

**Sexual Assault Disclosure: Exploring the Disclosure Experiences of Women
Who Have Been Sexually Assaulted**

Holiday Bogaert

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Criminology

Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Science
University of Ottawa

© Holiday Bogaert, Ottawa, Canada, 2024

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation and recognition to my supervisor, Professor Eduardo Gonzalez Castillo, whose unwavering support and guidance was instrumental in the completion of this work. Despite joining me in my second year of studies, your invaluable advice and mentorship not only improved my writing skills but also deepened my understanding of my thesis topic. My heartfelt thanks also go to my examiners, Chris Bruckert and Maritza Felices-Luna, for their invaluable feedback and insights. Additionally, I am grateful to Professor Maritza Felices-Luna for her early guidance in helping me find the right supervisor for my thesis. A special mention also goes to Professor Wayne Hanniman for introducing me to the fascinating field of victimology during my undergraduate studies and for his enduring encouragement and assistance throughout this entire process. Your knowledge and generosity have enriched me, and I aspire to one day pay it forward.

I also would like to express my gratitude to the women whose memoirs I used for my study. Though I never got to **meet** any of you, your memoirs made my analysis possible.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family and closest friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this entire process. I want to give a special thanks to my mother for giving me the opportunity to attend university. Without her courage and determination, I would not have had the chance to come to Canada and pursue my education. I owe everything to her actions, which enabled me to become the person I am today. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to accomplish what many of the girls I grew up with could not.

Abstract

Sexual assault is severely underreported in today's society. Despite extensive research on sexual assault statistics and reporting rates, limited attention has been given to women's experiences of disclosure. Additionally, factors contributing to these experiences have not been highlighted. In response to this deficit, this thesis seeks to understand the experiences of women who disclose sexual assault to informal or formal support and the contexts surrounding disclosure. To do this, the following research question was answered: What ideologies and ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change in self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.?

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I: Literature Review	4
Section 1: Western Views of Sexual Assault.....	6
Section 2: To Disclose or Not to Disclose	15
Section 3: Experiences of Disclosure	22
Conclusion	31
Chapter II: Theoretical Framework	36
Section 1: Ideology	37
Section 2: Application of Theory.....	53
Chapter III: Methodological Approach.....	56
Section 1: Epistemological Approach.....	57
Section 2: Sampling	59
Section 3: Data Production	61
Section 4: Analysis	62
Section 5: Ethical Considerations	70
Section 6: Limitations of Research.....	72
Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis.....	75
Section 1: Findings	75
Section 2: Discussion	107
Conclusion	118
Next Steps	120
References.....	121

Introduction

Though sexual assault continues to be a crime of increasingly large proportions, there has been a lack of research focusing on the subjective experiences of sexual assault disclosure women experience. Sexual assault disclosure can be understood as telling someone about an experience or incident of sexual assault (Urfa et al., 2022). These disclosures can take place with anyone at any time in a varying degree of settings. Although researchers have focused on the ideas of positive versus negative experiences and have given recommendations on how to make all experiences when disclosing sexual assault good and supportive, little change has been made. As will be shown, this is due to the lack of attention given to the dynamic nature of sexual assault disclosure and the ideologies present within society. Understanding this, this thesis aimed to understand the experiences of women who disclose sexual assault to informal or formal support and the contexts around disclosure to gain a more wholesome understanding of sexual assault disclosure. The research question that oriented this thesis is: What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and forms of subjective and objective violence are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.? To answer these questions, qualitative research was conducted through the study of five memoirs. In completing this thesis, the following chapters were deployed.

The first chapter, the Literature Review, provides a brief history of sexual assault, outlining the changes in the criminal justice system that led to the crime of sexual assault. Following this, an explanation of the Western view of sexual assault will be explained, focusing primarily on rape myths and their functionality within Western society. This chapter will also articulate the current

sexual assault reporting practices, primarily concerning the different types of disclosures existing today and why women do or do not choose to disclose experiences of sexual assault. Furthermore, it will seek to understand how women within the current literature conceptualize instances of sexual assault. Lastly, this chapter will explain the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of each author used to grasp their arguments and reasoning fully.

The second chapter, Theoretical Framework, introduces the fundamental theories and concepts used to produce the research question and analyze the collected data. These theories include ideology, as theorized by Slavoj Žižek, Louis Althusser, and Robert Pfaller. Additionally, in connection with the theory of ideology, the concepts of gender, violence, and patriarchy will be explained. This chapter will first work to explain each theory and concept, along with the various theorists who have contributed to it. This will be done to give the reader a well-rounded understanding of the theory guiding this research. Following this, the reason for choosing each theorist will be highlighted, along with the theories' relevance to this topic. To end, this chapter will highlight how both theories and concepts work together.

Following the theoretical framework, the third chapter will introduce the Methodological Approach by which this thesis adhered to. This chapter will first highlight the epistemological approach adopted. Following this, an explanation of the sampling strategy and choice of data will be highlighted. This will include the rationale and questions followed in picking the material. Next, data production will be explained, followed by an analysis strategy. Additionally, the ethical considerations of this project will be explored. To end, the limitations of this research will be discussed.

The last chapter, Findings and Analysis, will start by highlighting the key findings from the analyzed data. In this way, as we will see, experiences of disclosure are highly influenced by

ideological constructions, such as gender norms and rape myths. Next, the relations between these themes and the theoretical framework will be explained and compared to the current literature. Lastly, the guiding research question of this project will be answered and distilled, ultimately drawing a conclusion to this thesis.

Chapter I: Literature Review

As illustrated by current literature, sexual assault¹ continues to be one of the most underreported crimes in today's legal climate, with only one in ten assaults reported (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). To further illustrate the severity of the underreporting of sexual assault, StatsCan found that though one in three women (32%) are sexually assaulted, about 83% of all sexual assaults are not reported to the police, as found within the 2014 General Social Survey (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Department of Justice Canada, 2019). To understand why this occurs, we must first examine the way sexual assault has been approached in Canada.

According to Somerville & Gall (2012), rape was once understood in the *Criminal Code* of Canada as a man having sexual intercourse with a woman (other than his wife) that did not consent (Somerville & Gall, 2012). This understanding was not only sexist in application to offenders and victims, but it excluded an extensive range of actions which sexually harm individuals. Moreover, this understanding was guided by myths and stereotypical beliefs about real victims. Due to these limits, the law was later amended in 1993, with the *Criminal Code* of Canada replacing the crimes of rape and indecent assault with three sexual assault offences: sexual assault, sexual assault with a weapon, and aggravated sexual assault, focusing more on the violent nature of the assault rather than the sexual one (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

In addition to this, feminist advocates were making their voices heard. Starting in the late 70s, feminist advocates publicly demanded changes to the laws surrounding sexual assault. This

¹ Sexual assault, as understood in the current legal context, is a term which refers to all incidents or attempted attacks of unwanted and non-consensual sexual aggression by an individual towards another; these include sexual attack, forced grabbing, fondling, verbal attacks, etc. (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Murphy-Oikonen & Egan, 2022). Section 271 further states that sexual assault offences cover a wide range of behaviour, including any physical application of force which is not consensual and is done in a sexual nature and circumstance (Murphy-Oikonen & Egan, 2022). Examples include slapping someone on the butt at a bar to raping (forcefully penetrating with an object or a physical aspect of your body) someone (Paul Lewandowski Professional Corporation, n.d).

outrage specifically targeted the narrow definition of rape and the countless defence mechanisms individuals who were accused and charged with sexual assault could use (Sheehy, 2012). Feminists were successful in their fight, with significant reform taking place between 1981 – 1983, 1985, and once again in 1992. Although they successfully gained reform, with the hopes of increasing women's willingness to disclose assault, not much has changed within the criminal justice system (Sampert, 2010). As highlighted by the above data and Sampert (2010), reporting rates and the rates of solved sexual assault cases remain increasingly low. Overall, these reforms have resulted in a broader understanding of sexual assault and the removal of several defence mechanisms those charged could use; one example is the severe intoxication defence (Sheehy, 2012).

These calls to action are further illustrated through the case of *Jane Doe v Metropolitan Toronto (Municipality) Commissioners of Police*. This case brought to light current policing practices and legislation that essentially gave individuals charged with sexual assault the opportunity to plead to extreme intoxication (Sheehy, 2012). Furthermore, women's personal records were widely disclosed to defence lawyers in rape trials during this time. Overall, reforms occurred due to the inequality in previous sexual assault laws. Moreover, this new legislation clarified that females and males could be victims of sexual assault while clearly outlining that spouses who sexually assault their partners could be charged.

After this overview of the history of sexual assault, in the following paragraphs, I will first highlight the Western view of sexual assault in current literature. As the literature has shown, rape myths are the most prevalent factor in determining how Western society sees sexual assault. For this reason, I will start by explaining rape myths coined by Burt, then list several key myths in today's broader institutions and society. Then, I will explain the function of rape myths and the most common accepters of rape myths. The second section will explain reasons for or against

disclosing or reporting according to the literature. I will illustrate the differences between disclosure and reporting, then highlight the critical themes for or against them. My third section will consider women's experiences disclosing their sexual assault to informal and formal systems/institutions according to the literature. Furthermore, to start each section, I will highlight the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings to which the authors of each section adhere.

Section 1: Western Views of Sexual Assault

The literature shows that the current Western view of sexual assault inherently conforms to what some authors call rape myths (Krahé, 2016). This term refers to “the prejudicial, stereotypical, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Burt, 1980; Edwards et al., 2011; Sampert, 2010) and can be largely understood as a “complex set of beliefs thought to support and perpetuate male sexual violence” (Payne et al., 1999). These myths function in various ways; these include responsabilizing women and restricting accurate sexual assault knowledge.

Starting with responsabilizing women, the literature highlights that rape myths work to shift the blame onto victims and, therefore, allow them to be dismissed and ignored (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). Responsibilizing victims helps society explain why victims deserve or instigate their fate (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Additionally, under responsabilization, the literature introduces the “just world hypothesis” (Burt, 1980) and within this hypothesis comes the idea that sexual assault cannot happen if it was not provoked, thereby reassuring individuals that if they follow the prototypical lifestyle expected of them, they will not be assaulted or harmed (Burt, 1980). Ultimately, responsabilizing women for their assaults gives society a reason to dismiss them as falling into an unusual situation. Condoning and believing rape myths further allows people to live in a world of ignorance, where they can ignore reality by placing fault on the victim (Burt, 1980). Regarding the restriction of knowledge, myths remain on

societies' accurate depictions of sexual assault, and several themes emerge from the literature. To start, myths continue to restrict the understanding and construction of real sexual assaults (Burt & Albin, 1981). This restricted understanding thus leads the population to rely more on the myths they follow and continue to construct to justify the dismissal of victims. In this case, they are pleading ignorance and basing their beliefs and attitudes on myths which cannot be proven.

These myths are shown through various institutions, including the criminal justice system, current legislation, religion, media outlets, etc. Due to these myths, women disclosing sexual assault and/ or rape have been met with an air of skepticism and disbelief (Johnson, 2017; Krahe, 2016). Reliance on these myths ultimately sways women's experiences when disclosing their assaults. Understanding this as the current view, this section will first highlight the theoretical trends found within current literature, followed by a further understanding of rape myths.

Theoretical Trends

Several theoretical and conceptual trends were found within the literature used for this section. Starting with theory, a liberal feminist perspective continues to be used throughout the literature, explaining rape myths and their functions. As understood by Maynard (1995), liberal feminism is understood as a focus on the individual's rights and on the concept of "equality, justice and equal opportunities." To achieve this, liberal feminists suggest that legal and policy changes must be made to promote and ultimately gain women's equality with men. Further elaborating on this, Zhang (2021) highlights that equality for women can be achieved through changes within our current society. In this way, both authors claim that reforming our system and societal beliefs can lead to equality for women. Though Sampert (2010) never explicitly labels the feminist perspective they use, her work clearly indicates a liberalist perspective. Highlighting this liberal feminist perspective, Sampert (2010) starts their literature by examining the history of sexual assault laws

and how feminist advocates have fought for significant change (as was mentioned in the introduction). Their use of the liberal feminist perspective is evident through their want to change the current legislation following sexual assault laws. Furthermore, Samper's (2010) liberal feminist position is shown throughout by the author's specific focus on how current laws and criminal justice proceedings affect women (Sampert, 2010). Additionally, Sampert (2010) firmly declares that there is a need to "make sexual assault a public policy issue by lobbying the government to address the underreporting rate and low conviction rates" (p. 327). Additionally, Sampert (2010) highlights the need for police officers and the criminal justice system to become aware of the language they use when discussing sexual assault. Overall, Samper's (2010) use of a feminist theoretical framework is evidenced throughout the text with the words, phrases, and specific authors they use. Concerning the authors Sampert (2010) uses, Carol Smart, Catherine Mackinnon, Carol Bohmer, George Jonas, and Jane Doe are referenced quite a bit.

Edwards et al. (2011) also use a liberal feminist lens when describing rape myths and how they negatively affect women. This is evident through their want to introduce new programming and education into our current criminal justice system but not altogether abolish it. Edwards et al. (2011) hope to reform a system where individuals understand the reality of sexual assault and dismiss myths as falsehoods. When using a feminist lens, the author can better understand and empathize with how women must feel and create an analysis while looking for solutions that can present change. Using a feminist lens, Edwards et al. (2011) were able to depict the ways women are affected by rape myths. Furthermore, they illustrated how these rape myths are incorrect and ultimately negatively affect women who have been sexually assaulted (Edwards et al., 2011). Let us notice that though most authors do not explicitly state their theoretical frame as including a feminist perspective, it is evident through their use of language and their propositions to find

solutions to current rape myths, which primarily affect women. Regarding their use of language, these authors focus on terms such as criminal justice for women, victims' rights and support, reform to the current criminal justice system, etc.

Shifting gears, quite a few authors focus on the construction of rape myths, how rape myths ultimately come to be accepted and reused. As understood by Burr (2015), social constructionism includes several assumptions, having a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, social processes that sustains knowledge, and lastly, knowledge and social action. Registering taken-for-granted knowledge, the authors take special care to illustrate things as accurately as possible. Furthermore, they focus on how individuals perceive others and how society has constructed rape myths. Authors Brennan and Taylor-Butts (2008) use constructionism to understand how women in sexual assault cases have been constructed. Thus, they found that within the current criminal justice system, women who have been sexually assaulted are viewed under strict rape myths that paint a picture of who can and who cannot be a victim, specifically highlighting gender norms and stereotypes of believability and victimhood. Echoing this, several authors illustrate that the construction of rape myths has led to the construction of a real victim and those worthy of sympathy and help by creating societal norms that have been accepted not only by the justice system but also by the general population.

(Campbell et al., 2001; Johnson, 2017; Krahe, 2016; Randall, 2010). In sum, a constructionist perspective was present throughout the work used for this section since most authors focus on how women become or are labelled as actual victims versus those looking for sympathy or to cause trouble.

