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## Reasons for and Experiences of Sexual Assault Nondisclosure in a Diverse Community Sample

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—After a sexual assault (SA), victims often disclose their SA to an informal support provider (SP) to receive social support; however, many survivors do not disclose or wait months or years to tell anyone. While research exists on disclosure, social reactions of informal SPs to disclosure, and how those reactions affect the victim both positively and negatively, little research exists on reasons for and impact of adult SA survivors' nondisclosure to informal social network members.

**Method**—This qualitative interview study examined 42 ethnically diverse women who had disclosed SA to an informal SP (e.g., friend, family, significant other). For this study, nondisclosure of SA mentioned by survivors was examined.

**Results**—Various reasons for not telling people in their lives and/or delaying doing so were uncovered including fear of negative social reactions, lack of perceived available support and fear of burdening others, family and social norms expectations, and anticipated problematic gendered responses by both men (e.g., violence) and women (e.g., overwhelmed) SPs.

**Conclusions**—Implications for future SA disclosure research and supporting survivors in their choice to selectively/not disclose are discussed.

### Keywords

nondisclosure; sexual assault; informal support providers; survivors

### Introduction

One-third to half of sexual assault (SA) survivors do not disclose or delay disclosing SA to informal support providers (SPs), such as family, friends, and significant others. Rates of nondisclosure among SA victims range from 19–48% (Ahrens, Rios-Mandel, Isas, & del Carmen Lopez, 2010; Carretta, Burgess, & DeMarco, 2016; Carson et al., 2019; Jacques-Tiura, Tkatch, Abbey, & Wegner, 2010; Ullman, 2011). Non-stereotypical SAs (e.g., those

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by known perpetrators, alcohol-involved) are less likely to be reported in community populations (Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010), and survivors who are younger and African American or Latina, compared with Caucasians, are less likely to disclose (Ahrens et al., 2010; Jacques-Tiura et al 2010; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

More research has been conducted on factors related to women's non-reporting to formal sources including police than to informal sources; this work shows they do not report because they did not identify the experience as rape, wanted to keep it private, did not want their friends and family to find out, feared not being believed, or felt ashamed (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006; Wood & Stichman, 2018). These reasons may also mirror reasons for not telling informal support sources. Women fear telling others given the stigma of SA (Miller, Canales, Amacker, Backstrom, & Gidycz, 2011) and concerns about negative social reactions to disclosure (Ullman, 2010). Of women who do disclose, most eventually disclose to informal SPs (see Dworkin, Brill, & Ullman, 2018). However, those individuals may not always know the best way to respond to disclosure (Kirkner, Lorenz, Ullman, & Mandala, in press). While informal SPs are appraised more positively than formal sources, they also engage in more negative social reactions such as blame or by acknowledging the SA without providing any support (Relyea & Ullman, 2015). Research also shows that survivors whose disclosures or attempted disclosures are met with no response or negative responses from others often cease disclosing (Ahrens, 2006), fearing disclosure will not be effective or that the assault was their fault or did not qualify as rape. In other work, Ahrens, et al (2010) identified distinct patterns of disclosure (nondisclosure, delayed disclosure, immediate one-time disclosure, continual disclosure), demonstrating that it is indeed a process that evolves over time for survivors that can start and stop, assuming survivors ever tell anyone in the first place. Nondisclosers were less likely to have initially considered the SA to be rape in addition to having more posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms than the other disclosure groups.

Self-blame is a common response of survivors to SA and is related to depression and PTSD (Frazier, 2003; Najdowski & Ullman, 2009) and may be a contributing factor to nondisclosure, as survivors may feel unworthy of receiving help and may self-isolate to avoid receiving negative social reactions that appear to perpetuate further self-blame (Carretta, Burgess, & DeMarco, 2016; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016). Recent qualitative research with survivors shows that self-blame is reported as a reason for nondisclosure (Carson et al., 2019) and may be more common in those disclosing for the first time (Carretta et al., 2016). Research has also documented cultural barriers for distinct race/ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Latinas) regarding talking about sexuality and/or SA (Ahrens et al., 2010; Tillman, Bryant-Davis, Smith, & Marks, 2010). Various cultural factors and pressures including racism and social norms against speaking about sexuality or SA in African American and Latina women may preclude survivors from disclosing. This may be due to pressures towards racial loyalty that can make it difficult for women of color to disclose SA by men of color given discrimination against men of color and norms proscribing talking about sexuality, all of which lead to silencing of SA survivors (Gomez & Gobin, 2019; Tillman et al., 2010). Prior research on these data showed that mental health help-seeking stigma was a barrier to African American women seeking therapy for SA (Lorenz & Ullman, in press).

Because of the disproportionate number of women impacted by SA, as well as rape myths, disclosure of sexual violence is inherently gendered with women more likely to disclose than men (Banyard et al., 2007). The disclosure of SA does not occur in a vacuum; however, most research fails to examine the impacts of disclosure or nondisclosure on people in relation to specific gender concerns emanating from the larger social context (see Ullman, 2011 for a review). Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, and Ward (2010) found gender differences in friends' responses to disclosure in a college sample. Women reported greater emotional distress in response to a friend's disclosure, greater positive responses and lesser-perceived confusion/ineffectiveness as compared to men. Gendered differences in responses to disclosure may also reflect men's greater adherence to rape myths than women, which probably results in differences in social reactions (see Suarez & Gadalla, 2010 for a review). Given that gender impacts disclosure, social reactions, rape myth adherence, and impact on disclosure recipients, this is likely to be the case for nondisclosure as well.

