice to go to the party, to drink, to stay over versus go home. (Haley)

I led him on. I allowed him to hold my hand at the BBQ and gave off the wrong message. (Isabelle)

I could not believe I put myself in this situation. I did it to myself. I knew better than to make myself an easy target for some guy. I never should have flirted or dressed the way I did. (Jennifer)

I was partially to blame for not stopping him and for inviting him to my room. (Kaitlyn)

I put myself at risk with this man I didn't even know. It was my fault for not being more careful. I blame myself for allowing this to happen to me. I was a stupid kid. (Nicole)

I brought it on myself. I knew I was in the wrong. I had flirted with him and thought he liked me. I fell for it all. Bad things, like being raped, can happen if you let it. (Olivia)

2. External blame and/or fear of humiliation. In addition to the internal struggle most of these women described as a reason to remain silent, nearly all women ($n = 13$) also described the external influence of others who would blame them. The fear of facing humiliation by others after the assault was described as more hurtful than the assault they experienced. Some sample quotes describing the decision to remain silent about the assault rather than face others' blame and humiliating remarks include:

I knew I would be blamed and it would be horrible. It would be my reputation, not his, that got hurt. It would be me who was blamed, not him. (Angie)

I think we still live in a time when the first response is to ask what she did to cause this to happen. (Bethany)

I think by staying silent I spared myself all the pain and humiliation that would have come from others. (Emily)

As a feminist I knew I should stand up for what happened, but I did not have the best group of friends—which seems ironic when I think back. I think we all thought we were better than others. I know I would be blamed and I couldn't bear that. (Isabelle)

I wish I could have told my mother, but I knew she would blame me. She had told me when I came to college that if anything like that ever happened to me it would be my fault. (Jennifer)

I would rather have it eat away at me than to have the world think I was a whore. (Lexi)

Because I did not want to be judged . . . and I knew I would be judged. I would be blamed for putting myself in such a terrible position. (Nicole)

I think the public humiliation would be even worse than the rape. (Olivia)

3. *Wanting to pretend it never happened.* Many women ($n = 8$) explained that the reason they never spoke about the assault was their belief that it would just go away. By remaining silent, she could pretend or forget it ever happened. By talking about it, she had to admit the assault really happened. Examples of this are revealed in the following quotes:

I have held it in for three years and do not want this to be who I am or what my college was about. It happened. I have tried to move on and just forget it ever happened. (Darcy)

If I just ignored it, it would not be real . . . it would just go away. I could pretend it never happened. It came down to not wanting to face what happened. I would have to admit I had been sexually assaulted if I talked about it. (Isabelle)

I wanted to ignore it and have everything be like before this whole thing happened. (Mikayla)

I just did not want to re-live this situation. I just wanted to forget it ever happened. (Nicole)

I just thought it best to go back to school and pretend it was all a dream—to just start over and learn from my mistake. (Olivia)

4. *Fear of losing control of the situation.* Many women ($n = 7$) expressed a strong belief that if they told anyone, they would lose control of the situation (e.g., forced to report, drop out of school, and end up in the newspaper). By remaining silent, they were in control of their own autonomy. The fear of losing control of the situation can be seen in the following sample quotes:

I never wanted to see this boy again. If I reported it I would be forced to have to see him again and I did not want that. (Bethany)

I was afraid to tell anyone since I knew I would be pressured to report. I wish I could have told my mom but she would have forced me to report it. (Cassidy)

I wanted to tell my supervisor but I could not. This would look bad for the office if this got out. I would have no way to control what happened next. (Emily)

In classes the teachers all say it is their policy to report you if you tell them. I thought if I told anyone I would be forced to report it to the police. (Jennifer)

It would have been made into a big deal that I would have no control of. I feared that.
(Lexi)

As student-athletes, we are both popular and it would end up on the news for sure.
(Mikayla)

5. Fear of not being believed. Nearly half of the women ($n = 7$) said their decision not to tell anyone was due to the fear of not being believed. Many understood it would be her word against his, and they did not have faith in family, friends, or authorities to support them. For example,