Consequently, the concepts that follow the constructivist perspective include belief, falsehoods, and victims. In defining rape myths, every author in this section introduces the idea of

belief: belief in the myths or belief in women's disclosure. Each author used in this section discusses the concept of being believed or disbelieved using rape myths. In this way, being believed or not actually constitutes an action between the individual disclosing sexual assault and the person they disclose to. In these cases, the action would be the application of a rape myth and the resulting disbelief in a woman's account. This is consistently shown throughout by various authors, such as Sampert (2010), Edwards et al. (2011), Buddie and Miller (2001), and Franuik et al. (2008), among others. The second concept found most is victim, which is understood as a person who is harmed, injured, or even killed because of illegal activity, accident, or other actions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Each author's use of this term was very similar and quite surprising to me. This was surprising because as I dove deeper into the literature on victims and victimization, I found that the term individuals who have been victimized prefer to use is survivor meaning that these authors are not considering this perspective when completing their analysis.

Rape Myths

Elaborating on rape myths, Buddie and Miller (2001) highlight that these include attitudes and beliefs that are widely held and accepted; though they are generally false, these beliefs work to trivialize or suggest that an assault has not occurred (Franuik et al., 2008). In exploring this notion of belief, Zizek's understanding is quite useful. Zizek (2009) illustrates that belief can be understood as exterior to the person and as something embodied within the procedures of people. In this way, beliefs are embodied in the practices. Furthermore, belief can be considered objective because individuals must follow their exterior environment in motivating their beliefs. In other words, belief is something which is conditioned into someone due to their environment and the social setting in which they live. Moreover, belief is illustrated through our actions and not our thought patterns. In considering belief as a social control mechanism, Zizek (2009) points out that

belief materializes in everyday activities. In this way, belief supports the regulation of social reality (Zizek, 2009). Zizek (2009) further highlights that once belief is lost, the social field by which society operates begins to be destabilized.

Typical rape myths include suggesting that the victims are lying and deserving of their assault, excusing the perpetrators, and downplaying the seriousness of an assault (Franuik et al., 2008). Examples of rape myths include ‘husbands cannot rape their wives,’ ‘women enjoy rape’ or ‘women asked to be raped,’ and ‘women lie about being raped’ (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Edwards et al., 2011; Franuik et al., 2008). Though each author has their own way of identifying rape myths, they generally refer to the same ideas and can be classified into a few categories. These categories are as follows: women are asking for it/women are to blame for their assaults, women lie about rape, women want to be raped, and strangers rape women.

1. Women Precipitate Rape

Under this myth, two major themes arise in the literature. First, women’s actions provoke rape, leading to their responsabilizing. Second, their lack of resistance can be seen as compliance (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Hall et al., 1986; Randall, 2010).

Starting with the idea of provocation, various authors highlight the idea that women are responsible for preventing rape, as if their actions indicate that they were asking to be assaulted (Edwards et al., 2011). Common conceptions of provocation include clothing and lifestyle choices (Hall et al., 1986; Sampert, 2010). Regarding lifestyle choices, women who do not take safety precautions, drinking, drug use, or adultery, are seen as asking for it (Edwards et al., 2011). Common conceptions under this myth include, “She was walking at night, she is promiscuous, she was asking to be raped in that outfit, she was leading him on” (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Edwards et al., 2011). Ultimately, the responsabilization of women includes the expectation that they will

take precautionary measures to protect themselves and be at fault when they do not. Building off this idea, the true rape victim is responsible for showing signs of active resistance toward their attacker (Randall, 2010).

Overall, this myth continues to put women who are sexually assaulted at the front of their rapes, blaming them for not complying with society's rules of how they should be. Under this myth, the real victim will show active resistance; they will take caution in their lifestyle and clothing choices. Ultimately this myth not only disregards the important fact that a woman has been raped and should be helped but it also focuses on whether she is worthy of the attack based on her characteristics and choices. To end, this myth singles out women's behaviour as a causal factor to their sexual assault (Sampert, 2010).

2. *Women Lie*

One of the most common myths, dating back to ancient Greece and biblical eras, is that women lie, and because of such, women cry rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Edwards et al., 2011). Under this myth, women are depicted as deceitful, vindictive, and jaded. The assumption associated with a woman's deceitfulness is that they lie to get revenge, or they lie out of shame. In terms of revenge, the literature depicts women who lies about sexual assault as being jilted by an ex-lover (Burt, 1980; Dobkinds & Tavcer, 2023). An example of this includes the biblical tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife; within these stories, married women are rejected by a man and therefore accuse him of rape to punish him (Edwards et al., 2011). These accounts' unitality portrays women as lying to cover their deviant behaviour. Moving onto shame, the literature explains that women are seen as crying rape because they want to avoid shame associated with regretting past sexual experiences (Sampert, 2010).

Although the literature has shown that false rape allegations are incredibly rare, this myth still holds society's belief in sexual assault (Edwards et al., 2011). Ultimately, this myth shows that women are regarded as deceitful beings who thrive on revenge and shame.

3. *Women Want to Be Raped*

Emerging from the belief that women desire forced sex, this myth puts the onus on women to show they did not enjoy consensual sex or intentionally provoke rape (Edwards et al., 2011). Under this myth, the common belief is that women desire to be dominated (Edwards et al., 2011). Supporting this comes the idea of resistance. If a woman does not actively or violently resist an attack, it is because she enjoys or wants it (Burt, 1980).

Disagreeing with this myth, Burt (1980) highlights that women do not want to be raped, nor do they precipitate their rapes. In this way, Burt (1980) clearly illustrates that myths are overtly victim-blaming. Overall, this myth implies that women have unconscious desires that can only be satisfied through assault. Moreover, it implies that rape does not occur in these instances and that the victim was unconsciously consensual. Ultimately, this myth clearly indicates that women want to be raped.

4. *Real Rape Involves a Stranger*

Shifting the focus to whom a real rapist is, this myth claims that real victims of sexual assault are assaulted by strangers (Krahé, 2016). Furthermore, this assault must surprise the victim, they should not have seen it coming. This narrative also includes the idea of those who can rape and those who may be accused of rape. As highlighted in the literature, good men do not rape, and the racialized man is the most common rapist (Sampert, 2010).

Although this myth continues to be disproven, with literature claiming most sexual assault victims know their assaulter, it is nevertheless believed (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). Many authors

also disagree with the myth that real rapes must occur between a victim and a stranger. In fact, many have found that sexual assault most commonly occurs between a victim and someone they know. (Edwards et al., 2011). This narrative once again puts the onus on women to safeguard themselves from strangers and the dangers of the outside world (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). This myth further shifts blame away from the perpetrator by blatantly claiming women should be more aware of their surroundings (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023).

Considering these myths, the literature illustrates that women must fall under a specific categorization to be sexual assault victims. This classification is known as the ideal victim. The ideal sexual assault victim is someone who can prove their victim status by complying with the above myths; they are those who can establish their personal credibility (Randall, 2010). Furthermore, they must illustrate that they continuously make precautious lifestyle choices while actively resisting an attacker (Randall, 2010). As such, the ideal sexual assault victim is a woman who shows active resistance to an attack, does not know her attacker, has visible injuries, immediately discloses their assault, and lastly are ‘good’ woman (in this way, women must be considered morally and socially acceptable) (Campbell et al., 2001; Johnson, 2017; Krahé, 2016; Randall, 2010).

The overall response to these myths is disagreement. Sampert (2010) clearly indicates that although these myths continue to be prevalent today, the record needs to be set straight when one is used. In this way, they clearly indicate that myths are inaccurate and must be phased out of our current system. Moreover, they believe that individuals and institutions using these myths need to be held accountable for the damage they ultimately inflict upon sexual assault victims and influence current beliefs. Following a similar thought pattern, though Edwards et al. (2011) paper

is focused on rape myths, they clearly articulate their disagreement with them and further suggest ways to eradicate them at the individual and institutional levels.

To summarize, as the literature has shown in this section, rape myths explicitly sway the understanding of sexual assault and rape. Moreover, they function to discredit and ignore the majority of assault cases which occur today. In general, the literature has illustrated the ways in which these myths can sway women's experiences of disclosing or not disclosing. Furthermore, these myths lead to perceived or expected responses of negative reactions (blame, disbelief, etc.), leaving women with the hard choice of whether to disclose. Additionally, this section has illustrated the use of several theories, including a feminist perspective and constructivism. Along with these theories came the presence of the concepts of belief and falsehood, as well as victim. Keeping this in mind, the next section will highlight, according to the reviewed literature, why women chose to or did not disclose.

Section 2: To Disclose or Not to Disclose

Disclosure, as defined by Rufa et al. (2022), can be understood as telling someone about an assault either formally or informally. Individuals can voluntarily disclose or be persuaded to by other people (Rufa et al., 2022), and disclosure can occur in various settings with either informal or formal systems.

Though this disclosure avenue exists, the literature shows that about one-third to two-thirds of sexual assault victims delay or never disclose (Reich et al., 2022; Ullman et al., 2020). Having this in mind, this section will highlight the reasons individuals who have been sexually assaulted decide to or not disclose. First, this section will highlight the theoretical trends underpinning these author's analysis and understanding. Next, it will illustrate the reasons women have chosen to disclose. Following this, reasons they have chosen not to disclose will be presented. Ending this

section, I will connect this section back to the main argument that rape myths ultimately sway disclosure.

Theoretical Trends

In looking at the theoretical trends found within this section authors, several emerge; these include social reactions theory and cost versus benefit analysis. Social reactions theory, as used by these authors, illustrates that victims become victims when society labels them as such (Nickerson, 2023). Labels as understood by Eyben (2013) are understood as imposed boundaries or defined categories applied to individuals to illustrate the relations they may or may not have. Furthermore, labels are a process of classifying something based on personal and social factors; these can be positive or negative (Aguirre, 2020). Highlighting this process, Ahrens et al. (2007) point out that victims typically work through an evaluative process where they see if others will label them as victims. This evaluative process typically occurs when victims work through a process of self-labelling. In this way, victims will take their current understanding of a real victim and apply it to themselves.

Ullman et al. (2020) come at social reactions from a different angle, illustrating that those current visible social reactions, either by media or by previous examples, work to dissuade victims from disclosing their sexual assaults. Additionally, they highlight that individuals who do disclose are affected by societal reactions since it either works to disregard or validate their experiences (Ullman et al., 2020). Starzynski et al. (2007) also focus on social reactions and find that these also affect the process of disclosure since women take what they currently understand of society, how sexual assault victims are typically blamed or have their experiences devalued and use this to decide on if they should disclose their assaults.

Overall, these authors point out that social reactions and perceived social reactions sway women's decisions to disclose their assaults (Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens, 2007; Griffin et al., 2022; Starzynski et al., 2007; Ullman, 2010; Ullman et al., 2020). Building on this idea, Ahrens et al. (2007) also introduce the idea of a cost versus benefit analysis. As they understand it, victims undergo a process where they weigh the benefits or costs of disclosing their sexual assaults (Ahrens et al., 2007). Within this analysis, victims take what they currently know about sexual assault disclosures and determine whether disclosing will provide them with the support they need or negatively affect them (Ahrens et al., 2007). Though no other author specifically mentions this analysis process, it is evident by the way they discuss victims. For example, Griffin et al. (2022) illustrate that victims consider various factors when deciding to disclose their sexual assaults. These include their age, their assailant, and their likelihood of being believed, among others. Similarly, Reich et al. (2022) point out that women tend to evaluate the outcomes of their possible disclosure and weigh whether it will benefit or hinder them. In this sense, women will weigh the pros and cons of disclosing their assaults and try and predict the results of disclosing. If these women assume the reaction to their assaults will be harmful/bad, they will choose not to disclose their assault.

Along with these theories, the various authors in this section have similar concepts and understandings of the reasons women do or do not disclose their assaults. These reoccurring concepts include expectation and choice. Expectations, in their simplest form, are preconceived notions or ideals of a given situation or event that can result in different emotions. For example, when a preconceived ideal is not met, individuals may be disappointed or angry since the reality of their situation went against what they expected or wanted. Though this is not necessarily a conceptual frame, the authors highlight themselves; most authors in this section reference this

concept when analyzing their data. Ahrens et al. (2007) look at what women who have been sexually assaulted expect and want during their disclosures. As it was shown in this section, women disclose with the expectation of gaining support (Ahrens et al., 2007; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Starzynski et al., 2007; Ullman, 2010; Ullman et al., 2020). Shifting this focus, many authors highlight the idea of choice. Furthermore, choice is not dependent on their want to disclose but on factors such as accessibility. To summarize, this section has included theories such as social reactions and benefits versus risk. The authors have further highlighted the concept of expectations and choice.

Reasons To Disclose

In disclosing, women who have been sexually assaulted have decided to share their assaults with specific individuals. In understanding why this happens, several themes emerged in the literature. These themes include seeking support for themselves, wanting to protect other women from their assailant, and fitting in with real rape tropes. Though the literature has used different titles when describing these themes, I believe these encompass several authors' ideas.

As discussed in the literature, women are likely to disclose for various support-seeking reasons; these include medical and mental health help, socio-economic help, and general support and validation (Griffin et al., 2022; Ullman, 2010). Regarding medical help, women with severe physical injuries, the ones too difficult to deal with alone will disclose their sexual assaults to gain aid. In other instances, women may have to disclose their assaults because their injuries are too great to hide. In other words, women disclose their assaults when they actively need medical care. In concern to mental health help, many women who have been sexually assaulted find themselves suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ahrens et al., 2007). To continue their lives in healthy and happy ways, many women turn to mental health support services as a

source of disclosure (Ullman, 2010). In addition to needing these supports, many women choose to disclose because they need financial assistance (Carson et al., 2021). Moving on to the idea of general support, many women chose to disclose their assaults because they want the people around them to know and, in return, positively support their healing (Griffin et al., 2022).

Shifting the focus, the literature shows that women also chose to disclose in hopes that they could receive justice for their assaults and protect other women (Ahrens et al., 2007; Carson et al., 2021; Ullman, 2010). In hopes of protecting other women and getting justice, women will turn to formal support services for their disclosure (Griffin et al., 2022). In disclosing, women are hopeful their assailant will be caught, thereby getting their justice while protecting other women.

As stated in section one, a real rape victim fits within current rape myths. As illustrated by the literature, identifying oneself as a victim plays a large role in the decision to disclose (Ahrens et al., 2007). Once a woman has identified herself as a victim of sexual assault, she is more likely to disclose since she has less to fear about being blamed, disbelieved, or having her experiences minimized (Ullman et al., 2020). The victim here will show signs of injury and lack familiarity with their assaulter (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

Overall, as shown in the literature, women disclose their instances of sexual assault when they feel they will get support, protect other women, have a chance at seeking justice, and see themselves as sexual assault victims.