### Studies of Non-disclosers

Carretta et al. (2016) recently gathered data from an online convenience sample of 242 adult college women and found that 24% had never disclosed SA until participating in the study and were less likely to seek treatment for emotional harm than the 76% who had disclosed SA prior to study participation. Almost two-thirds of non-disclosing women believed the abuse was their fault versus 39.1% of women with prior disclosure. In another recent online study of undergraduate women, Carson et al. (2019) studied reasons for nondisclosure and associated symptoms of PTSD and depression. Of 221 participants with sexual victimization histories, 25% had not previously disclosed for four reasons: shame, minimization of experience, fear of consequences, and privacy. Dworkin and Allen's (2016) study found that 54 college SA survivors' perceptions of responsiveness were not associated with continued disclosure; however they were more likely to continue disclosing when they perceived more rape myth acceptance from responders and when the SA was more recent. These results illustrate survivors' persistence in attempting to get help, even after receiving negative responses.

The disclosure process model explains when disclosing a concealable stigma like SA may be positive or negative (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Concealable stigma is also part of what makes disclosing difficult for SA survivors; as similar to SA, "coming out" for sexual minorities is fraught with potential hazards including negative reactions from other people (Bry et al. 2017). Although each of these identities (i.e., SA victim; sexual minority person) has unique stressors, managing them may have similar features, in that both are concealable, there is a process of discovery and acknowledgment, and associated experiences of stigma (Corrigan et al., 2009). In a qualitative interview study of gender minority individuals, coming out was shown to have positive and negative effects on communication and social support and was related to both increases and decreases in experiences of stigma (Bry et al., 2017). In addition, there is a significant stigma associated with SA, as well as shame and self-blame, particularly for survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) and/or multiple sexual victimizations (see Kennedy & Prock, 2018 for a review). Miller et al. (2011) studied 144 college SA victims and found that stigma threat prospectively predicted sexual revictimization during a 4-month follow-up period. While overall posttraumatic growth

scores did not change, scores on the decreased possibilities for new growth subscale accounted for the relationship between stigma threat and survivors' revictimizations during the course of the study. Thus, similarly to stigma and its consequences, nondisclosure may influence various health and victimization outcomes in SA survivors. This research seeks to understand nondisclosure for individuals navigating the decision to disclose or not through a gendered analysis and structural understanding of social attitudes about SA/sex more broadly. Additionally, this study seeks to understand the ways in which gender intersects with the relationship of the discloser and the disclosure-recipient. The decision to disclose, or not disclose SA may result in gendered responses from the disclosure recipients and/or survivor self-blame due to gendered social norms about sexual violence. By acknowledging the inherently gendered beliefs (i.e., rape myths) about SA of individuals in society, we may be able to make sense out of nondisclosure, social reactions, and internalized beliefs about victimization.

### **Current Study**

The current study draws on in-depth, qualitative data from a community sample of adult SA survivors, some of whom also reported CSA. This paper is organized by identified themes, but two major research questions drove our analysis and examination of the codes. We addressed a critical gap in the literature by using survivors' in-depth interview data to explore the following research questions: 1) How do survivors explain their nondisclosure of SA? and 2) What are survivors' experiences of non-disclosure within different informal relationships?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study's sample included adult female SA survivors who disclosed their SA to an informal SP. Participants were recruited in the Chicago, Illinois metropolitan area in the United States. Survivors had previously participated in a 3-year longitudinal survey ( $N = 1,863$ ) regarding unwanted sexual experiences and the social reactions they received when disclosing these experiences (see Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2016, for study description). Interviews with survivors ( $n = 42$ ) took place over 2 years. Written informed consent was obtained for all interviews and the study was approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago IRB.

Survivors were an average of 41 years old ( $SD=11.8$ ; range: 20–59) and ethnically diverse: 62% African American, 17% White, 26% Hispanic (assessed separately from race), 12% Multi-racial, 2% American Indian, and 7% other/unknown. Approximately 60% of survivors had children. About 76% had attended or graduated from college; 29% were currently in school, and 29% were employed. While the study focused on unwanted SA experiences in adulthood, survivors in our sample experienced several types of unwanted sexual experiences.

## Procedures

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted by one of three trained interviewers on the research team and lasted an average of one hour (range: 30 minutes to 3 hours). Participants were compensated \$30USD for the interview portion of the study. After each interview, interviewers created “summary” documents, which included interesting points, questions raised, thoughts, and feelings emerging from the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked by other members of the research team.

## Measures

The interview protocol focused on the survivor’s disclosure of SA, social support provided/received, and appraisals of the survivor-SP relationship. Interview participants were asked to discuss whether they did not tell and why they did not tell anyone about SA after it occurred and any impacts of this decision on their lives and relationships. The present study focused on survivors’ perceptions of nondisclosure and delayed disclosure and the impacts on survivors and their relationships since the SA up to the present time.