I knew the response I would get: “She’s crying rape” and “I don’t believe you.” It was the worst time in my life—I did not want to face the doubt. (Cassidy)

I kept thinking about how I had tried to be nice to him, and how I even asked him to use a condom. Seriously, who was I going to tell that to and have them believe I was assaulted.
(Faith)

I had consented to stay overnight, so who was going to believe me when I said this happened and I now was trying to claim I was raped. (Gina)

I felt there was no one who would believe me. I am an athlete. These things do not happen to us . . . or so people think. I recently saw a film called *The Hunting Ground*. It actually confirmed my belief that if I had reported it, I would not be believed. (Haley)

I knew no one would believe me if I tried to say, “Guess what, he raped me—but I was so drunk—it was all a blur.” (Olivia)

6. Fear of getting in trouble. Another common reason for not telling anyone about the sexual assault was the woman’s concern that she would face serious consequences. Despite being raped, many women ($n = 7$) feared telling someone would lead to getting in trouble themselves for things, such as underage drinking, losing their job, or retaliation from others who were friends with the perpetrator. Examples of how women talked about this fear of getting in trouble include:

I had way more alcohol than I should have and I was underage. I knew I would get in trouble for underage drinking first—that’s what this would become if I told anyone.
(Darcy)

I was the one who would get in trouble. In the end, I was the one who would pay the price by losing my job. I did something very wrong and I am paying the price for my lapse in judgment. (Emily)

I feared on some level there would be retaliation—that I would suffer the consequences if I spoke out and reported this or told anyone. (Haley)

I felt if I told my life would only get worse—I would be in so much trouble with so many people. (Jennifer)

I was worried he would fire me if I said anything, so I knew I could not say anything to anyone. (Olivia)

7. To avoid the stigma/label. One-third ($n = 5$) of women stated that the reason they never told anyone they had been sexually assaulted was because of the stigma they believed still existed around this topic. They wanted to avoid having people look at them differently, or they wanted to avoid having the spotlight shined on them. This was expressed in such quotes as:

I knew I could not say anything. I did not want to be “that girl.” (Angie)

The stigma. What would others think of me? (Bethany)

There is no way I was going to walk in there to tell someone. It would be like having a sign on my forehead, “I was raped,” and the looks I would get would be more than I could handle. (Darcy)

I needed to know I was not going to be labeled negatively. (Gina)

I didn’t want people to pity me—see me as “there’s the rape victim.” (Mikayla)

8. Not wanting to get others in trouble. Despite being sexually assaulted, some women ($n = 3$) stated that they remained silent about what had happened to them to protect others from being hurt. This can be seen in the following quotes from the interviews:

I knew my boyfriend’s roommate would be in big trouble when he found out what happened and I didn’t want anything else to happen. (Faith)

If I told, my teammates would have gotten in trouble too, since they were also at the party. I felt I was risking everyone on the team. I would have been telling on others who were at the party and drinking. (Haley)

I also did not want to see his best friend get in trouble with my boyfriend. (Kaitlyn)

9. Fear of losing someone. In addition to not wanting to have others get in trouble, some women ($n = 3$) described their fear of losing their boyfriend if he were to find out about the assault. The following quotes highlight this fear:

I was afraid of losing my boyfriend and hurting him when he found out since I worried he would think I cheated on him with his roommate rather than understand I was raped by him. (Faith)

I had fear my boyfriend would break up with me. I loved him. (Kaitlyn)

I was now dating a new guy that I really liked. I did not want to ruin any chances with my new boyfriend. (Lexi)

10. Fear of being hurt, safety. Finally, two women ($n = 2$) talked at length about their fear of being hurt and their personal safety if they were to tell anyone they had been sexually assaulted. This is demonstrated in these examples:

I had to see him at school and would try to avoid any eye contact. But he would just stare at me. I was scared of him. I transferred the next semester. (Cassidy)

I did not even tell my boyfriend. I feared he would seriously hurt me. (Faith)

Who She Considered Telling

In addition to asking the 15 college women their reasons why they never told anyone that they had been sexually assaulted, they were asked if they had ever considered telling someone and, if so, why they did not tell them. All but two ($n = 13$) shared that they would have told someone under the right circumstances.