Reasons To Not Disclose

When deciding not to disclose sexual assault, the literature has shown that many factors influence a woman to make such a choice. Though the literature lists various reasons women do not disclose, several themes occur throughout. These include internal factors, external factors, previous disclosure experiences, a disjoint with current rape myths, and the fact that nothing could be done.

Regarding internal factors, the concept of fear and shame emerge. The literature found that most women feared being blamed (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Reich et al., 2022; Ullman et al., 2020). In this way, women feared that if they disclosed their assault to informal or formal sources, they would ultimately be blamed. Authors in this section understand blame as something someone can encompass. In this way, blame can be shifted from perpetrators to victims and used to discredit their sexual assault disclosure (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Examples of this, as found within current studies, involve victims being told it was their fault or that they should have known better (Griffin et al., 2022). In addition to blame, women fear not being believed (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). Women with these assumptions typically feared disbelief due to their lifestyle choices. As understood by these authors, lifestyle choices are considered free will decisions women make. These authors also point to the fact that lifestyles women partake in might not be due to their choice, like being a sex worker or living in low-income housing (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). In these situations, women who had been drinking or using substances fear disbelief and blame (Ullman et al., 2020). Moving on to the last facet of fear found within the literature, we encounter a fear of retaliation (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). Within this category, women feared disclosing would put themselves in danger or open themselves up to judgment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Ullman, 2010). Overall, women did not disclose because they expected negative reactions from the person they would disclose to (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Reich et al., 2022; Ullman et al., 2020).

As stated in the literature, many women who are assaulted feel internalized shame. Under shame, women blamed themselves for being assaulted (Reich et al., 2022). Examples included women feeling like they deserved their assault or somehow precipitated an assault with their actions (Reich et al., 2022). In addition to blaming themselves, the literature highlights that many

women minimize their assaults due to the embarrassment of being assaulted (Reich et al., 2022; Ullman, 2010). Overall, internalizing factors that swayed women not to disclose heavily relied on the fear that they would be blamed or not believed and the internalized shame they felt at being assaulted.

Shifting the focus to external factors, the literature highlights outside barriers to women disclosing their assaults. In these cases, women cannot disclose due to their socioeconomic location. Examples of women who cannot disclose assault include sex workers, immigrants, women in abusive relationships, etc. Like the internal factors influencing disclosure, women's substance uses, and lifestyle choices lead them not to disclose.

Regarding previous disclosure experiences, the literature highlights this as being a very important factor in disclosing sexual assault in the future (Griffin et al., 2022). In these cases, women had disclosed experiences of sexual assault in the past and were not believed, ignored, or blamed (Brenna & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Examples include women going to disclosure services, like campus security or mental health professionals and being told their experiences are not a concern to them, being disbelieved, or being blamed for what has happened (Griffin et al., 2022). Other examples include women going to the police and being turned away for insufficient evidence. Ultimately, previous disclosures tend to stick with these women and sway their decisions to disclose.

As shown in the current literature, not fitting with current rape myths influence women's choices not to disclose (Starzynski et al., 2007). One factor influencing women's decision not to disclose is when the assailant is a stranger (Ullman et al., 2020). In many of these cases, women will know their assaulter and chose not to disclose it because they believe no one would believe

them. Additionally, the victim's status compared to their assailants greatly influences not disclosing their assault (Griffin et al., 2022).

Moving on to the idea that nothing could be done, many sexual assault victims did not disclose because they believed nothing could be done for them. This way, according to the reviewed literature, victims felt their assaulter would not be punished (Dobkins & Tavcer, 2023). In addition to believing nothing would be done, many victims did not want the hassle of disclosing or reporting their experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). In other words, many women chose not to disclose because they did not want to deal with the aftermath of it.

Altogether, as the literature has shown, several factors influence women's decision not to disclose their assaults. As shown above, these include internal factors, such as fear and shame; external factors, such as proximity and location to available services; previous bad disclosure experiences, a lack of rape myth presence in the assault; and a belief that nothing could be done.

Culminating the reasons women do or do not disclose sexual assault, readers can see a clear link to rape myths. In this way, many of the reasons women disclose are because they feel they fit the societal definition of a real victim. This was illustrated through their need for medical attention, ergo having a serious injury, their attack itself, and believing justice can be met. Similarly, the reasons for not disclosing seem to contradict women's reasons for disclosing assaults. These overall included not fitting in with current rape myths, being ashamed of what happened to them, and being afraid of the backlash they could face. Shifting this focus, the next section will focus on women who have disclosed and their experiences during their disclosure process.

Section 3: Experiences of Disclosure

Disclosure, as shown in the literature, is the process of telling or informing an individual about an assault that has occurred to oneself (Rufa et al., 2022). As highlighted in the previous section,

disclosures can occur through informal or formal sources. The literature shows that informal disclosure occurs when victims turn to informal responders within their social circles, typically including friends, partners, parents, other family members, etc. (Dworkin et al., 2016; Starzynski et al., 2005). In contrast, formal disclosure occurs between victims and those formally trained to deal with sexual assault victimization in some capacity. These include police officers, medical professionals, mental health professionals, crisis centers, counsellors, and teachers (Starzynski et al., 2005). As will be shown, the literature labels disclosure experiences as positive or negative. This is a very simplistic and limiting way of understanding disclosure experiences because it does not take into consideration that disclosures are not static, they are dynamic subjective experiences that must be viewed in terms with flexibility as experiences of disclosure, how women remember their experiences changes over time as they grow and heal.

To explain this restriction on sexual assault experience, this section will first highlight the theoretical trends found, followed by an illustration of the ways in which the literature labels current experiences through an explanation of experiences at the informal and formal levels. Next, I will explain why this understanding is overly simplistic and limiting to women's experiences.

Theoretical Trends

Though no specific theoretical trends are mentioned by the authors in this section, other than the already mentioned social reactions theory and cost versus benefit analysis, most authors focus on women's process of disclosure choice evaluation and the categorizing experiences. The absence of specific theoretical trends is maybe due to the nature of this topic and the newness of it. Researchers completing this work may also find it more prudent to simply do a descriptive search rather than focus on an obvious theory, as the importance of this topic is truly to understand women's experiences of sexual assault disclosure. In this way, as mentioned above, these authors

focus on how they can place women's experiences of disclosure into categories such as positive or negative.

Consequently, in looking for these experiences, several concepts are often used. These concepts include choice, belief, blame, support, and experience. Overall, these concepts conceptualize women as beings that can clearly evaluate the choices that lead to sexual assault while also evaluating and trying to predict how they will be treated when or if they disclose. This ultimately shifts responsibility from their assailants onto them.

As mentioned in section two, choice is often used to illustrate women's experiences of sexual assault disclosure. Like section two, the authors here write as though women have a choice while disregarding many of the factors that affect or take away this choice. When speaking about sexual assault, belief, as mentioned by Rufa et al. (2022), occurs when a woman's disclosure of sexual assault is taken as accurate. In this way, accuracy is taken as truth-telling or labelling these women as legitimate victims. Furthermore, connecting this to the idea of an experience, Rufa et al. (2022) explain that belief leads to positive experiences. Echoing this, Campbell (2006) found that believed individuals tended to describe their experiences as positive or supportive. Contrastingly, Ahrens (2006) discusses the idea of blame and how this ultimately leads to women's negative perceptions of their disclosure experiences. This author illustrates that when victims are blamed, they may feel like they are reliving their assault again (Ahrens, 2006). Building off this, being blamed often makes victims feel like they have been silenced and rendered powerless, resulting in their disclosure being labelled as negative (Ahrens, 2006). Similarly, Campbell (2006) found that rape victims who experience blame found their disclosure experiences highly stressful. Overall, the authors in this section found that victim-blaming attitudes and expressions led victims to perceive their disclosure experiences as negative.

Informal Disclosure Experiences

When disclosing to friends and/or family members, victims of sexual assault tend to anticipate responses and will alter whom they disclose to accordingly. Victims evaluate responses to get the most positive experience, but this is not always true. As shown below, even when victims carefully decide whom to tell, their experiences can be negative, ultimately resulting in their revictimization.

Regarding the negative perceptions of sexual assault disclosures, the literature illustrates these as including revictimization, blame, and a lack of belief (Ahrens, 2006; Rufa et al., 2022). Concerning revictimization, the literature highlights various studies where women seek support from informal sources but feel minimized or lack trust in their support person (Rufa et al., 2022). Shifting the focus to blame, many women, when disclosing their assaults, were told it was their fault. For example, as found in a study by Ahrens (2006), many women disclosing to close family members were told their assaults were not true rapes and, therefore, they could not be victims. Moreover, these women are told they should have known better or that they must have wanted or initiated the assault (Ahrens, 2006).

As illustrated above, negative experiences when disclosing to informal support persons and systems can result in traumatizing and revictimizing encounters that leave the victim feeling blamed, ashamed, guilty, and not believed (Ahrens, 2006; Rufa et al., 2022). As shown, informal reporting occurs with various individuals and can be negative with those we expect to be most supportive, including our priests, parents, and closest friends.

In contrast, positive experiences when disclosing have included being listened to and believed, and lastly, being provided comfort and/or emotional support (Milliken et al., 2016). Positive experiences included victims receiving emotional support, tangible aid, being discrete, and reacting positively (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012). For emotional support, overall physical comfort (,

hugs, etc.) and words of affirmation were shared with the victims by their support person (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Rufa et al., 2022). Tangible aid consisted of support persons helping victims decide what to do; this included filing a report together, going to a mental health professional, etc. Regarding being listened to, support persons were attentive and did not ask questions. Overall, the authors in this subsection have illustrated that a positive experience contains emotional support, comfort, belief, and a lack of blame.

Formal Disclosure Experiences

This subsection will discuss victims' negative and positive experiences when dealing with formal support. First, reporting to educational professionals will be discussed, followed by reporting to medical professionals. Finally, reporting experiences with police officials will be explained.

Reporting to University Officials

When reporting a sexual assault to a university professional, there are many to choose from. Victims can turn to counsellors, teachers, or university authorities for support. Though only a minority of students report their assaults to university personnel, their experiences are important to highlight because it shows how even trained professionals can succeed or fail at providing support.

The negative experiences, as illustrated by the literature, include not being believed, being blamed, and victims having their disclosure reported further without their consent. Regarding students who have reported, they continue to report feelings of blame, dismissal, minimization, and inadequate help. Four common themes emerge when students disclose their sexual assault to universities. First, many students felt pressured to disclose further, meaning that once they had told university personnel, they felt coerced or intimidated into reporting to other services (Sall & Littleton, 2022). Second, victims felt that school resources were dismissive and ultimately blamed

them, further insinuating they were not to be believed. Third, victims felt their school did not consider their well-being by providing sufficient resources such as counselling, academic accommodation, or advocacy service (Sall & Littleton, 2022). Forth, victims felt that their school failed by not checking in on them, not having a knowledgeable healthcare and sexual assault team, and not providing effective or time-efficient counselling services and sessions. Finally, victims felt their institution did not care for their well-being and would have been better off not reporting since the process was revictimizing (Sall & Littleton, 2022).

To conclude, negative experiences at the university level include external and internal blame, coerced reporting, the feeling of disbelief, and overall dissatisfaction with the step taken to ensure the victim's well-being.

In contrast to the negative experience, positive ones include feeling listened to, believed, and given the proper resources to get better. These experiences include situations where victims are given the necessary resources to get better. To victims, this consists of academic accommodations, counselling services, and an integrated response across campus. Furthermore, victims felt that when they were in control of their reporting, not being coerced to a further report, they were empowered, and recovery seemed to be easier (Sall & Littleton, 2022).

Reporting to Medical and/or Mental Health Professionals

Reporting to a medical professional or clinic can take place through many avenues. These involve mental help and/or crisis lines, abortion clinics, walk-in clinics, and emergency rooms, among others. Though all individuals being disclosed have been trained to deal with sexual assault cases, this subsection will illustrate that, according with the literature, victims continue to have bad experiences regardless of the training medical and/or mental health providers have received. Supporting this idea, Starzynski et al. (2017) highlight that only 35% of sexual assault victims turn

to mental health professionals. Similarly, Lanthier et al. (2018) show that reporting to health services ranges from six to twenty-seven percent.

The negative experiences during disclosure to various medical and mental health professionals consist of a lack of time consistency, an overall lack of needs met, feelings of being blamed or not listened to, and the feeling that victims are being judged. Building on these points, Lanthier et al. (2018) found that negative experiences were associated with perceived victim blaming, minimizing and/or dismissing disclosure, treating survivors differently after disclosure, professionals exhibiting a cold and/or detached demeanour, and lastly, doubting the survivor. Starzynski et al. (2017) explain that negative experiences when disclosing to a therapist happened when therapists were perceived to be dismissive, unprofessional, judgemental, and blaming. Furthermore, since therapists are expensive and hard to get under insurance, many victims felt they could not spend adequate time with one therapist, which led to a lack of trust (Starzynski et al., 2017).

Campbell (2006), reflecting on various service providers, crisis lines, hospitals, therapy, etc., found that negative experiences varied with each service. To start, when going to the hospital, victims felt their experiences to be negative when they did not receive information regarding possible pregnancy, HIV and/or STDs information. Furthermore, experiences were increasingly traumatic when victims were not given the morning-after pill or basic antibiotics for general STDs. Though Campbell (2006) does not say why this is retraumatizing, I speculate that it is because the victims must relive their assault again when they go to another health clinic to get further information. Regarding mental health services, negative experiences mainly resulted when referrals took place. This experience was negative because victims feel they are not receiving the

help they need within an acceptable time frame causing their mental health to worsen and, in time, affect the rest of their life.

As shown above, negative experiences when dealing with medical and/or mental health professionals include blame, a lack of information, judgment, and minimizing or dismissive behaviour.

Conversely, the literature shows positive experiences contain acceptance, belief, validation, honesty, and open communication. Supporting this, Lanthier et al. (2018), when studying mental health provider responses, explain helpful responses to disclosure as validating and providing emotional support and providing tangible aid. When validating and providing emotional support, victims explained that receiving compassion, having responders be empathetic, listening in an active voice, being supportive and encouraging, and acknowledging the victim's strength and skill in dealing with their assault were helpful interventions (Lanthier et al., 2018). Victims' experiences were most positive regarding tangible aid when professionals helped them access medical care, providing them with resources to cope with the aftermath of sexual assault and encouraging victims to see a counsellor. Moreover, victims felt more positive when tangible aid was followed by validation and check-ups.

Similarly, Campbell (2006), when looking into various medical and mental health providers, found that positive experiences were related to information and resource giving. To start, it was found that victims who received information on pregnancy, the morning-after pill, HIV and STDs were considerably happier than those who did not. Further, victims receiving proper tests and antibiotics felt more positive towards their service provider. Regarding resource help, victims tended to have positive experiences when providers helped them get in contact with mental health providers, therapy, and counselling services (Campbell, 2006).