## Data Coding and Analysis

Research team members summarized each interview transcript to identify patterns and themes, which were later discussed by the team in a process similar to that of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team conducted several rounds of interview coding and refinement to develop a codebook covering the content of individual interviews and themes. The codes were descriptive in nature and were used to summarize and describe the primary topic of the interview text (Saldana, 2012). We examined the context of the codes by reviewing transcripts and interviewer summaries when identifying relevant interview excerpts (i.e., quotes). We used Atlas.ti Version 7 qualitative analysis software for coding and analysis, identifying codes that made the most analytic sense of the data (termed “focused” coding; Charmaz, 2006) and using identified codes to pair with segments of the transcript. Specifically, we selected codes that best represented the interview text, coded the data separately, and compared interpretations of content with other team members to achieve consensus (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

The analysis took place in several stages after coding was completed. First, we conducted queries in Atlas.ti software to identify all quotes reflecting the SA nondisclosure code. We examined these quotes for unique patterns by relationship (family, friend, partner) and gender of disclosure recipient. Like thematic analysis, team members individually reviewed transcripts to identify quotes for each query in search of patterns and noteworthy findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, the team met several times to review identified themes and patterns, looking for similarities and contrasts within and between survivors related to our research questions.

## Results

Various reasons for not telling anyone or specific persons and/or delaying doing so were uncovered (See Table 1). They included fear of negative social reactions, including responses of violence to the survivor’s disclosure (e.g., as some men they told saw them as

targets for further violence). A lack of perceived available support and the associated fear of burdening others were also important reasons for nondisclosure. Circumstances limiting disclosures were also identified and revealed the complex continuum of disclosure in reality. In addition, anticipated problematic gendered responses of fear of violence by men and fear of overwhelming women told were noted as reasons for not telling, especially for family and partners. In this section, results are presented on survivors' reasons for and experiences of their nondisclosure of SA. Results are presented based on reasons for nondisclosure or selective disclosure that emerged in our analysis<sup>1</sup>.

### Overall Reasons for Nondisclosure

Several reasons for nondisclosure were identified including: fear of blame, disbelief, others not wanting to talk about it, and/or not caring.

**Fear of negative social reactions**—Nondisclosure often occurred where survivors feared being judged or viewed differently/stigmatized for their SA. One survivor said she did not talk about it because she perceived that those around her did not want to talk about it:

The first person I spoke to I no longer talk to her (friend). The other person I talked to about what happened when I ran away for a week, it's not like they wanted to talk about it. She (friend) knew about how promiscuous I was and about the guy who choked me. I didn't tell my boyfriend about any of that stuff. (24, AA)

One survivor did not want to disclose her SAs because she knew that others knew about her substance use and thought that was why she was raped, so would likely blame her:

I didn't really get any support, because the reason I got raped several times is because of my drug use. It's kind of embarrassing because they already know you got raped because you were out there, it's hard to go out there and find some support. I just toughed it out for myself and dealt with it. I just kept stuff to myself. (50, AA)

Another survivor feared being disbelieved, blamed, and that no one would care. Specifically, she felt her mother would blame her due to her substance use and that keeping the assault to herself was the only option:

I just couldn't tell people what actually was going on with me. I didn't know how they would feel, some of it I didn't think they would care or somebody would respond like my mom "Oh it was your fault". So, I just kept it to myself. (46, AA)

Another survivor avoided telling her daughters about her substance-related SA fearing their judgment:

At first, I thought it was my fault a lot because I was around somebody I thought I could trust, but I couldn't because he was drinking and it got out of hand, one thing lead to another, he wanted sex, I didn't. So sometimes I don't even talk about it, I block it out. I didn't really confide in my daughters at first...I was afraid of what

<sup>1</sup>We used abbreviations next to quotes to refer to participant demographics (Age, Race/Ethnicity): AA = African American, WH = White, N = Native American, H = Hispanic, Multi = Multi-Race, U = Unknown.

they might say. I didn't want them to know because they are always judging. (54, AA)

This speaks to the challenges women face with disclosing substance-involved SAs. Another survivor explained her nondisclosure decision to one sister and inability to tell other siblings who would have actually been there for her:

My sister would have blamed me because she saw stuff in black and white...my two older sisters would never ever blame me, they would have been there for me 100%, just like they have now, I mean all my brothers and sisters, but I didn't tell it. (59, AA)

Another survivor did not disclose because the offender was a trusted family friend and doctor, so she thought her parents would never believe her and internalized the blame:

I just didn't tell anyone about it for a long time. Not until the next assault happened. I just knew there was no way anyone would believe that this doctor who had been a family friend for all of these years would ever do this and so no one in my family knows about that. I still never told anybody about that. He was 4 years older than me and I always knew they would blame me, so I didn't tell them for the longest time. (49, WH)

The survivor also could not tell anyone due to her self-blame and her parents' calling her a slut and a whore and constantly blaming her for drinking and putting herself in "dangerous situations." Her narrative speaks to norms about who is credible and who is not (i.e., a male friend of the family is more trustworthy than survivor), but also illustrates difficulties women face when disclosing SA due to judgments of women's sexuality and substance use and her family's adherence to rape myths. Another survivor of repeated SAs did not tell her mother or boyfriend right away due to feared negative reactions, because it was not the first time she had been assaulted:

I didn't tell my mother right away. Once I eventually got home, I didn't tell my boyfriend right away cause I knew he was gonna say something about it like "oh well, I told you." After the third time it happened, I was like I'm not gonna tell her, cause it has happened twice. I really don't know what her reaction would have been, but I was just like I'm not gonna tell her, so I didn't tell her. (22, AA).