More than half ($n = 8$) described that they had considered telling someone but stated that the other person's initial response kept them from saying anything. They needed the other person to pursue it or bring it up when they saw she was upset. Others said that they felt shut down by those they might have told. For example:

I went to the health center to get tested for STIs and the nurse actually made me feel like a bad person for having had sex without a condom. I feel she missed an opportunity to ask me why I had sex without a condom. She shut me down and just added to my belief not to tell anyone. (Angie)

My dad, if he had asked me why I seemed so upset on the ride home from his girlfriend's house. And later when I was 18 I might have told my first boyfriend. When we had sex for the first time I was crying and he asked why. I just could not go there. I could not tell him. He just dropped it. (Bethany)

I considered telling some of my sorority sisters but felt I would not be believed. We had recently had an educational program and the speaker talked about sexual assault and many of the girls rolled their eyes and talked about all those girls who falsely accuse guys. (Gina)

I tried to tell my roommate but she shut me down. She was a friend of his. I also wish I could have told my mother, but I knew she would blame me. (Jennifer)

Some of the women ($n = 7$) also said they would have told someone if they were sure they would not get in trouble or be forced to do something (e.g., for underage

drinking, fired from job, losing her scholarship, her boyfriend would leave her, and her mom would make her leave school). For example:

I wish I could have told my mom but she would have forced me to report it. (Cassidy)

I knew I would get in trouble for underage drinking first—that's what this would become if I told anyone. (Darcy)

I wanted to tell my supervisor but I could not . . . I would be fired. (Emily)

I considered telling my coach, since it really caused me to feel down. I did not know anyone else who had ever experienced something like this. But I knew I would face consequences. I would lose my scholarship. (Haley)

I wish I could have told my boyfriend but I was afraid of him getting mad at me, hating me, and breaking up with me. (Kaitlyn)

I considered telling my mom at one point. She would have been devastated and might have made me come home and quit college. (Mikayla)

Finally, while two-thirds of the women ($n = 10$) interviewed for this study said they regretted not being able to tell anyone due to the many reasons they described above, one-third of the women ($n = 5$) said they had no regrets about remaining silent. They attributed the sexual assault to something women have to accept in silence. As one woman said during her interview:

I have no regrets about keeping it a secret. I think about how what I have gone through is something so many other girls have experienced and we all just know it is something we have to face and own as something guys do. We live in a time where this is somehow considered normal and there is nothing we can do. If we say anything, we are to blame. So I'm glad I've never told anyone. (Gina)

As an aside, four of the college women said that after having shared their sexual assault in the interview, they were now considering telling someone else (e.g., a campus representative, their mother, a counselor).

Discussion

The interviews with these 15 college women offer insight into a difficult-to-reach group of sexual assault survivors—a group that has never been the focus of research. These women have told no one, making recruitment and participation in such a research study difficult to accomplish. Their interviews provide a unique perspective on the reasons why some women choose to remain silent and tell no one about being sexually assaulted. The findings point to the many reasons women gave for not telling anyone about the assault, their experiences as “safe victims,” their ability to excuse

men's behavior, and that many said they would have told someone if the circumstances were better. These are discussed below.

Many Reasons For Not Telling Anyone

The reasons for not telling anyone that emerged from the interviews support many of the previous research findings with other survivors who have told someone but just not reported their assault to authorities (e.g., police). The reasons described in this research parallel earlier findings of self-blame, fear that others will blame them, fear of not being believed or getting into trouble, not wanting the stigma associated with being a "rape victim," and the fear of losing someone or being hurt (Bachman, 1998; Binder, 1981; Brubaker 2009; Du Mont et al., 2003; Fisher et al., 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Krebs et al., 2009; Mengeling et al., 2014; Prothero, 2018; Sampson, 2002; Spencer et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2007).