As shown in the literature, positive experiences stemmed from providers being empathetic, considerate, informative, and taking the time to walk through the steps necessary to get victims help.

Reporting to the Police

Though sexual assault continues to be prevalent in our society, with 19.3% of women experiencing rape and 43.9% experiencing some other form of sexual assault, only about 32-35% of all sexual assault victims report to police services (Henninger et al., 2020). This is commonly because victims fear mistreatment and adverse reactions (Lorenz, 2022). This is further supported by the fact that one-quarter of victims who contact the police receive adverse reactions, resulting in their revictimization (Lorenz, 2022). This subsection will highlight how the literature has labelled women's disclosure experiences as negative or positive when reporting their sexual assault to police services.

When looking at negative experiences, the most common emerging themes found in the literature are feeling blamed, dismissed, untrusted, and not taken seriously. Carbone-Lopez et al. (2016) and McQueen et al. (2021), highlighting these themes, illustrates that victims were most disappointed in police responses when they felt they were not taken seriously, their reports were not followed up, they were blamed, and officers openly showed skepticism and disbelief (Lorenz, 2022). Additionally, victims whose experiences were negative included officers not wanting to take their reports or not writing anything down during initial report taking (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2016, Sheehy, 2012). In these situations, victims felt their reporting was being mocked and dismissed and, in turn, were left feeling further victimized. Furthering the idea of blame causing a negative experience, Lorenz (2022) found that victims' experiences were unsatisfying when officers discouraged them, told them their case was not important enough to report, and/or asked

victims to share their stories multiple times. Moreover, victims felt they were being blamed when officers questioned their credibility (Lorenz, 2022).

In looking at the positive experiences of reporting sexual assault to police services, shown by the literature, the opposite occurs. Positive interactions and disclosures result from feeling that reporters are being believed, respected, and taken seriously, reporting and interviews were taken seriously. Illustrating this, Lorenz (2022) found that validating and courteous behaviour made victims feel more comfortable during reporting periods and ultimately made their experiences positive. Additionally, helpful, and supportive officers made victims feel believed and supported, resulting in a positive encounter (Lorenz, 2022).

Similarly, the key themes associated with the nature of experiences include communication of respect, explanation of the procedure, belief in an account, and cultural sensitivity (Henninger et al., 2020). As illustrated in their paper, the more these themes were respected and applied when dealing with victims, the more positive an experience they reported. Overall, the literature has shown that positive experiences when reporting to the police are simply the opposite of negative ones. To feel positive in their reporting, victims must feel believed, gain support, and be taken seriously.

To conclude, the literature currently illustrates experiences as falling within one of two categories, positive or negative. This understanding is overly simplistic since it ignores the social context and time frame in which women chose to disclose their assault. Moreover, it ignores the process by which women chose to disclose and their reasons for and to whom they disclosed.

Conclusion

As the literature has shown, the current view of sexual assault victims continues to be informed by rape myths. These, in turn, influence women's decision to disclose sexual assault varies on many

factors, including rape myths. These myths include women precipitating rape, lying about rape, wanting to be raped, and actual rapists being strangers. Overall, our current society believes that there is a real victim and treats victims differently depending on this assigned status. In addition to assigning status, rape myths work to discredit and ignore many cases that take place today.

In knowing these myths exist, women make the decision to disclose or not to disclose. Regarding the decision to disclose, women highlight seeking support, wanting to protect other women, and being able to label themselves as sexual assault victims. In contrast, the decision not to disclose includes internal factors, external factors, previous disclosure experiences, a disjoint with current rape myths, and the fact that nothing could be done.

Additionally, several theoretical trends were discovered. First, section one illustrates a feminist lens. In this way, the authors analyze their data through the eyes of a liberal feminist, meaning they consider how women perceive the things they are seeing and take the feminist stance. Furthermore, most authors use a constructivist frame, meaning they are specifically looking at the way society has come to construct rape myths and ultimately use them to define who can or cannot be a victim. Regarding the concepts found within this section, several emerged. These include beliefs, falsehoods, and victims.

Belief, as understood by the literature on sex assault, is the acknowledgement and trust is an individual's disclosure of sexual assault (Buddie & Miller, 2001). Belief is something that is shown both through words and actions. Consequently, belief is shown through the application of rape myths to women's disclosure experiences. Victims, persons who are harmed, injured, or even killed because of illegal activity, accident, or other actions, are used very often within this section (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this way, the concept of the victim becomes inherently intertwined with the notions of belief.

Section two introduces several new theoretical trends, including social reactions theory and cost versus benefit analysis. Social reactions theory, as used by Ahrens (2006), illustrates that victims evaluate whether they should disclose their assaults based on social reactions that they have encountered, heard about, or perceived. Similarly, social reactions work to discredit or validate victims' experiences (Ullman et al., 2020). Authors consistently used a cost versus benefit analysis as well to illustrate the evaluative process women experience again when deciding whether to disclose their sexual assaults or not. With these theories also comes the concept of expectations and choice. Expectations, in their most basic form, are the preconceived notions of a given situation or event which may result in different emotional responses. Within this section, expectations are shown by several authors who highlight the responses women want to receive when disclosing instances of sexual assault.

Though there are no specific theoretical trends found within section three, several concepts were reoccurring. These concepts include choice, belief, blame, support, and experience. Like section two, choice here is used to indicate and assume all women have a choice to disclose their instances of sexual assault.

Overall, this lack of acknowledgement that choice can be different for different women disregards their experiences. Belief, as mentioned in section one, is once again introduced by these authors to highlight truth-telling (Campbell et al., 2006; Rufa et al., 2022). In this way, women express being believed when someone is supportive and helpful towards their disclosure experiences. Contrastingly, the idea of blame occurs when women perceive their interactions as being negative or having their support person question their experiences (Ahrens, 2006). This experience then led women to label their experiences as negative and hurtful.

To end, experiences of sexual assault disclosure are presented in two ways in the literature: positive or negative. Seeing this as too simplistic, my research will work to understand the context around women's disclosure further while also keeping in mind that the perception of disclosure is dynamic and not static. As we will see, this context (whose study is often ignored by literature) and its relationships to the experience of disclosure can be studied in a profitable way with the concept of ideology. Knowing this will help myself and others to see that applying a definitive label such as positive or negative ultimately minimizes the proper understanding of the disclosure. Overall, my research will contribute to the current literature by broadening the understanding of the ideological aspects influencing women's experiences when disclosing sexual assault. Furthermore, it will push the current barrier that sees sexual assault disclosure experiences as positive or negative. My research will also work to illustrate that experiences of sexual assault disclosure is never ending. Every time an individual discusses their experience of sexual assault they are once again experiencing disclosure. To put a definitive label on one experience of disclosure would disregard the fact that sexual assault disclosure continues to take place throughout sexual assault victims lives and will continuously be received differently as this is uncontrollable. Here I am also trying to show individuals that experiences do not have to be labelled to be legitimate. Concerning why experiences occur the way they do, my work will work to highlight that a systemic change is needed.

In addressing this issue, my research will use several concepts and nuances found within the literature. These include rape myths and gendered ideologies, an evaluative process in deciding when or whom to disclose instances of sexual assault to, the concept of belief, blame, among others. Ultimately, my research will examine how women who have been sexually assaulted construct/understand their experiences of informal and formal disclosure. Moreover,

this research will work to elaborate on the experiences of women who disclose sexual assault to informal or formal support. Focusing on the contexts around disclosure, what ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter, I delved into the current perspectives on sexual assault. Moreover, I aimed to comprehend the decision-making process of women when it comes to reporting incidents of sexual assault and to whom they choose to report—finally, the previous chapter looked at the ways women interpret these experiences according to the literature on the subject. After reviewing the literature, I realized that the current research is overly naive and only contextualizes experiences as either positive or negative based on their disclosure. Furthermore, it does not get into the change women go through after a sexual assault, during their instances of disclosure, and after.

With this understanding, I intend to concentrate on the following theory to guide my research; this include critical approaches to ideology as understood by the Marxian theory, specifically the theorists Slavoj Žižek, Louis Althusser, and Robert Pfaller. I will also be examining three concepts: gender, violence, and patriarchy. This theory will allow me to comprehend how women create their experiences of sexual assault from disclosure encounters. Furthermore, I have chosen this theory because I am dealing with the ways in which women's experiences of disclosure are influenced by societal beliefs and myths² and with the way these women interact with others.

To achieve this, I will first explain the concept of ideology, the various theorists who have contributed to this field, its relevance to my topic, and its limitations. Following this, a second group of related concepts will be discussed, where I will summarize what they are and their relevance to my topic. Lastly, I will explain how my theories and concepts intertwine and ultimately aided me in the formulation of my final research question and analysis of my data.

² Myths are understood to be the widely held but typically false beliefs or ideas. Building on this, Burt (1980) understands myths as stereotypical, prejudicial, or false beliefs. Ultimately, myths are the false ideas individuals hold regarding an action, item, or situation, such as sexual assault.

Section 1: Ideology

Ideology, as first coined by French philosopher Pierre Cabanis and by Antoine Destutt de Tracy and their friends, was initially understood/assigned as an object of the theory of ideas (Althusser, 2006; Žižek, 1994). Today some broad understandings of ideology include Satori (1969), Lala (1996), Laclau (1996) and Crips (2018). Satori (1969) and Lala (1996), for example, highlight that ideology is a group of concepts used to understand a complex social phenomenon concerning ideas, beliefs, social actions, etc.

Laclau (1996) simplifies it as a system of ideas which work to inform the beliefs individuals hold. Further explaining ideology, Laclau introduces the concept of hegemony (Worsham & Olson, 1999). In geopolitical terms, hegemony is the political, economic, or military control of one state over another; it is essentially the power the state holds over others. As understood by Laclau, who follows Gramscian thinking, hegemony relates to national politics and can be understood not as an imposition of a preconceived set of ideas but as something that emerges through the political interactions of groups (Worsham & Olson, 1999). In this way, Laclau claims that ideology is created through the political interactions that take place in our society and ultimately define the dominant ideas at a given time. Furthermore, hegemonic ideologies are not solely created by the elite but must involve the social processes of negotiation (Worsham & Olson, 1999).

Crips (2018) states that ideology is prevalent due to its unconscious nature. In this way, ideology is hidden in plain sight, and beliefs that are shared among people are ultimately not supported by evidence (Krips, 2018). Gerring (1997) highlights that ideology remains a flexible and contested term. In this way, ideology continues to be redefined and repurposed to fit different researchers' understanding. For example, some researchers view ideology as a set of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes, whereas others see it as a belief system or worldview (Gerring, 1997).

The following paragraphs will introduce and explain the vital theorists within ideology studies and their unique perspectives that guided my analytical approach; these include Louis Althusser, Robert Pfaller, and Slavoj Žižek, who represent these different understandings.

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, explains ideology in two contrasting ways (1) the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real condition of existence and (2) ideology as a material existence (Althusser, 2006). Regarding the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real condition, Althusser (2006) explains that ideology is the permanent medium binding all individuals together within our society. In this way, ideology is not a reflection of the real world but it represents the world society has made it. The second way Althusser sees ideology is that of a material existence. In this way, ideology will always be present within an apparatus, they will always be present within the material world through rituals, tradition, etc. (Althusser, 2006). Ultimately, ideology, despite its imaginary state, exists through an individual's actions. Further explaining Althusser's theory of Ideology, Krips (2018) articulates ideology to be the socially normative activities of the upper class, along with the behaviours and beliefs they expect from the rest of the population. Althusser (2006) further highlights that ideology is permanently inserted into societal practices and material conditions. Thus, regarding ideologies function, Althusser understands ideology to be shown through individual actions, not just ideas: An example of these actions can be segregation in the United States of America. During this time, individuals were segregated due to the colour of their skin and the belief that they were different. In this context, ideology was present in the minds and actions of Caucasian Americans. Furthermore, these ideologies were present in the teaching of children that being around or sharing a bathroom with an African American individual was dirty and wrong. Regarding a Canadian example, we can consider residential schools. Residential schools operated due to the colonialist belief that the

English culture and people were superior to Indigenous individuals. This belief was ultimately shown through the removal of Indigenous children from their families and their subsequent placement into residential schools, which would work to assimilate them into colonial culture. In this case, ideology was illustrated through the belief of indigenous inferiority and through the actions of arbitrary and ultimately harmful removal of their children.

Further elaborating on this, Althusser (2006) states that ideology interpellates individuals to transform them into subjects. Once individuals have been transformed into subjects, they fall under the ideological beliefs of the system into which they have been interpellated (Kang, 2018). Althusser explains how ideology works in society through his theory on Ideological State apparatuses (ISA). ISAs can be understood as a “number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” such as the media, the church, the education system, trade unions, and families (Althusser, 2006, p. 92). ISA functions through ideology and violence, meaning individuals are taught the ideological ways, and if they reject them or doubt them, they are punished (Althusser, 2006, p. 92). Though Althusser (2006) does not go into the details of punishment, one can assume this would include ostracization, prison sentences, probation, fines, etc.

In understanding ISA, Althusser (2006) cautions individuals not to confuse them with repressive state apparatuses (RSA): the army, the police, and the justice system. The difference between these is that RSA is one singular apparatus and belongs to the government, whereas ISA can be private and constitute a plurality (Althusser, 2006). As illustrated by Althusser (2006), ISAs can be grouped into an empirical list: religious ISA, education ISA, family ISA, cultural ISA, etc. These institutions produce the beliefs and, subsequently, the actions/behaviours that must be followed once one becomes a state subject (Althusser, 2006; Žižek, 1994). One example Althusser

(2006) uses to illustrate this is the educational ISA. According to Althusser (2006), all educational ISAs contribute to the same results: the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation. In this way, youth are brought into the education system and taught “a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling class ideology”; this includes language requirements, history, math, and science (Althusser, 2006, p. 97). Furthermore, youth are overwhelmingly exposed to the predominant ideologies through the philosophies, ethics, and civic instructions of the education system. Once these youth have graduated from their institutions, they are ingrained with the ruling class's ideologies, and they can then reproduce them and aid the ruling class in staying in its position of power (Althusser, 2006).

Robert Pfaller, building off Althusser's comprehension of ideology, understands ideology to be a category of beliefs that signify the unwritten laws that dictate and are illustrated through individuals' actions (Krips, 2018). Shifting away from Althusser's claims, Pfaller focuses more on how people's beliefs, actions and knowledge are related. In other words, Pfaller builds on Althusser's understanding of ideology through action by highlighting a further relationship between beliefs and knowledge that must be understood to see the ideology of a given society correctly (Krips, 2018).