One survivor said her mother told her to never tell anyone about the abuse by her uncle, so she complied. Although the survivor listened to her mother's wishes, she wished she could have told her aunt, but is glad she did not disclose because of her family's likely negative reaction. Her quote illustrates others' influence on nondisclosure to avoid ramifications of telling in the family:

When she passed, she always said don't tell nobody what he done to you, and my aunt always saying I was fast, she knew. I think in the back of her mind, she knew that her husband wasn't right, so I end up not telling anybody, just kept it balled in. (44, AA)

This suggests nondisclosure may also be effective in some cases where it is simply not possible to talk about abuse or SA due to gendered and cultural norms around sex or where

challenging family dynamics led survivors to anticipate receiving negative social reactions. However, nondisclosure in some instances may make it easier for survivors to gain support without having to address their victimization directly. These quotes illustrate the close connection between survivors' own appraisals of self-blame with their assessments that they will be blamed by others due to their behavior and/or the context of the SA. In many cases, survivors chose to not disclose, because they were aware of the attitudes and beliefs held by their family and significant others that often reflected gendered beliefs about women's behaviors and sexuality. Additionally, many survivors chose not to disclose because they themselves held negative beliefs about substance use and "risky" behaviors and felt that they were at fault for their own victimization.

**Perceived lack of support and related fear of burdening others**—Survivors often shared challenges navigating family or interpersonal dynamics in addition to lack of support as reasons for nondisclosure. Family abuse was commonly hidden due to fear, threats, and concerns about the impact on the family of telling. Lack of perceived support can set the stage for some survivors' nondisclosure due to fear of being blamed, disbelieved, and even rejected, especially by family. Simply perceiving that support is not available and/or that the disclosure would be too taxing for others to handle may even be tantamount to a negative reaction for survivors who feel they have no one to turn to. One survivor felt her family and friends could not help due to not having the knowledge or tools to support her, so support would not come from them:

I don't think they were equipped to handle my situation. I couldn't really rely on a friend. (21, Multi, H)

Similarly, another survivor who could not tell her husband, felt that she did not have support from family and because she felt that she was already blaming herself and did not want that to be exacerbated by lack of support from her family:

I didn't feel supported and the same sort of situation with my sister, I didn't feel supported by her either, judgment of my family is why I didn't want to say anything in the first place, because I knew it would be faulted to me, and I definitely didn't want to feel that because I was already feeling a lot of that and didn't want to deal with that. (21, Multi, H)

Some survivors did not tell specific people because they didn't think the person could deal with it or simply perceived a lack of available support. One survivor could not tell friends as she was isolated due to violent boyfriends from her teens into her 30's. While she told her mother, she could not really get good support from her:

I have never had girlfriends or anyone I could confide in. My mother I told everything that happened to me but you know they're shocked and can't really help; they want to save you...I never had that comfort of having anyone to really tell, nobody really gives a damn. I was one of those abused women that was extremely isolated. (45, U, H)

Another survivor perceived a lack of support as she could not talk to friends and feared her parents would not understand how to be supportive:



She wasn't there for me, who would have been there for me then? I definitely think that it had a big impact on me and if you can't go to your friends, who can you go to? Because your parents don't understand. They never say anything. (46, U, H)

Some survivors felt that their disclosure would feel like a "burden" on the family and could not imagine placing that onto loved ones:

I never really discussed it with them about getting raped. I didn't want to put that burden on them. I'm very careful about discussing anything good or bad with my family. (50, AA)

Another survivor felt that a lack of perceived support led to her nondisclosure and inability to address her trauma due to social isolation:

I didn't have anybody to talk to. I was just living the lifestyle I was living and I was out on my own and had nobody to talk to about any of these things. (21, AA, H)

In terms of not talking about it now, this survivor also noted she did not want to "burden" others and that she did not have the chance to tell:

I don't really have the opportunity to and was afraid to because it's in the past and people always tell you that you have to let go of the past and move on, even said to me that I did it to myself in a sense. Because I was a teenager, I was old enough to know better than to run away from home. So, I kinda don't share these stories...I just recall people in my life telling me to not dwell on the past." (21, AA, H)

**Expectations to not disclose**—Some survivors of color described the proscribing of SA disclosure and help-seeking in the past. One mother did not tell her daughter:

I didn't tell her. I wouldn't tell her that. She doesn't even want to mention the sex word really. Only one that I really talk to, but I can't talk to her about certain things. (47, AA)

Women of color who were assaulted long ago, prior to increased awareness of the prevalence and impact of rape and CSA, alluded to norms that these issues were just not talked about and that it just was not done, "It's hard, you know, you just, you don't talk about it," (42, Multi). This survivor also reflected on how that has changed over time saying, "It's weird now that I talk about this. I haven't even told my sister," (42, Multi).