Prominent in these findings is the extent of the victim's self-blame, shame, and guilt as well as the fear that others will blame or humiliate her once they find out about the sexual assault. This study revealed that nearly every woman interviewed cited these two reasons as the most prominent reasons why they were unwilling to tell anyone. In addition, two reasons for not telling anyone that were found in this study were not previously identified in earlier research on major reasons for not reporting. First, many women described wanting to pretend it never happened. By remaining silent, they felt they could forget it and just "move on." Staying silent to avoid thinking about the event is consistent with common reactions to trauma (Dworkin et al., 2017). And the second reason many women gave for not telling anyone was that they feared losing control of the situation; they did not want to worry about being forced to report, confront the perpetrator, or have others find out by seeing their story in the news.

Another important finding that became very clear from the interviews was that each woman had *many* reasons for not telling. They did not have just one major reason. It was evident they put a great amount of thought into whether or not to tell anyone; they weighed the consequences and chose to stay silent. The interviews with these women illustrate the complexity behind their decisions to remain silent.

Safe Victims

Related to earlier research by Koss (2011) in which she describes women who are assaulted by someone they know as "safe victims" because they are unlikely to report the rape, this study also found these women to be "safe victims" but for a variety of reasons. Not only did almost all of these women know their perpetrator as an acquaintance or friend, but in many cases, the participants described how they felt he knew she could not or would not tell anyone because she would be blamed, not believed, or find herself in trouble (e.g., he knew she was drunk and would not be believed; he knew she'd be in trouble for drinking with underage residents; he knew he could say she was a willing participant and her boyfriend would think she cheated on him; he drugged her; and he knew people saw her flirting with him). In addition, she was a "safe

victim” because there was no witnesses. In many cases, women interviewed in this study described how they felt the perpetrator took them where he knew they were alone (her room in the residence hall when her roommate was not home, or an apartment when no one was home) or he isolated her (he took her outside the party, he drove her to an isolated parking lot, and he invited her to his hotel room and got her friends to leave them alone long enough to assault her).

Excusing Men’s Behavior

Most of the women excused men’s behavior and instead blamed themselves for being sexually assaulted, suggesting this is just what men do, that men behave badly, and/or that men take advantage of women. Women still carry the responsibility. She blames herself, and others blame her. Instead of her seeing the sexual assault as “He did this to me,” too often she viewed it as “I let him do this to me.” Half the women said things like, “I allowed this to happen” or “I put myself in this situation,” and some women attributed the sexual assault specifically to what they were wearing, or because they were flirting with him or being too friendly to him. Furthermore, despite describing the emotional impact the sexual assault had on them, some women minimized what happened as a way of coping, for instance: “The assault was not that bad,” “At least he used a condom,” “It could have been worse,” and “I’m not dead.”

Most Said They Wanted to Tell Someone

Most of the women interviewed for this study said they would have told someone, but the initial response of others confirmed that it was better to remain silent. Many women talked about needing the other person who saw that they were upset or who recognized something was not right, to pursue it with them. For whatever reason—perhaps the other person’s own discomfort or the discomfort they perceived from her—the other person did not continue to ask questions and dropped the conversation. In addition, other women talked about missed opportunities and feeling shut down by comments or harsh judgments made by others related to the topic of sexual assault.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. As a qualitative study, the sample was small and limited to college women who were attending a public university in the Northeast. The findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other populations. The participants were still enrolled in college despite their experience with sexual assault, which may make their experience different from those who have dropped out as a result of their assault. The challenges of recruitment also led to limitations, and due to the nature of the study, the sample was limited to those who self-selected to participate. In addition, efforts to recruit participants spanned several years. All of the women interviewed were willing to speak to us about their assault and therefore may not fully represent the target group we sought to understand (those who have never spoken about their assault). Finally,

they were never asked directly as part of the interview why they had chosen to participate in our study (i.e., why, after never telling anyone, they chose to tell us), so we were unable to analyze as part of the study.