Instead of simply seeing actions as the consequence of belief, Pfaller considers that beliefs are not personal; *they are the beliefs of others*. Contrasting to Althusser, Pfaller illustrates these beliefs as coming from “naive observers” rather than the subjective ruling class (Krips, 2018). In this way, ideologies are produced and sustained by everyday individuals. Pfaller further understood ideology to be the gap between belief and knowledge. In this way, knowledge is understood as what people know to be true and beliefs as the thing's individuals want to be true

and feed into their superstitions but know better than to share (Krips, 2018). Ultimately these differ, and ideology arises through the unfilled holes between both.

Based on Krips's interpretation of Pfaller, there are two forms of ideology: the ideology of faith and the ideology of belief. The ideology of faith deals with 'personal convictions.' In other words, under this conception of ideology, individuals are determined to have a reason for doing something. For example, individuals who believe in God may use it to rationalize specific actions. On the other hand, the ideology of belief can be understood as the beliefs of others. In this way, individuals take on the beliefs of others despite it not being their true belief (Krips, 2018). Furthermore, although individuals act upon these beliefs, they know better than to believe in them themselves honestly. In other words, the ideology of belief operates by individuals doing what they believe they should, following the masses, even when they do not believe in what they are doing. Taking his forms of ideology a step further, Pfaller illustrates that ideology as belief can quickly turn into ideology as faith. This transition, as highlighted by Krips (2018), takes place when the beliefs of others become our beliefs as well. In this way, the ideology of belief becomes faith when we start to share the beliefs of others and let them become the reasoning behind our actions and words.

With a similar logic, Slavoj Žižek, a Marxist and Lacanian philosopher, understands ideology as the persistent discourse that dictates people's actions and promotes/sustains the broader social structures in place. According to Žižek (2009), through ideology, individuals gain a false consciousness, an illusionary representation of reality reflecting broader societal structures, ultimately affecting their everyday practice and thought patterns. In this way, though ideology affects our consciousness and how we think and behave, the actual process of ideological interpolation is both unconscious and conscious. This is clearly understood when Žižek points out

that individuals know ideologies are present in the world and understand them as false but continue to follow them and allow them to sway their behaviours (Žižek, 2009). Furthermore, ideology implies that individuals are unaware of their conscious beliefs and how they unquestioningly follow the dominant patterns of society. In this way, individuals are blind to the world's reality and how they have been taught, through ideology, to conceive it (Žižek, 2009).

Žižek (1994) sees ideology as not necessarily false or true; it can be either. This does not truly matter, though, since ideology works through how the content of it relates to individuals. Therefore, ideology for Žižek operates through its ability to connect with people and their other beliefs, the dominant beliefs already present within a society. In this way, ideology only works when it successfully manages an individual's everyday interactions and persuades them to act in accordance with the broader structures (Žižek, 2009). An example of this, taken from the *Sublime Object of Ideology*, is of a German man and his confusing feelings towards his Jewish neighbour. Within this example, Žižek highlights that the German man has specific beliefs (antisemitic) from the society he lives in; these beliefs dictate his actions, where the problem arises for him when he meets his Jewish neighbour who does not fit within the ideological stereotypes he has been exposed to. Once meeting his neighbour, the German man sees that the beliefs he follows are proven wrong, but because of the hold ideology has on him, he takes the actions of his Jewish neighbour, regardless of whether they match his beliefs, and finds a way still to dislike his neighbour (Žižek, 2009). In simpler terms, the German man, regardless of the reality, will find a way to keep his beliefs on his Jewish neighbour.

From this example, ideology's main aim is the attitude it demands and the behaviour it promotes. Regarding why ideology continues to stay popular and reproduce itself, Žižek (2009) highlights the ideological quilt. This quilt comprises all floating beliefs/ideological elements

coming together and creating a more concrete ideology. Once the quilt has been weaved, it is held together by larger social structures which people already flock to, such as religion, class, politics, etc. (Žižek, 2009). Overall, Žižek understands ideology as the influenced consciousness of individuals and the blurring of reality in adherence to broader social structures.

As suggested by Žižek and Althusser, the broader social structures within society construct how individuals see things, ultimately affecting their actions. Furthermore, I agree with Žižek in his understanding that ideologies can be true or false since I consider that ideology can spring from something that was once true but can also come from something that has never been true. For example, my previous chapter discusses rape myths. These beliefs, which dominate Western society, have been proven false and come from false knowledge. Though this has been proven, like Žižek example of the German man, individuals continue to believe them because it is part of the dominant belief and supported by the social structures and institutions (and it contributes to the reproduction of those structures).

In addition to Žižek, I will use Pfaller's and Althusser's ideological theory. Pfaller and Althusser are pertinent to my research as they highlight how ideology is illustrated through actions. I believe this is an important aspect to consider, as words and actions do not always align. In looking at actions, we can clearly see one's personal conviction and its true meaning. In this way, individuals can say something, but their bodies will always betray them and tell something different. Furthermore, Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses is useful to my analysis as it deals with the structures in society that not only produce but reproduce and sustain the ideologies that ultimately affect sexual assault disclosure.

Critiques of Ideology

Though I have decided to use the theory of ideology, it faces several criticisms despite its prevalence and use in academia. Sharpe (2006) generally critiques that ideology is too broadly defined. In this way, there are too many contradicting understandings of ideology. For example, Gerring (1997) highlights that current ideological definitions continue to have different subject matter, locations, positions, and functions. Due to this, ideology has become incredibly manipulatable and applicable to various topics (Gerring, 1997). Another critique Sharpe (2006) offers is that most theories of ideology depend on an objective other or truth. In this way, ideology would have something to measure up against, which would highlight its falsity.

Regarding this critique, Žižek, Pfaller, and Althusser bring in a concrete definition of ideology, highlighting that it is both theoretical and political as well as imaginary and material, meaning that ideology is a complex notion of beliefs illustrated through actions created by the dominant social structures in society. In this way, Ideology as theoretical is a tool to understand the affects ideology has within our society, whereas ideology as political constitutes the beliefs and ideas that coming from those in power, (, the ruling class) are shared by society. By using these theorists' understanding, I can evade the limitations of many ideological theories. Regarding ideology manipulability, I will adhere strictly to the combined definition of ideology these theorists bring in, ideology is the beliefs, practices, rituals, and behaviours produced and maintained by those in power, the ruling class. In using this definition, I can make sure I am following one subject matter, the beliefs and practices which occur during sexual assault disclosure and one location. Concerning the second critique, Žižek firmly states that ideology does not have to be true nor false; it can be either, neither, or both. Furthermore, Althusser articulates that though ideology is imaginary, ergo false, it is real through actions making it true. These understandings are helpful to

me since the ideological systems pertaining to patriarchy, violence, and gender related to the topic of this research cannot be proven to come from truth or falsity.

Concerning the relevance of the Marxian theory of ideology, as mentioned above within my work, I expect that experiences of disclosures will be overrun with ideological moments. In this way, I believe that the way individuals respond to women's disclosure of sexual assault will directly result from the ideological beliefs that currently exist within Western society. The ideologies I expect to find revolve around gender, subjective violence, and patriarchy, which, as I will show, are circular concepts in that they all support and lead to each other. These concepts are included as they are all related to ideological beliefs held by the current Western society, Canada and America, where my research is taking place.

In what follows, I will explain the ways in which different systems of ideological domination, gender and patriarchy, and different forms of violence relate to my research.

Gender

In understanding the concept of gender, I have decided to employ Judith Butler's approach as she clearly outlines the concept of gender, gender norms, and how these issues relate to the current subordination and oppression of women throughout history.

As understood by Butler (1999), gender is a socially constructed term assigned to specific biological attributes, genitals. Furthermore, gender is the cultured meaning the sexed body takes on (Butler, 1986/1999). Elaborating on this, Ahmed (2016), in an interview with Butler, illustrates that gender is an assignment and label. In other words, gender is assigned to all during their birth. In our societies, the genders that are assigned include male and female. With these terms comes a designated set of presumptions and norms. Expanding on this, Butler (1986) explains that to be considered female and/or a woman, one must have a specific biology (genitals). However, in her

later work, Butler recognizes the changing relationship between gender and sex; they no longer must match one another.

I argue that the norms that have subordinated and dictated women's position in society continue to follow a biological standpoint. In this way, our society continues to connect gender and sex to one another and follows the social norms and ideologies which support this belief. Further building on norms, Butler (1986/1999) illustrates that gender is performative, meaning that women behave in certain ways to fit within their assigned gender roles. Gender norms can be understood as the beliefs and practices which dictate male and female behaviours, attributes, practices, and roles (Butler, 1999/2004). Butler (1999) highlights that these norms work to establish a regulatory function that controls the actions and behaviours of men and women. In this way, gender is understood as an internalized feature which produces our mental and bodily acts. Furthermore, gender norms are used to distinguish between those who are enacting gender correctly and those who are not (Butler, 1999/2004). Ultimately, gender, working as a performative practice is used to regulate the human body and create the standards by which men and women should live.

Regarding gender as a performative nature, Borgerson (2005), through their reading of Judith Butler, explains that gender is a performance in that women act in specific ways, that may be contradictory to their thoughts and feelings when they are out in the world. In this way, women put on a show to fit into the world they are walking out into. For example, when women visit countries where hijabs are typically enforced on all domestic women, though they are not from that country, they will wear a hijab in compliance with the female norms to match their environment.

Performances can further be understood as norm iterations, the repetition of certain behaviours, which continuously produce and maintain the illusion of a natural category of behaviour, such as gender (Borgerson, 2005). Additionally, Borgerson (2005) highlights that without repetitive behaviour, the natural categories of behaviour would disperse and be no more. Building on this, Butler (1999), illustrates that “gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (p.). In this way, gender as performance is sustained and sustains the gender norms present within society.

Overall, as illustrated, gender is a constructed term associated with biological sex. Furthermore, gender imposes conscious and unconscious performative requirements among people, specifically women. These performance requirements, coming in the form of gender roles and practices, designate women into subordinated positions to men, allowing the violence they face to be minimized. Additionally, due to regulatory gendered norms, women continue to be placed on a hierarchy, continuously being compared to other women and men. When a woman does not fit in, she is ostracized from society due to their lack of adherence to “the way things are and ought to be.” This ostracization can involve different kinds of violence.

In the subsection that follows, I will explain the different types of violence that exist within our society, as found by Žižek. Furthermore, I will highlight why this concept is valuable to my research.

Violence

Žižek's (2008) book on violence states that violence is inherent within every system. This includes direct physical violence, along with subtler forms such as coercion. Regardless of the form of violence, it is meant to sustain the dominant systems of oppression in society (Žižek, 2008).

Expanding on this view of Violence, Žižek (2008) highlights three forms in any given society: subjective, objective, and systemic. Subjective violence relates to the display of one's own subjective ideas and beliefs (Packman, 2016). From his perspective, subjective violence is the most visible: crime and terror, civil unrest, and international conflict (Packman, 2016; Žižek, 2008). Additionally, subjective violence always has a visible culprit, meaning there is always someone to punish for committing violent acts (Van der Linden, 2012). In this way, subjective violence is used by individuals or groups to illustrate their feelings in a specific manner. Van Der Linden (2012), through the interpretation of Žižek's work on violence, highlights that subjective violence is "a process of physical force, or a "mental blow," often suddenly and unexpectedly aimed at its victims. Subjective violence, in its most basic form, involves agents generating physical force through their own bodies (stabbing, hitting, etc.) or an immediate extension of their bodies (shooting), and this physical force then strikes the victim. In psychological violence, the "mental blow" against the victim is also usually directly generated by the perpetrator (shouting, threatening, simulating killing, etc.)." Ultimately, as we see here, subjective violence is violence which takes place by an individual toward another individual directly. This violence is most visibilized by society. Furthermore, these actions are based on an individual's beliefs about right and wrong.

An example of this would be femicide, the targeting and murder of women because they are women. In these situations, typically targeted by men, women are the victims of individual

beliefs and ideas. Ultimately, subjective violence is violence which is typically visible to all and used to express an individual or group perspective on a specific topic.

Objective violence is the more subtle form of harm which takes place behind the scenes. This violence is often invisibilized by ever-present and over-medialized subjective violence (Packman, 2016; Žižek, 2008). Included within objective violence are symbolic and systemic forms of violence. Žižek (2008) views symbolic violence to be violence shown through language. This form of violence exists both in the obvious and discrete, taking place between everyday individuals and the systems in practice. This form of violence is ingrained within the social structures and institutional practices and inflicts significant harm upon individuals even when subjective violence is not occurring (Van der Linden, 2012). Furthermore, systemic violence pertains to our society's general economy and industries. In other words, the functioning of our capitalist society is an inherently violent process that leaves a plethora of harm and suffering (Van der Linden, 2012). This type of violence is considered 'normal' because it fits the typical state of affairs and is not as visibly heinous as subjective violence. This type of violence is seen more significantly, meaning it is ingrained within the dominant systems and institutions in power (Žižek, 2008)

In my research, I will approach the experiences of sexual assault disclosure as subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is pertinent in the case of sexual assault as it is subjective violence in itself. During a sexual assault, an individual is brutally attacked by another individual who had the intention to abuse them sexually. Objective violence is relevant to experiences and disclosures of sexual assault as they are often perceived in a manner that follows society's prejudiced beliefs, systemic violence. Furthermore, within the realm of objective

violence, women's disclosures are further subjected to symbolic violence, which is often expressed through words.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy can be understood as an ideological perspective, a set of beliefs or ideas, that refers to control and power between individuals of any gender, in this case women, by a system dominated by men as a gendered construction (Akgul, 2017). Patriarchy can refer to several power relations between individuals, including fathers over their children, men over women, men over men, and women over women. As bell hooks (2004) highlighted, a patriarchal relationship can occur between almost anyone. She clarifies that modern-day patriarchal relationships are not to be understood as purely gendered but also classist and ableist. As my work does not focus on men who have been sexually victimized, I will be focusing on women as the subject of patriarchal relations. Furthermore, though I recognize that patriarchy happens between either gender, I will follow a more in-tune understanding that sees patriarchy as the subjugation and oppression of women by the current system primarily dominated by men (Akgul, 2017; Walby, 1990).

Having this broad understanding, the next subsection will first introduce a Marxist and radical feminist perspective of patriarchy, as these are perspectives I chose to follow, highlighting the introduction of a patriarchal system. Next, I will highlight this concept's critiques and its limitations. To end, I will illustrate why and how this concept will help me in the formulation and answering of my research question.

Marxist and Radical Feminisms

From a Marxist perspective, patriarchy is part of the superstructure of our capitalist society (Hamilton, 2012). Furthermore, the creation of patriarchal ideology comes from the labour division between men and women and the different classes of women (Cappuccilli & Ferrari, 2022). The

shift towards a patriarchal society ultimately resulted in a large change to the societal ideologies surrounding women and the value of their reproductive powers. This shift will be explained in detail below.