Another survivor shared similar feelings regarding the difference between disclosing now versus in the past. Although she knew she would be loved unconditionally by her family, she also worried that the cultural values at the time would not be respectful of her experiences and that would translate into negative social reactions:

At first, because I thought it was my fault, I didn't want to tell them about it. Because I thought I had put myself in that position where I had got hurt. I didn't think anybody would understand because of the era we were in, "Oh you're a bad girl." "You're an awful child, you embarrassed your family, you embarrassed your mom." Back in those days, embarrassing your mom or your family is like a curse. So, that was partly the issue and certain type of values, but all through everything, I

knew I was loved conditionally and I was wanted, but I still just didn't trust the times. (59, AA)

In further elaborating on the context and why it took years for her to tell, the survivor explained how she could not tell even though she needed to, as she would risk banishment from her family and community. This led the survivor to self-isolate as a protective response:

If somebody had just came to me and said, "it was not your fault, it's not your fault". If I had allowed somebody, but back in those days it was either, you was right or you was wrong at the church school and family. And you want to stay a part of that and to stay a part of that you kept your mouth shut about a lot of stuff. (59, AA)

Another survivor noted that talking about family-member perpetrated CSA was a taboo topic in her family, reflecting cultural taboos and stigma:

In my family, a lot of it was not discussed because it's a taboo. You don't talk about that your cousin got abused from your brother and how embarrassing it was for my friend to come over and then she can't play with me anymore...I just kept that a secret until I felt like I could deal with that. (44, U, H)

One survivor stopped talking about it to her cousin who told them to forgive a relative perpetrator. She explained how CSA was not spoken about in families in those days:

I asked her well why didn't you ask us? Cuz [of what it] was like the mid-70s. Then you didn't tell because we thought we were in trouble. It's not like today where you tell your child, if someone touches you, you tell me. It was not like that at all. That was never even discussed in our home. I don't know if my aunt knew but she went to her grave and I never said a word to her. (41, AA)

In this study, women of color in particular reflected on cultural and community norms regarding disclosure and nondisclosure. These quotes illuminate some of the compounded challenges survivors of color may face in disclosing sexual violence, especially when reflecting on the complex norms faced by past generations of survivors.

**Circumstantial factors limiting disclosures**—Survivors sometimes described partial disclosure whereby they would tell some information (or some information would be known due to witnesses to abuse) but not all information about their SA/CSA due to various circumstances. Survivors were also selective in who they told or refrained from telling and were careful to withhold certain assault-related details, especially to those they felt would perceive it to be their fault. In some cases, survivors spoke of letting others know something happened but not telling them specifics, or it was not stated aloud, but others knew abuse had occurred. Some survivors indicated involuntary disclosure due to circumstances beyond their control.

One survivor shared that her friend only knew because she was sitting next to the survivor when the SA occurred and doubted she would have told her friend otherwise:

I didn't tell nobody about being in high school when the guy grabbed me and left, just my best friend because she was right next to me. I wonder if I would have even told her. You know what I'm sayin'? (32, N, H)

Another survivor said her brother disclosed her SA to her mother without her consent:

We were raped when we were children and we never told her [mother] and one day my brother, I guess he was about 23, just got really angry at her and told her. But if had it been up to me, I would've never told her. (49, AA, H)

Another survivor feared her grandmother would see her as less if she told her but still received comfort and support from her despite never telling her what happened:

My grandma never like specifically brought it up, but I always felt supported by her in general. She was always very comforting so I don't feel like she judged me, I just didn't want her to see me as less. So I didn't talk to her about it. (21, Multi)

Another survivor did not tell others because it was partner violence-related and she was married at the time, but some people knew or there were vague disclosures without going into detail:

I actually don't have any specific memories of sitting down with someone and telling them exactly what happened, because I didn't tell anyone while it was happening in the marriages... yet I know a few people know about it because it's just come up very generally or vaguely. (27, WH)

Even survivors who told others often kept aspects of the SA secret to avoid being judged: I always told people the story of what happened, but it was always balled up inside, certain little secrets. you be ashamed to tell some of your friends, or have family members you can't talk to, you ain't got family members that do scare; if you tell them, they're going to say it's your fault, or that you've been fast, or you're crazy, so you end up keeping it balled up. (44, AA)

### **Nondisclosure in Survivors' Relationships**

**Nondisclosure in relationships with men**—For many survivors in the study, navigating disclosure with the men in their life was a particular challenge. Survivors shared difficulties disclosing their victimization in relationships with men close to them due to fear of violence, discomfort discussing sexual issues, and blame they felt from them due to rape myth acceptance of the men they did not disclose to. While some of these reasons are reflected in survivors' overall reasons for nondisclosure, the section below details how these reasons are salient due to gender of the disclosee, relationship of the disclosee, and their intersection. Some survivors said they could not tell fathers because of the stigma of discussing sex and them being male:

Another survivor feared her father blaming her due to the way she dressed:

My dad's protective, but I feel like he always gave me shit for the way I dress. I used to dress worse. I still don't have a good sense of fashion, but when I was younger it was really bad probably. So I wouldn't wanna tell my dad anything and then have him say something like those boring generic asshole things, like "oh

whoa, well, what were you wearing?” because I don’t want to hear that from my dad. I’d just rather not say anything than risk like hearing something like that. (20, WH, H)

For this survivor, not telling her father was the better, protective option for her, so she could avoid him blaming her for SA. Other survivors spoke about not being able to tell husbands due to guilt about SA or stigmatized factors like drinking, both of which they feared could lead to judgment/stigma:

There was no way I could have opened up to him [husband]. (21, Multi, H) Other instances when I was out drinking and came in contact with some people, I was raped by two guys. I never told my husband. (49, AA)

This survivor also talked about being sober in recent years, but about hiding stuff from her husband back when she was using. When the interviewer asked if she would ever tell him now, she said no because he indicated he did not want to know about her past SAs by other men:

I guess it was a statement that he made that he don’t really wanna know nothing about nothing....I guess a husband wants to think that I’m just all for him and that’s fine, I am now. But I wasn’t then, no. (49, AA)

This survivor felt she could not disclose her SA because of her husband’s jealous feelings regarding her “past SA experiences with other men.” This likely reflects a lack of understanding of the difference between rape and sex/infidelity. A more extreme example was a survivor who had told prior boyfriends about past abuse, who then responded to disclosure by being abusive towards her themselves. This led her to resolve not to tell men about her past SAs ever again:

I noticed before when I’ve spoken to previous boyfriends or guys that I was seriously dating. When I would tell them about my experiences of being raped or in an abusive relationship, it made me feel like they looked at me differently and felt that if they’d [other men] had done it, I can do it too in a sense. The last boyfriend I told about that took advantage of me in that same way. He became very controlling, very abusive. There was a time I didn’t want to have sex and he held my hand and hit me and had sex with me. I was like, wow, and made up my mind from that point on that I would never tell another guy about my experiences. (24, AA)

While this survivor did not talk about a specific romantic male relationship they didn’t disclose to, they had a blanket rule for themselves that they wouldn’t disclose to male romantic partners.

**Fear of men’s violence by and against perpetrators**—Several survivors’ fear of precipitating more violence led to not telling men who they feared might take revenge or kill the perpetrators, particularly in situations involving family and/or IPV. Similarly, some survivors feared disclosing their SA due to threats of violence by their perpetrators against loved ones or the survivor herself if she told anyone:

The most devastating part of it all was I was told I couldn’t tell anybody, especially my mom. They would kill my mom and my mom was all I had. (57, AA, H)

Another survivor's sister responded with violence when telling that her sister's boyfriend tried to assault her, which led to her being silenced and refusing to tell anyone else in the future:

Well, I told my sister that her boyfriend tried to rape me and she beat me up. I couldn't believe that! I was like man, by then I just said I ain't gonna tell nobody nothing else. I just keep all this stuff to myself. (sighs). (45, AA)

Another survivor spoke of traditional masculinity that precluded her from telling her father out of fearing him having to think about her (his daughter) in a sexual context, in addition to fearing his taking control in ways she did not want and not focusing on her well-being:

I have not told my father. There's a whole other layer of very traditionally masculine even just thinking about his daughter in a sexual context would be awful. So it adds a whole other layer (23, WH).

This same survivor shared her fear of retributive violence, expressing a fear that he may go out and "kill someone":

I'm worried he [father] will kill someone. He will go to the police or make this big deal and just not focus on, are you okay? (23, WH)

Other survivors also shared their fear of retributive violence of their loved ones, clearly considering which male family members to tell and not tell based on perceptions of whether they would react violently. Another survivor expressed fear of telling her dad, stating:

I didn't even tell my dad because I knew my dad would probably went out back in them days fathers had guns. Really, I'm just saying. It's just certain things you don't feel comfortable talking to other people about. (54, AA)

Another feared harmful response of family members towards offenders, that in effect take away control and ignore the survivors' needs. One survivor feared telling her brothers would lead them to hurt the offender and she wanted to protect them:

I didn't want to put my brothers in a position where they would hurt this guy or kill him, and I knew within myself that's what would have happened. (59, AA)

In some cases, survivors received support with their children being those they did not want to tell in the past. One survivor grew much closer to her son and felt supported generally even though not telling him out of fear that he might harm the perpetrator:

Interviewer: Did you tell him what happened? S: No, he would have probably went to try to find him, the man ask me where he be at...he would have tried to go find him and go hurt him or something. And I wouldn't want that on my conscience. (54, AA)

**Nondisclosure in relationships with women**—Some survivors shared challenges disclosing their victimization to close female relationships. Specifically, survivors discussed difficulties disclosing to maternal figures due to fear of disappointment, judgment based on traditional gender norms and fear of literally killing the disclosure recipient from shock. One survivor shared that she never felt comfortable telling her mom about her SA due to

generational differences in beliefs about sex and sexual violence. She felt her mom would not understand the nuances of consent and might rely on her own beliefs about the expectations of a “wife” and also said she had a similar dynamic with her sister-in-law:

I never told my mom. The reason why I probably didn't tell my mom is because if you married, the older generation thinks you're supposed to do it anyway. Like my sister-in-law when I talk about the stuff that happened to me, man she gets so “don't tell me! You don't have to talk to me about that.” I'm like, I just wanted to tell somebody. Ok and I know I can't tell her. (49, AA)

For this survivor, some women in the family were unsafe to tell due to their traditional beliefs or unspoken “rules” about what is appropriate to discuss or not.