Conclusion

Despite decades of efforts by sexual assault prevention and intervention programs, and the more recent efforts by the #MeToo movement, the findings of this study reveal that the subtle notion continues to persist that a sexual assault is somehow the victim's fault and that she should not have gotten herself into that position in the first place. The findings also reveal that victims feel men are still not being held accountable. Colleges and universities must continue to work to change this. These findings suggest that when it comes to the prevention of sexual assault, there needs to be a greater emphasis on involving men. Institutions of higher education need to provide ways to educate young men about their roles and responsibilities to ensure safe and respectful behavior toward others. Numerous articles have addressed the importance of involving men in sexual assault prevention work (e.g., Carlson et al., 2015; Casey, 2010; Crooks et al., 2007; Funk, 2008; Katz et al., 2011).

For colleges and universities to provide the needed support services to sexual assault survivors, they need to know the extent of the problem and who needs the services. The findings of this study point to the need for continued efforts to educate on the realities of sexual assault. Ongoing myths about sexual assault lead to misunderstandings, which in turn hurt the survivors and reinforce stigma. Education on the realities of sexual assault can lead to the destigmatization of sexual assault and help survivors share their experience with sexual assault. The interviews suggest there is still a long way to go before these college women feel confident in their ability to speak out about their sexual assault.

These efforts to educate are necessary, since we know from these interviews and from other studies examining the impact of sexual assault (see meta-analysis by Dworkin et al., 2017), it can dramatically change the course of victims' lives. For example, experiencing sexual assault is associated with an increased risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and risk of suicide, and too often she struggles to form relationships. Researchers have shown that the effective treatment for PTSD is "the ability to share your trauma with others—to be able to talk about it with others." (Dworkin et al., 2017). For the sake of their mental health, it is important that colleges and universities help sexual assault survivors break their silence and talk freely. This will happen as they continue to educate others, break down stereotypes and myths, and help others understand sexual assault for what it is—an assault perpetrated by a person against another. The responsibility lies with the perpetrator and not the victim/survivor.

In addition, most of these college women said they would have told someone if they felt the person was receptive. This finding is important because it suggests sexual assault programming must move beyond prevention and teach intervention, specifically, the skills necessary for people to be more accepting and open to listening to

survivors. Previous studies have noted that the ability to provide emotional support is associated with increased coping (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Banyard et al., 2010; Dworkin et al., 2019; Orchowski et al., 2013). More recent studies have examined the effectiveness of such intervention programs in promoting the positive reactions to such disclosures (Edwards et al., 2020) as well as how best to implement such programs (Waterman et al., 2020). Future research is needed to assist in developing intervention programs.

This study highlights the ongoing internal self-blame, shame, and guilt many college women continue to hold onto following a sexual assault. According to Binder (1981, p. 438) “even as social factors change, the internal psychological barriers to report remain!” Decades later, it is clear the barriers to speaking out remain, despite social movements such as #MeToo, which is working to help survivors of sexual violence find the courage to speak up about being attacked.

Ultimately, our findings point to the need for colleges and universities to find ways to encourage women to speak about their experience and, in the process, find the needed support. It became clear from the interviews with these college women that, providing a place for them to speak freely was viewed as beneficial. As one woman said, by participating in the research study, a “door was opened.” Each woman was given an opportunity to talk freely to someone who was not going to judge her or report her. Many of the women ($n = 8$) stated at the end of the interview how helpful their participation in the study had been and that telling their story had been powerful and healing. For example:

By saying it out loud, it released the shame I have carried for so long . . . a shame that I never should have owned to begin with. (Haley)

By talking to you it has given me closure—speaking is like putting the period at the end of the sentence. (Lexi)

This study highlights the need for colleges and universities to recognize the important role they can play in opening the door for sexual assault victims to be able to talk to someone.

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