Marxists argue that during the seventeenth century, there was a shift from a feudal to a capitalist society in Europe (Hamilton, 2012). During the feudal era, women of all classes were economically productive. In this way, though men were given land on their master's property, women were considered partners to their husbands in all aspects of the home and work (Federici, 2004; Hamilton, 2012). Furthermore, women could inherit familial land and commonly managed it (Federici, 2004). Women were more equal to men during this period because they were less dependent on them, either their kin or spouse, while also being “less differentiated by them physically, socially, and psychologically.” (Federici, 2004, p. 25). Furthermore, women were less subservient to men's needs during this time and were recognized for their contributions to their families and land at large. Though women were not controlled indefinitely by their male family members, they were commanded by the masters of the land that they resided on (Federici, 2004).

With the removal of familial land and the introduction of waged labour outside the home, women's roles ultimately shifted. With this shift came a disdain for women and a devaluation of their work. To clarify, women were now seen as incapable of completing their roles, motherhood and work, so they were classified as burdens to men (Hamilton, 2012). They were considered burdens because women could not perform both tasks. Furthermore, women's roles, motherhood and house rendering, ceased to be viewed as real work as they did not contribute to the production of capital in a direct way (Federici, 2004).

Overall, the transition from a feudal system to one of capitalism and outside production led to this shift in gender dynamics because women in the feudal system were considered invaluable;

they were part of the familial labour force and were recognized for their work. Within the capitalist system, women were forced to work inside the home, where their labour was no longer considered valuable. In this way, women were forced to live in poor conditions while holding low-paying positions or were forced to rely upon others to subsidize their minuscule incomes (Federici, 2004). In addition to low-paying jobs, women struggled to find work as they could not readily travel if they were pregnant or had young children (Federici, 2004). Overall, regardless of what women did during this period of capitalism, their work was found to be inferior to that of men, and this was reflected in the lessened wages they received in comparison to men.

Unlike the Marxist perspective, radical feminists argue that the social difference between women and men, the patriarchal ideology, has risen out of the cultural interpretations of their biological differences (Hamilton, 2012). In this way, the differences perceived among men and women are a social process where cultural expectations are created to dictate the actions of both men and women. Furthermore, they highlight a patriarchal beginning to religion, specifically the formation of the protestant church (Hamilton, 2012). Under this religion, women were depicted as subservient and submissive to the very will of their husbands. Additionally, wives were meant to be companions and helpmates rather than equal partners to their husbands (Hamilton, 2012). Ultimately, women were considered inferior to their husbands as she was to be obedient and submit to their every whim and call.

Limitations

Marxists, as I have shown, see patriarchy as a result of class and labour disparities between men and women, as well as women and women. For their part, feminists do not discuss the class differences and labour distribution that have labelled women inferior to men. Since these theories rectify each other, using both is in my best interest.

As stated above, the concepts of gender, violence and ideology are all connected because although they are not ideologies in their own right, they are all supported by societal ideologies and beliefs. In this way, these concepts all concern ideological beliefs. Additionally, these concepts all feed into each other. Starting with the concept of gender. If there were no gender divide and no gender norms that created standards to be followed, individuals would not face vulnerability and violence as a result of their performance of gender. Furthermore, their vulnerability would not lead to violence because the distinction in gender and roles would be unimportant. Concerning patriarchy, once again, if there were no gender, there would be no gender divide within things such as the workforce, education, etc. Moreover, no violence would be against individuals, especially women, who fall out of the patriarchal norms. Shifting to violence, though I believe violence can thrive on any practice, ideology, or concept, I believe it would be less prevalent if gender and patriarchal distinctions were removed or seen as less critical within Western society.

Regarding the relevance of these concepts for my topic of interest, they are important because they affect all interactions women go through. In this way, highlighting Ahmed's (2016) interview with Butler, women are vulnerable due to their gender in a patriarchal world. This vulnerability often results in violence, either subjective or objective. Concerning disclosure interactions, the individuals that women go to are undoubtedly affected by the dominant ideologies which circulate in our society. These ideologies ultimately affect how these individuals respond, either through words or actions, to these women and in turn these responses affect how women construct their experiences of sexual assault.

Section 2: Application of Theory

In this final section, I will explain how I have utilized ideology and three key concepts - violence, gender, and patriarchy - to formulate my research question and analyze my empirical material.

Additionally, I will demonstrate how Žižekian, Pfaller and Althusser's ideology, will allow me to complete my analysis and answer my research question.

As discussed above, ideology, as understood by Žižek, is the persistent discourse within our society which dictates individuals' everyday actions while also upholding the dominant social institutions. Furthermore, ideology can be understood as beliefs and ideals shared between those of the ruling/upper class which influence the behaviours and practices of a society. Ultimately, Žižek views ideology as the beliefs, behaviours, and practices circulating in our society that work to uphold the dominant social institutions and to which individuals adhere to make sense of their realities. Ultimately, ideology functions to structure the reality of individuals in an unconscious way. As mentioned above, I am using this theory because I expect disclosure interactions to include many ideological beliefs concerning gender, violence, and patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, I am using Pfaller's theory of ideology because, like Althusser, he specifically highlights the importance of actions. In this way, Pfaller focuses on the ways in which individuals' actions are connected to either belief or faith. Regarding actions as the consequence of belief, Pfaller explains that these beliefs are not personal. In fact, actions due to belief can be compared to a mob mentality. In this situation, individuals are acting in a certain way due to the volition and personal beliefs of the majority. Shifting the focus, the ideology of faith deals with personal convictions, meaning individuals rationalize and create reasons for having their ideals. Ultimately, using Pfaller's theory is beneficial in creating and answering my research question, as his understanding of ideology highlights actions and behaviours.

Regarding gender, I believe the social norms and roles surrounding gender will be shown through these interactions, specifically by the individual being disclosed to. Furthermore, I believe that patriarchal beliefs about women will be expressed regarding the social norms and their

position in society, their subordination and exclusion from creating the standards of belief and practice. As a result of both these ideological standpoints, I hope to highlight the violence women face when interactions go poorly and follow the dominant discourse of Western society.

Applying ideology and the above concepts will allow me to engage with how women construct their disclosure experiences. Using the theories of ideology, I can understand the relationship between the current belief system, gender, violence, and patriarchy, which affect how women's disclosures occur. In other words, by understanding the beliefs of the individual disclosing and their disclosure person, I can link a correlative relationship between the current societal view of sexual assault victims and how they construct their own experiences of sexual assault disclosure.

Overall, ideology and above concepts allow me to elaborate the following question: What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and forms of subjective and objective violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.

Chapter III: Methodological Approach

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach I adopted to answer my research question and to collect and analyze my data. With the goal of learning the experiences of women who disclose sexual assault to informal and formal support and the contexts around disclosure, my research asked the question: What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.?

To complete my research, I conducted a qualitative and documentary research. I also followed a constructivist method for the production of my data. I completed a qualitative analysis as I am concerned with the subjective experiences of each individual woman and with the ideological dimension of these experiences. I also wanted to know whether there are similarities, themes, that are readily present despite experiences being isolated from each other. In looking at documents, I was able to go through the interactions each woman faced and gain insight into the interaction of sexual assault disclosure itself, but also the way women were feeling during their disclosures. Additionally, in looking at documents, I was able to see the effect their disclosure experiences have had on them. For the analysis of my sample, I employed a qualitative reflexive content/thematic analysis, as understood by Braun and Clarke (2021AB).

As part of my sampling, I analyzed five memoirs written in Canada and the USA over the last twenty-five years to reach my goals. This approach was beneficial to my work as it is attainable considering my time constrain of two years and has been thoroughly explained.

The structure of my chapter is as follows. 1) First, the epistemological approach I employed will be explained. 2) Next, I explain my sampling strategy and describe the memoirs that were selected for this research. In this section, my reasoning for choosing each biography will be presented and a brief introduction will be made for each memoir and its subsequent author. 3) Within the third section, data production will be explained; this will entail how my empirical material, biographies, was collected. 4) Following this section, my analysis strategy will be introduced. This will include a step-by-step explanation of content/thematic analysis and the steps I used to answer my research question. 5) Following this, ethical considerations for this project will be explained. 6) To finish, the limitations of my research will be discussed.

Section 1: Epistemological Approach

Paradigm

Within my research, knowledge was created from my interaction with women's constructed experiences of sexual assault disclosure. Additionally, since I did not interact with these women in person, I instead read their memoirs and looked at the social context in which they disclosed since this ultimately affects how they constructed or interpreted their disclosure experiences.

Secondly, knowing that my understanding of experiences is subjective and influenced by my preconceptions and beliefs, I actively identified and was aware of them. In this way, my previous understanding of the disclosure may have affected how I understood what I read and interacted with the material. To keep this under check, I actively identified my initial thought process since it is more likely to follow stereotypes and preconceived ideas and then actively worked away from them. In keeping track of these beliefs, I kept a reflection journal and actively worked to understand where these ideas came from to keep them from skewing my work to fit with what I wanted it to. In other words, though my work is subjective and interpreted by my

understanding, I cannot let them take over or skew them to prove what I believe. I looked for genuine experiences rather than undertaking authentic experiences.

Within my research I sought out multiple truths by reading several memoirs to bring them together and create a broader and more wholesome truth about the experiences of sexual assault disclosure women have. Truth within my research constituted the subjective understandings individuals or groups have. In this way, truth is created not out of an objective reality but from the actual lived experiences and beliefs of individuals. In other words, truth is about how individuals conceptualize a thing, experience, or situation. With this logic, a more wholesome truth is one that is encompassing of multiple experiences sharing similar characteristics. In this way, I took the perspectives of multiple women and came to a comprehensive truth that is evident within all their memoirs. In doing this, my research is not generalizable to the more significant population. I tried to understand the experiences of some and not all women to get a more sophisticated understanding.

Lastly, in completing the analysis, I took individuals experiencing the phenomena of disclosure and, as an outsider, tried to get a sense of it. I wanted to know what caused them to interpret their disclosures this way. In this way, I tried to understand their process of constructing these experiences.

As highlighted, my research project sought to create knowledge from experiences. To interpret and incorporate disclosure as accurately as possible, I used a reflection journal. I also sought a more authentic truth, not one singular one. I do not believe there is one single experience of sexual assault disclosure, and I simply looked to find a more wholesome truth by bringing multiple experiences together. Finally, in recognizing myself as an outsider, I actively worked to represent each women's experiences as accurately as possible.

Section 2: Sampling

To approach women's sexual assault disclosure experiences, I chose to investigate memoirs. A memoir, as understood by Couser (2012), is a text written to present the self through actual lived experiences. Supporting this, Dukes (n.d.) defines a memoir as a narrative written from the author's perspective. In its simplest form, memoirs can be understood as self-life writing (Couser, 2012). In self-life writing, the author focuses on a specific instance or event they have experienced and conveys it to their audience to share an essential part of themselves. Within this broad definition, memoirs can take place in various forms: films, songs, stories, etc. The type I chose to focus on is the written memoir.

As part of my sampling strategy, I chose five memoirs that explicitly discuss sexual assault, in most cases rape, written by women within Canada and the USA. I chose to include American memoirs due to there being an insufficient number of Canadian-written memoirs discussing sexual assault disclosure that matched my criteria. My timeline for these memoirs was between twenty to twenty-five years. Though this was my timeline for written work, some experiences took place out of this range. I chose to include these, though, as not many memoirs explicitly share the experiences of disclosure, and the experiences and feelings created through it. In choosing the memoirs, the following criteria were deployed, (1) the author is a self-identified female person, (2) Canadian or American, (3) written within the last twenty-five years. Memoirs were explicitly chosen as my empirical material because they gave me insight into the perspective and lived experience of women who have disclosed sexual assault. I focused my research on women because their experiences are more easily accessible, in terms of written memoirs than others. I felt that focusing on children would be too taxing on my well-being, especially considering the time constraints I had to finish this thesis. Furthermore, I felt focusing on men would also be incredibly

time-consuming as there are no extensive sources of material where they express their experiences of sexual assault and their subsequent disclosures. I also focused on women because their experiences are something that I, as a woman, can empathize with.

The memoirs chosen consist of the following: *Crying Wolf* by Eden Boudreau (2023), *One Hour in Paris* by Karin L. Freedman (2014), *Wide Open* by D.M. Ditson (2019), *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller (2019), and lastly *Lucky* by Alice Sebold (1999).

Eden Boudreau is a writer from Halifax, Canada living with her three sons and husband. Her memoir discusses her experience of sexual assault while highlighting her experience of initial disclosure and the disclosures that would follow in the years to come (Boudreau, 2023; CBC/Radio Canada, 2023). Boudreau's story is different compared to the other memoirs collected. Identifying as a bisexual and polyamorous woman, she struggled to disclose her experience of sexual assault (Walker, 2023). Karin Freedman is an associate professor in the philosophy department at the University of Guelph. She resides in Toronto with her partner and continues to work concerning sexual assault (Freedman, 2014). Where else the other memoirs take place in Canada or America, Freedman's unique experience occurs in Paris, France. Although her experience occurs outside of the countries in my research criteria, her memoir was chosen because the disclosure occurred in Canada (Freedman, 2014). D.M. Ditson resides in Nelson, British Columbia, with her partner, where she continues to work as a communications strategist, journalist, and author (Ditson, 2023). Within her memoir, Ditson discusses her journey to recovery after sexual assault, highlighting her unique experience and hoping it can help other women recover (Ditson, 2023). Alice Sebold is an American novelist focusing primarily on fiction (Brennan, 2003). For reference, she wrote the book 'The Lovely Bones.' In her memoir, Sebold explains the circumstances of her rape and how it forever changed her life (Sebold, n.d.). Lastly, Chanel Miller is a writer and artist living in

America. Her memoir explains how she was sexually assaulted by an Athlete at her university and how people reacted when she disclosed this (Miller, 2023).

Section 3: Data Production

I began my search for memoirs with a broad internet search. During this search, I looked up ‘memoirs of sexual assault,’ ‘rape memoirs,’ ‘stories of sexual assault,’ etc. in both Canada and the USA. After having a good list of memoirs, I reviewed them to ensure they fit my timeline and gendered expectations. For this part, I read the synopsis of each book. When I figured out the five memoirs I wanted to use, I searched to see if these books were accessible, English, fairly priced, and either deliverable or close to my location. Fortunately, these memoirs are English, reasonably priced, and available via Amazon, Indigo, Good Reads, etc. Ultimately, the five memoirs I chose met the criteria I initially set out with.

With this research, I hope to expand the scope of how sexual assault disclosure is understood by highlighting the way these women construct their experiences of it. Additionally, my work will deviate from others by not labelling experiences definitively, such as positive or negative experiences. Instead, through my work, I aim to show that experiences are conceptualized differently by all women. To classify their experience is to limit the true impact it had on their life. Through my analysis, I will not use definitive terms but let the data speak for itself and use themes within the text.