One survivor told no one until years later and was afraid her mother would be upset if she had disclosed shortly after SA:

I was more afraid at my mom being upset, so I couldn't tell her. I didn't tell my mom until almost 13 years later. (30, AA)

Another survivor explained why she needed to keep the secret from her family to protect them, particularly her mother:

I never told my brothers or sisters, til today they don't know about it. My mother has gotten too old now. I wouldn't want to break her heart. His [the abuser's] wife has no idea because that would really destroy a family if I open up a can of worms. So I keep that to myself. I won't say, go to my grave and not tell my mother about that because that would hurt her too bad. I wouldn't want her last years to be torn up. (59, AA)

Overall, a lot of nondisclosure to women stemmed from a desire to protect mothers or maternal figures from the stress and discomfort of the trauma the survivor experienced.

## Discussion

This study was the first of an ethnically diverse community sample of survivors examining reasons and experiences of nondisclosure of SA. It is noteworthy that even in this sample of women with prior SA disclosures, many said they told no one at the time they were assaulted. This fits with research showing 2/3 of women delay telling often for months or years (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Some didn't tell certain people at all including up until the time of the interview and had specific reasons for not doing so. Nondisclosure was mostly due to fear of negative social reactions. That this was the most common reason for not telling is not surprising given the gendered values regarding sexual violence and adherence to rape myths broadly (see Grubb & Turner, 2012 for a review).

Perceived lack of support and the related fear of burdening others as reasons for nondisclosure of SA mirrors research in other contexts of concealable stigmatized identities (e.g. sexual/gender minority; Bry et al., 2017). Some survivors chose not to disclose because they did not believe they had the necessary support, and that lack of support would translate into more exacerbated self-blame and shame for burdening those unable to handle it.

Oftentimes, survivors already felt guilty and at fault for their SAs, so nondisclosure in those situations may have been protective. Some survivors also alluded to social isolation that led to nondisclosure and was related to a lack of perceived available support from their informal social networks.

Tarana Burke (2018), founder of the MeToo movement has pointed out the protective functions served by nondisclosure, in that not telling others may help some survivors maintain their strength and agency by retaining control over their story and over any harmful reactions they may receive from others. This is important in that our culture often expects people to talk about trauma and seek help from therapists, but this model may not work for all survivors or be realistic for those who face greater marginalization and/or stigmatized identities. Without validating and reporting on women of color's experiences of SA and treating their experiences as serious and worthy of reporting, response, and accountability in society, disclosure may be more problematic and even unrealistic for some of these survivors. This was somewhat present in our data on how social expectations influenced survivors' choices to not disclose, particularly for some survivors of color. These survivors appeared to worry about social expectations (more than individual ones) influencing social reactions, particularly African American survivors who mentioned these expectations.

Our findings regarding circumstances limiting disclosure (e.g., partial/selective/involuntary disclosure) also enhance and build on research and theory demonstrating the variation in the disclosure process (Ahrens et al., 2010; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Some survivors in our study mentioned some details to some informal supports but not others, said that they did not tell the "whole story", or never actually disclosed, but because someone witnessed their SA/abuse, informal supports knew about their experience. Future qualitative work on disclosure/nondisclosure, and other parts of that continuum, should investigate further survivors' reasons for partial disclosure (e.g., if this is protective as Burke, 2018 suggests) in addition to factors that could impact partial disclosure (e.g., quality of the relationship of disclosee).

We found differences in nondisclosure experiences based on gender and relationship to disclosee. These interviews of female SA survivors show that gendered aspects of nondisclosure and feared negative reactions from men, in particular, are experienced by survivors and adds to our understanding of not only why gender plays such a significant role, but also the familial and relationship contexts in which this occurs (e.g., fathers, brothers, romantic partners). This extends and is consistent with research showing that disclosure and responses from informal supports are gendered (Banyard et al., 2007; Banyard et al., 2010; Ullman, 2011) and calls for more research to examine this intersection of gender and relationship of disclosee.

Nondisclosure was particularly difficult in families, regardless of the nature of SA being disclosed, suggesting that this is an area where further research and intervention is needed. Survivors commonly talked about not disclosing/selective disclosing with their family, regardless of whether CSA or SA, perhaps because it is harder to keep secrets and there are unique dynamics and expectations of the family more generally (Alaggia, 2019). Even if survivors did disclose, in family relationships, both parents and children do not tell either their children or their parents respectively at the time of abuse but disclose later for different

reasons. In particular, disclosures of CSA and not telling family members were salient. This indicates that disclosing CSA differs from disclosing SA given distinct age and contexts, however, some of the dynamics of disclosure and nondisclosure are similar. Because perpetrators of CSA are often known by the family or are family members themselves, survivors often fear disclosing due to the threat of losing one's family and/or the family siding with the perpetrator.