In my research, I looked for other themes relating to ideological comments pertaining to gender or patriarchal standards. For this, I looked for insults directed towards the women disclosing sexual assault, stereotypes expressed by both the individual disclosing and their disclosure person, rape myths and gender presumptions and norms, gossip, etc. I also focused on themes related to experiences of disclosures, interactions of disclosure, the feelings that arise from

sexual assault and how they may change with disclosure. In this way, I looked at sentences the authors use to describe their interactions. Moreover, I looked for keywords such as “I felt,” “they looked,” etc. Additionally, for these interactions and how the authors conceptualize them, I paid close attention to the wording used and the tone that is set. To do this, I carefully looked for changes in the dialogue throughout each memoir. In addition to interaction, I looked at changes in self-perspective, how women viewed themselves before disclosing, after disclosing, and by the end of their memoir. To find these changes and perspectives, I looked for any sentences where the author addresses themselves or expresses their feeling. Furthermore, for this general theme, I looked for instances depicting self-blame, such as sentences saying “it was my fault” or “I should have known better,” self-hatred, etc. (ideology). Lastly, I looked at how objective violence is present in their lives after sexual assault. To do this, I looked at how these women's lives have changed; for this, I looked for sentences describing new fears, and the overall negative impacts they have felt, such as not being able to go outside, be intimate with their partners, go to work, etc.

Locating these themes related to the above sections is vital as it allowed me to properly code and analyze my data. Furthermore, having these guiding principles allowed me to focus the majority of my attention on the codes that are pertinent to my research instead of going into my search blindly and over-coding.

Having the process of locating memoirs, the purpose of research highlighted, and the mode by which I will use to find codes and create themes, the next section will illustrate how this empirical material was analyzed. This will explain a qualitative reflexive content/thematic analysis and its coding process.

Section 4: Analysis

Reflexive Content/Thematic Analysis

Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis of my empirical material were deployed. To start, a qualitative analysis method seeks to interpret and describe the significance found in language. Qualitative content analysis helps the researcher understand why, how, and what happens behind specific experiences or behaviours. Furthermore, the primary goal of any qualitative analysis is to better understand a phenomenon by looking at the experiences of individuals directly impacted by that phenomenon or involved in it (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). A thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to organize and analyze various discursive data sets (Dawandi, 2020). When using content and thematic analysis, a researcher works to identify, analyze, and report repeated themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Moreover, content/thematic analysis works to find patterns within data that are important or interesting (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

As already said, I conducted a content and thematic analysis as part of a constructivist paradigm. I found this method particularly useful because it allowed me to understand and illustrate how a wide variety of women, in my case five, construct experiences. Having this basic understanding of content and thematic analysis, I will now explain why I chose to use reflexive content/thematic analysis. As coined by Braun and Clarke, a reflexive content/thematic analysis builds upon its predecessor, the content/thematic analysis, while highlighting the subjective involvement of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021A). Furthermore, a reflexive approach involves the researcher being more engaged with their work, meaning the researcher must become fully aware of their thought process and how they may have preconceived notions of the material they are looking at (Braun & Clarke, 2021B).

When completing a reflexive content/thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke highlight a six-step coding process. To start, the researcher must familiarize themselves with their data (Bryne,

2022; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Dawandi, 2020; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017).

Familiarization with Data

When familiarizing oneself with the data, the researcher must repeatedly read through their empirical material (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This stage, which starts during data collection, helps the researcher determine the type and number of codes or themes that could emerge from the data set (Dawandi, 2020; Terry et al., 2017). Moreover, this stage involves organizing raw data and documentation of theoretical and reflective thought (Nowell et al., 2017). To simplify, this stage entails the researcher reading and rereading their data to identify information that may be relevant to their research project (Bryne, 2022). This initial step is incredibly important as it informs the rest of the coding process and informs the researcher of their data depth (Dawandi, 2020).

To complete this stage, I read each memoir and identified phrases that were relevant to my research question. After reading through each memoir, I created a Word document to record all the important phrases that I had highlighted. Once this stage was finished, I moved on to the next stage of my coding process, which involved narrowing down the pertinent codes even further.

Initial Coding

The second phase, generating initial codes, includes the researcher taking notes on data items that are of interest, writing down questions and looking for connections between data items (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). During this stage, the researcher generates basic codes, not themes. Codes, as illustrated by Kiger and Varpio (2020) and taken from Boyatzis (1998), are ‘[t]he most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon.’ Once the initial codes are located, a coding framework will then follow to guide the rest of the research (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In other words, these initial codes

create the building blocks of the analysis process (Terry et al., 2017). Codes, as they are, can be tied to semantic or latent meaning and may be inductive or deductive. In my case, I have decided to look for latent themes within my data by completing an inductive analysis. As understood by Bryne (2022), latent codes go beyond the surface. In other words, in searching for latent codes, the researcher seeks to identify the underlying assumptions and hidden meaning informing the data set (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). When looking for latent codes, the researcher becomes more interpretive, playing an active role in identifying which codes are relevant or irrelevant to the research question (Bryne, 2022). Shifting the focus, an inductive analysis stays true to the data set, looking for themes found within the data (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). In this way, the themes identified during the last coding process will be linked to the original data and reflective of the entire data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). During this process, the researcher can easily become muddled or disorganized with their data during this stage. To keep track of this, journaling is recommended. In keeping a journal, the researcher can identify their thought process and codes that interest them.

During this stage of the process, I reviewed my initial findings and worked to distill the codes which I found pertinent to answering my research questions. To do this, I highlighted everything that seemed valuable to my research within each memoir's codebook. Furthermore, during this stage, I was able to see the beginning of themes within each memoir. To keep track of why each code was pertinent, my initial reaction, and content/thematic formulation beginnings I kept a digital journal attached to my codes in the form of comments. Overall, in completing this stage, I was able to go through my initial codes and highlight phrases which seemed important to my research and the answering of my research question.

Searching for Themes

The third phase of the coding process, searching for themes³, involves the researcher reviewing their previous codes and data extracts to find themes that represent a broader significance within the data (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020). During this phase, the focus is on finding patterns and relationships between the entire data set (Dawandi, 2020). To simplify this process, Kiger and Vaprio (2020) use the analogy of a house; in this way, they explain that “if your entire analysis is seen as a house, the individual codes are the bricks and tile, and themes are the walls and the roof. The process of theme identification – how those walls and roof are built – is fundamentally an active and interpretive process” (p. 850).

Though the researcher begins their theme extraction/creation, this phase is not finite; it is flexible, meaning all themes are open to change (Hayfield et al., 2017). Once a theme has been identified, the researcher creates a hierarchy of themes, identifying the main themes and the sub-themes to follow (Nowel et al., 2017). The most important part of this phase is that themes, codes, and data item patterns help the researcher answer their research question (Bryne, 2022). To summarize, during phase three, the researcher will look for patterns within the data from a rather deductive perspective.

When looking for themes, I once again reviewed my word document containing all my original coding. At this stage, I was able to go through these codes and extract quotes which seems relevant in the answering of my research question. To do this, I separated the notes I had by memoir and found the pertinent themes within each one. When looking for themes within each memoir, I started by simply locating every possible theme. Ultimately, during this stage, I ended up with about seven to nine themes in each memoir (see Figure 1). Once these general themes were located,

³ As understood by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes are understood as patterned responses or meanings taken from the data set.

I looked to see if any themes were similar or fell into a hierarchal order. After completing this stage, I then compared each memoirs' themes and found similarities and differences between them.

Figure 1: Initial Themes

Crying Wolf by Eden Boudreau	One Hour in Paris by Karyn L. Freedman	Know My Name by Channel Miller	Lucky by Alice Sebold	Wide Open by DM Ditson
1. Gendered Ideologies	1. Gendered Ideologies	1. Gendered Ideologies	1. Gendered Ideologies	1. Gendered Ideologies
2. Gendered Rules	2. Disclosure Choice	2. Disclosure Choice	2. Disclosure Choice	2. Gendered Rules
3. Disclosure Choice	3. Rape Myths	3. Rape Myths	3. Rape Myths	3. Disclosure Choice
4. Rape Myths	4. Multiple Disclosure	4. Multiple Disclosure	4. Multiple Disclosure	4. Rape Myths
5. Multiple Disclosure	5. Self-Blame	5. Self-Blame	5. Blame	5. Multiple Disclosure
6. Self-Blame	6. Shame	6. Shame	6. Lasting Violence	6. Self-Blame
7. Shame	7. Blaming Others/Anger	7. Lasting Violence	7. POV Change	7. Shame
8. Lasting Violence	8. Lasting Violence	8. POV Change		8. Lasting Violence
9. POV Change	9. POV Change			9. POV Change

Reviewing Themes

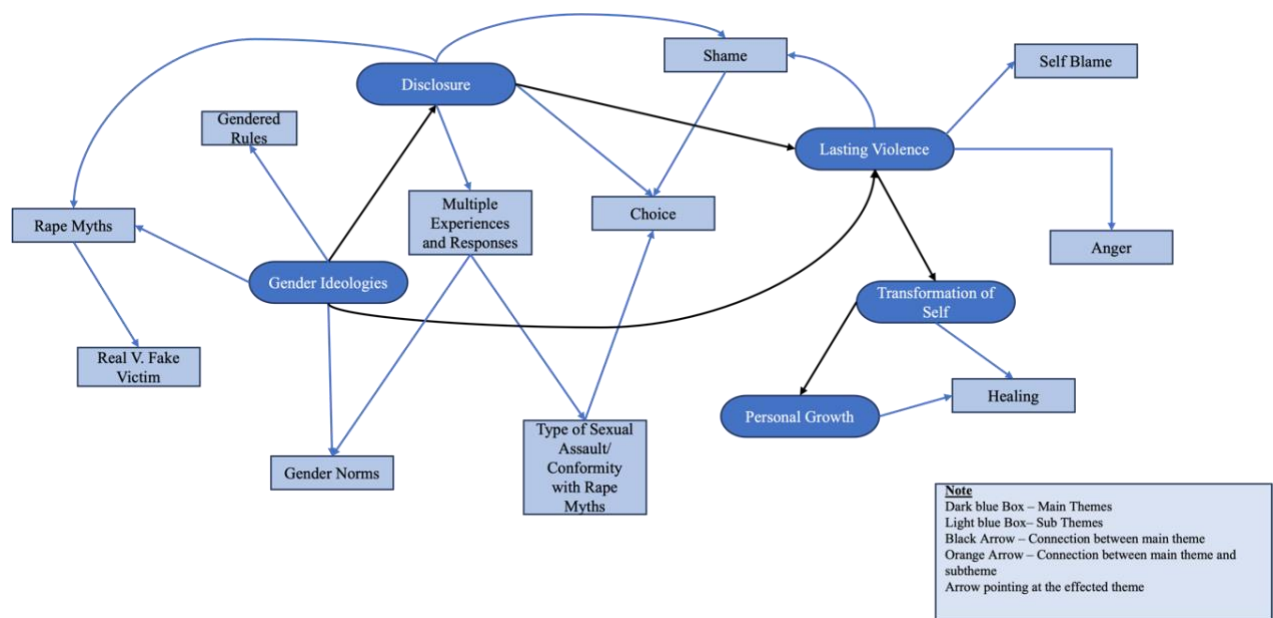
The fourth phase of the coding process sees the researcher reviewing their themes in relation to their codes and the entire data set (Bryne, 2022). In this way, the researcher must make sure the themes work together. In general, when reviewing themes, several questions can be posed. These include, ‘Is this a theme?’ ‘What are the boundaries around this theme?’ ‘Does this theme make sense?’ ‘Is there an overlap between themes?’ (Bryne, 2022; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Furthermore, it introduces a two-level analytical process. During the first level, the researcher reviews the coded data they placed into themes during the previous phase to ensure that they properly fit (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020). During this phase, questions like ‘Does each theme have

enough supporting evidence?’ Is the data included coherent in supporting the theme?’ and ‘Are some themes too large, too small, or out of place?’ (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020, p. 851). Throughout this level, the researcher should keep detailed notes on their decision process (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020). The second level includes the researcher deciding if the individual themes they have found fit within the original data set and can accurately represent the entirety of the data (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020). To do this, Kiger and Vaprio (2020) recommend using a map, as found in Braun and Clarke’s original work on content/thematic analysis coding. A content/thematic map simply puts the researcher’s themes onto paper so they can see how each theme relates or does not relate to the entire data set.

During the completion of this stage, I generated a content/thematic map (see Figure 2) that aided in visualizing my thought process and establishing the precise placement of themes. Transferring my main themes onto paper provided me with a comprehensive overview of how they intertwined. Next, I introduced my sub-themes, which allowed me to observe the interplay between my main and sub-themes. In the end, I identified a total of five main themes and eleven sub-themes.

Figure 2: Content/thematic Map



Defining and Naming Themes

Once themes have been located and reviewed, the researcher then moves on to phase five, defining and naming themes. The researcher must analyze the underlying data items within each theme (Bryne, 2020). Since there will be many items, the researcher must now decide which items to use as extracts when writing their final analysis. To do this, the researcher will return to their content/thematic map and find data items which most consciously highlight their theme and answer their research question (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020).

Shifting the focus from defining themes, naming themes is highly important as it is the first thing readers see. Bryne (2022) highlights that names should be concise, informative, and memorable. Furthermore, they should not be too diverse or complex as it will confuse the reader (Dawandi, 2020). In this way, names should not be mere theme descriptors; they should be creative and catchy. while also highlighting the critical aspects of the theme (Bryne, 2022).

During this stage, I conducted a thorough review of my primary and secondary themes, seeking out descriptive language that would accurately capture the essence of each theme. When selecting the names for my themes, I aimed to strike a balance between being succinct, informative, and imaginative, while simultaneously ensuring that they remained clear and unambiguous for the reader.

Writing a Report

Once all these phases have been completed (familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes) the researcher is now ready to write their final report/ analysis. In producing a final report, Kiger and Vaprio (2020), highlight that narrative and a logical account of how the researcher interpreted their data should be explained. In this way, the researcher must highlight why their selection of themes and data are

essential and relevant to answering their research question. Furthermore, during this end phase, the researcher must concisely highlight their choices, such as the type of analysis, paradigm, etc. (Kiger & Vaprio, 2020).

In writing my analysis, I started by highlighting my findings in a hierarchal and logical way, making sure to start with the most prevalent themes. Furthermore, for this stage, I highlighted the importance of each theme while also working to explain each woman's perspective and my interpretation of each quote used. I related each theme to my theoretical framework and the previous literature to show the reader not only the connection between my research and that of others but also the differences and new understandings my study generated. Once my findings were explained, I then answered my research question, incorporating once again the findings and their theoretical underpinning.