We also found some evidence that some men may respond to disclosure as an opportunity to revictimize the survivor, particularly in partner violence situations, and women's awareness of and/or past experience with this can lead to nondisclosure. Specifically, nondisclosure may obviate other men from feeling no restraints against revictimizing a survivor who they may see as tainted or a legitimate target knowing her SA history. Both revictimization and stigmas associated with SA may impact nondisclosure or selective disclosure. In particular, survivors with more stigmatized identities (e.g., sex worker, minority race) and those victimized more than once may lead them to not want to disclose (Bry et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2011), especially if they had already disclosed an earlier incident and had a negative response. Multiple victimizations of some survivors also appeared to lead to nondisclosure, perhaps due to the stigma of survivors feeling something was wrong with them if assaulted repeatedly and/or fear people that would not believe them anymore. The stigma regarding multiple victimizations, "risky" behavior, and SA-related substance use reflect rape myths, which are particularly gendered and emanate from social attitudes of women's sexuality and blameworthiness (Miller et al., 2011). Future research should investigate how revictimization and multiple stigmatized SA-related behaviors and/or stigmatized identities intersect and relate to disclosure (and nondisclosure) decisions, and if these are mitigated by relationship to the disclosee. Nondisclosure may also be self-protective, given research showing that perpetrators may try to target previously victimized women they perceive to be more easily victimized (Relyea & Ullman, 2016), which may explain the revictimization of some women with CSA histories.

Some findings suggest that problematic forms of masculinity, sometimes called toxic masculinity (Kupers, 2005), may underlie gendered responses from various family disclosees, especially fathers, husbands, and brothers, who more often express anger at the disclosure and a desire to act with violent retribution against perpetrators. This form of masculinity is defined as specific aspects (e.g., misogyny, homophobia, violence) that foster domination of others and are, thus, socially destructive (Kupers, 2005). Despite the face validity of this interpretation, there are individual differences by gender, such that men are less likely to have had SA experience in their pasts or to anticipate being victimized, and perhaps, therefore, less able to relate to this issue or know how to respond with support as are women (Banyard et al., 2010). There are also individual differences in who survivors tell; for example, one survivor told some brothers but not another brother because she knew he would react violently against the perpetrator. While the gender of disclosees may not explain all disclosures and nondisclosures and some women, though very few, were also unsupportive, future research should seek to better understand the relationships of disclosure to broader discourses regarding gender and masculinity. Some survivors described not disclosing to protect patriarchal figures in the family, which reflected gendered beliefs regarding what certain women disclosees could "handle" with some survivors fearing



women disclosees might die of shock. While the intent was protection, some scholars have called this behavior “benevolent sexism” (e.g., sexist attitudes viewing women stereotypically and restricting their roles, but subjectively positive in feeling tone and tending to elicit prosocial behavior like helping and self-disclosure; Glick & Fiske, 1997). This construct is distinct from more violent/controlling responses characteristic of the more hostile form of toxic masculinity seen in the nondisclosures to men in survivors’ lives. Future research is needed on nondisclosure of SA in relationship to various gender-related motivations to better understand their nature and consequences for survivors).

### Limitations

This study was one of the first to conduct an in-depth analysis of how nondisclosure of SA affects survivors and their informal networks in a community sample. This study was limited by the retrospective design, with possible memory bias influencing accounts at the time of the interview. This study extends knowledge of the reasons for nondisclosure in a large qualitative sample of survivors valuable for achieving thematic saturation. Results suggest education is needed for survivors and their partners and family to understand survivors’ needs to disclose and receive support. Sexual health education and parental education on how to talk to their children about sex, in general, could help break down barriers to disclosure mentioned by survivors in this study about feeling unable to talk about anything related to sex with family members. Dismantling rape myth stereotypes through education could also decrease barriers to disclosure and help survivors feel more comfortable disclosing if they decide they want to. It also shows the need for interventions to educate families, communities and the public about how to respond in positive ways to SA disclosures (see Edwards & Ullman, 2018). Although there are increased efforts to prevent sexual violence on college campuses, these results and other related research points to the need to diversify target populations of prevention efforts by focusing on community members. Additionally, prevention efforts and community education should focus on addressing challenging familial dynamics in their interventions to have the most impact for survivors, while also paying close attention to race and cultural factors influencing SA nondisclosure in various relationships and contexts

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**Table 1.**

Themes Identified on Non-Disclosure of Sexual Assault.

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**Overall Reasons for Non-Disclosure**

- Fear of Negative Social Reactions
  - Perceived Lack of Support and Related Fear of Burdening Others
  - Societal Expectation to Not Disclose
  - Circumstantial Factors Limiting Disclosure
- 

**Non-Disclosure in Survivors' Relationships**

- Non-Disclosure in Relationships with Men
  - Fear of Male Retributive Violence
  - Non-Disclosure in Relationships with Women
- 

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