Section 5: Ethical Considerations

When reflecting on my research ethics, several questions come up; these include who owns the data/material/information I used, who should own this information, and who should have access to it. In response to my first question, I automatically answered that the population or participants I looked at owned the data. Though these memoirs have been copyrighted and changed to be published and distributed to the public, each was first approved by the author. Furthermore, each author has acknowledged that their memoirs are as true and accurate as possible. In other words, the only thing I truly own is the analysis since that is what I produced from my participant's experiences. Overall, in recognizing ownership, I had no qualms with only truly owning my analysis since my participants constructed the actual experiences and data I used. Regarding accessibility, I chose for the general population to have full access to my work. In this way, my writing and language are readable for those who have not attended college or university. I kept my

mother and brother in mind when deciding this. My mother, who did not finish high school, was interested in reading what I found and I reciprocated these feelings. Additionally, my brother, who has a learning disability and is a welder, should also be able to understand the words and overall message my work produces. Considering that my work is to be evaluated by a group of academics, I know I must use certain academic jargon and worked to find a balance between the two throughout my work. I have realized my desire for accessibility will depend on my ability to balance my desires versus my requirements.

Building off this, I also used the ethics of trust and reflexivity, as understood by Allen (1994). Within the ethics of trust, the researcher has the responsibility to be mindful, respectful and empower their participants. Since I worked with memoirs, I was continuously mindful of my perceptions and the ways I interacted with them. As stated in the previous section, I kept a reflection journal to help keep myself aware. Regarding respect, I took everything that is said as accurate while also working to actively portray what is said as closely as possible within my work.

Concerning external factors influencing my topic, such as partisan and governmental politics, I did not see them influencing my work directly. Indirectly, I do believe that the current neoliberal governmental atmosphere promotes a capitalistic, and, therefore a patriarchal society, leading to misogyny and violence against women. Furthermore, the current political views have supported policies that put women in situations where they are perceived to be of blame for crimes against them. Concerning gender politics, I do believe that the political environment of gendered inequality and violence has certainly influenced the ways I perceive gender and, therefore, my data, considering I am a woman myself. Knowing of these political agendas, I was conscious of the bias I have against the current view of sexual assault. Regarding internal factors, I may have biases because I am incredibly passionate about my topic due to personal reasons.

Ultimately, to keep my bias in check, as stated before, I will use a reflection journal to ensure my inherent beliefs do not skew the way I understand the experiences I am reading. As with influences, I also had motivations to be mindful of. My internal motivation was to understand sexual assault and how women perceive telling others about it. My external motivation for choosing this project is that current work on disclosure experiences seems insufficient and lacking in terms of gaining the full picture of what women truly go through.

Section 6: Limitations of Research

As with all research, there were limitations to mine. These limitations presented themselves within my use of memories, in the use of a qualitative method and in the tool of reflexive content/thematic analysis. Since memoirs are not the typical source of empirical material, their limitations are ones that were not found within the current literature. The first limitation I encountered was that I could not clarify any of the author's work. In this way, as opposed to interviews, I could not contact the authors and have them clear up what they meant when they wrote their text. This led to the next limitation: everything is based on my textual interpretation. This leads to a risk of my work becoming incredibly subjective and based on opinion rather than focusing on the author's original meaning. To counter both these limitations, I kept a journal to track my reactions and opinions. Furthermore, I took everything the authors say as accurate without needing clarification. In this way, I treated what is written as though the author has nothing left to say about it and, therefore, it must be all. Another limitation within my research is that these memoirs were written by cis-gendered, white passing women who all had a university or college education, highlighting the inequality in who gets to share their experiences of sexual assault through memoir writing. This further goes to illustrate the privilege of writing a memoir and the notions of believability and justice. Additionally, a significant limitation that is present through memoirs is the fact that they

have been copy-edited and printed for the market. In other words, the memoirs I looked at could be exaggerated or censored to fit public demands. As there is no way to overcome this limitation, I remained fully conscious of the memoirs I read and take them as truth. Furthermore, I will continue researching the authors and find other places, the media, lectures, etc., where they may have shared their stories. The last significant risk, pertaining directly to the memoirs is that the authors cannot control how their written word is interpreted. In this way, each woman cannot control how their disclosure is taken when individuals read it leading there to be a variety of interpretations and understandings of their disclosures.

Along with these limitations, qualitative work also faces backlash for not being replicable or generalizable (Mwita, 2022). Concerning replicability, critics claim that due to the subjective nature of qualitative work, it cannot be replicated. In this regard, I believe that replicability is not necessarily crucial since qualitative work simply looks at the words and perspectives of each woman and, therefore, could not be replicated anyway. In other words, during interviews, people may not answer questions the exact same way, nor will a researcher interpret them the same way. That is the beauty of qualitative work because we get so many different researchers' perspectives and can look at a problem in several ways. Concerning generalizability, I was unconcerned since I specifically wanted to look at how the five women within my data constructed their experience. I am not concerned with representing the whole population since I know this would be incredibly out of the scope of a master's thesis. Furthermore, concerning generalizability, due to the problems I discussed earlier with data, most qualitative work tends to involve small samples, making it impossible to generalize for a population (Mwita, 2022).

In addition to their being limited within qualitative research, the reflexive content/thematic analysis also has limitations. Though this research is limited, critics currently argue that

content/thematic analysis abstracts issues and organizes data from the perspective of the researcher (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Like the above statement, content/thematic analysis is constructed around the researcher's subjectivity.

Though these limits are valid and present throughout my research, I believe my research is still important. Regarding subjectivity and bias, I intend, as I have already mentioned, to use a journal to document my thought process to be as unbiased as possible while keeping as true to the text as possible. For this reason, I am completing an inductive analysis and finding my themes and their names within the text, as explained earlier. Regarding the complexity and time-consuming nature of my research, I have already found my empirical material and have created a schedule to follow to keep everything in order. Regardless of the limitations discussed here, my research still identified how women construct their experiences of sexual assault.

Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

As highlighted within my theoretical and methodological chapter, my thesis sought to understand the experiences of women when disclosing instances of sexual assault through the analysis of textual productions. Furthermore, I sought to understand the contexts around sexual assault disclosure. To do this, I asked the question: What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and forms of objective violence are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure?

Additionally, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.? Ultimately, through the analysis of five memoirs, I was able to answer these questions and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences that women have when disclosing sexual assault.

This chapter will first explain the findings from the data I analyzed. I will then pinpoint the relation between these findings and the theoretical framework and concepts I use. These findings will then be compared to previous research to highlight phenomena known and unknown. In the second part of this chapter, I will present the discussion of these results to answer the above research question.

Section 1: Findings

Themes, as understood by Braun and Clarke (2006), are the patterned responses or meanings which are from data sets. By patterned, Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to the similarities between data sets. In this way, a patterned response is something the researcher sees often and can classify as a theme. Considering this distinction, the memoirs I analyzed produced four main themes and several sub-themes that pertain to the subject of this research. The main themes are (1) Impacts, Outcomes, and Considerations of Disclosure within Legal and Social Frameworks, (2) The

Significance, Norms, Stereotypes, and Social Construction as it Pertains to the Holdings of Mainstream Ideological Beliefs Surrounding Victims of Sexual Assault in Western Societies, (3) Violence, Aftermath, and Resilience of Victims, and (4) Exploring the Development of Personal Growth and Self-Healing for Victims.

The following sub-sections will start with a general understanding of each theme and where it fits in terms of the theories and concepts I used. The theories and concepts include ideology, gender, patriarchy, and violence, and will be explained as they arise. Following this, the sub-themes will be explained. To end, I will highlight the current literature in comparison to each section or each section in total.

Impacts, Outcomes, and Considerations of Disclosure within Legal and Social Frameworks

The first theme located within each memoir is centred around disclosure. Disclosure, as understood by Rufa et al. (2022), consists of an individual telling someone, either an informal or formal source, about an assault perpetrated against that individual. Informal disclosures, articulated by Dworkin et al. (2016) and Starzynski et al. (2005), occur when victims turn to informal responders. These include individuals in their social circles like friends, family, partners, etc. By contrast, formal disclosures take place when an individual chooses to go to a formal response, someone who has been trained to handle situations dealing with sexual assault (Starzynski et al., 2005). Formal sources/responders include medical professionals, police officers, mental health professionals, counsellors, etc. Disclosure can occur through various avenues, including face-to-face, over the phone, written, etc. Within this theme, several sub-themes appeared; included in this is the choice of who and when to disclose; multiple forms of disclosure, verbal, written, online, etc.; differing experiences of disclosure as related to ideologies and beliefs about rape; and a fear of disclosing.

This theme is highly affected by ideology, specifically gendered norms, gendered rules, and rape myths. Ideology, as understood by Zizek (2009), is the beliefs, behaviours, and practices that are prevalent within our current society and work to uphold the dominant social structure. Expanding on this, Pfaller and Althusser (2006) illustrate that ideology is further shown through the unconscious and conscious actions of individuals (Krips, 2018). In this way, ideology is both shown through the verbal and bodily expressions of individuals and can be unconscious, individuals simply following the prevalent practices without recognizing them, or conscious, individuals following the dominant practices because they may or may not believe them. Regarding individuals who do not truly believe the ideologies circulating, they may choose to abide by them in order to fit in.

Gender norms, as found by Butler (1999/2004), are the beliefs and practices dictating male and female behaviours, actions, and attributes (physical and emotional). Gendered rules, flowing from gendered norms, are the unspoken rules by which all genders are pressured to abide. These rules stem from our patriarchal society, which places specific roles on women and men. Lastly, rape myths are the “prejudicial, stereotypical, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Burt, 2980, p.). These myths predominantly focus on how women are not to present themselves after they have been sexually assaulted and who can be a victim of sexual assault as well as a perpetrator (Burt, 1980). These myths conform to the stereotypical beliefs of how women are to behave as submissive and subservient, non-promiscuous, and always being a “good girl.” Within my data, this theme is related to the following sub-themes.

Decision-Making Processes and the Roles of Individual Agency Regarding the Choice to Disclose
Choice can be understood as an act of selecting or deciding to do something. It is a practice of “free will” based on several subjective and objective factors, including the beliefs and norms that

circulate throughout society. In my data, the concept of choice appeared for every single woman. Some had the choice to disclose their assaults, whereas others had that choice taken away from them by police officers or the media.

When deciding to disclose an instance of sexual assault, women typically work through an evaluative process where they decide if others will label them a victim, therefore allowing them access to support and acknowledgement (Ahrens et al., 2007). Furthermore, the choice to disclose is affected by the visible social reactions illustrated in the media or by someone known to the victim (Ulman et al., 2020). When looking at each woman's choice to disclose, the evaluative process is inherently visible and is related to ideological assumptions. In this way, most of the women in this study took the time to evaluate whether they should disclose and to whom they should disclose to based on where they fell in relation to the norms of sexual assault. When doing this, each woman took the gendered norms and rules they were consciously aware of that surround sexual assault, applied them to themselves, and then made the decision to disclose based on this evaluative process.

Though several of the women in my study, Boudreau, Freedman, and Ditson, had the choice to disclose their assaults, their choices were plagued by the ideologies, gender norms and rules, they knew to be present within society. In this way, choice is less about rationality and logic and instead plagued by societal ideological assumptions. For example, when deciding if she should report her assault to the police, Boudreau went through an internal struggle. Though she understood herself to be a victim, she also believed that due to her situation as a polyamorous woman meeting non-stereotypical rape norms, she would not be believed. Additionally, she felt that she would be responsabilized and blamed since, within Western society, women not fitting within the stereotypical rape are often blamed, which allows them to be further dismissed (Burt,

1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). She also felt she would not be believed as she knew her assailant, and the stereotypical belief of sexual assault is that assailants are mostly strangers.

Tapping the phone screen one more time, I dialled three numbers – 911. My thumb hovered over the green call button. I couldn't help but wonder who they would protect in this particular situation. Would it be the grown woman whose skin was saturated in ink, who was a "young" mother by today's standards, and who had willingly gone on a date with a man who wasn't her husband? Or would it be a misunderstood gentleman who had clearly been led on and tricked into believing his date was up for a good time, just to have her unfairly persecute him without solid proof? (Boudreau, 2023, pp. 18-23)

Like Boudreau, Ditson's choice to disclose her multiple instances of sexual assault was affected by the beliefs about women and sex that she had been taught from an early age. Throughout her life, Ditson had continuously been told that girls and women were to be modest, to protect themselves from boys and men, and that all men wanted to take advantage of women and hurt them. Due to this belief, when Ditson was sexually assaulted, she believed she would be blamed as she was constantly told she had to protect herself. During her first assault, Ditson was drunk, once again not fitting in with the rape and gendered norms that women are too constantly aware of to be careful. In this regard, Ditson felt as though she had put herself in harm's way and was, therefore, deserving of blame.

On the opposite spectrum, Freedman, meeting the requirements of a stereotypical sexual assault victim, who also was given a choice of whether to disclose her assault to her friends and family due to it being in a foreign country, also struggled to disclose. However, unlike Boudreau, Freedman's choice not to tell the people around her was not due to the disbelief that would follow

but due to her internal shame. Freedman did not want to disclose this to those around her because she did not want to be seen as a victim or be treated differently. So, although the ideologies around sexual assault did not affect her in the same way as Boudreau, they still affected her because she knew once she disclosed, she would be treated differently by her family, friends, and in general society. Furthermore, she felt she may be ostracized because even though she fit within the rape myths and norms, she would still be seen as a woman who had been assaulted and could not protect herself.

Unlike these three women, two women in my study, Miller and Sebold, had their choice to disclose taken from them. In both cases, these women's sexual assaults were revealed to the people around them either by an officer, the media, or a close friend. In Sebold's case, the officer she would initially disclose to would out her assault to her entire school.

Get out of the way, he said to my curious peers. This girl's just been raped.

(Sebold, 1999, p. 15).

This was a violation of her right to privacy. This officer revealed that she had been assaulted. He took no consideration into the fact that she may want to keep what has happened a secret so her school life would not be affected. Due to this assault, Sebold would go back to school the following year and not only be ostracised by her peers, but she would also feel different. In this way, her friends would end up avoiding her, while her other schoolmates would gossip about her. Sebold would continue to feel like she did not fit in and like people would not want to be around her. This belief was proven right when individuals would stare at her and most of her friends decided it would be too difficult to be around her. Furthermore, in exposing Sebold, this officer took away her autonomy and time to evaluate whom and when she wanted to tell others;

he took away her processing time and her ability to wrap her head around the fact that she had been assaulted.

On the other hand, Miller did not have a choice in whether to disclose her assault to the police or not. Disclosure was forced upon her as she was assaulted during a period of unconsciousness and did not come to her until the police had already been called and she was admitted to a hospital. Furthermore, due to the public nature of her case, Miller's choice to be kept anonymous was taken from her. Miller's choice and autonomy to disclose were fully taken from her by the media. Due to this, Miller was targeted by several online individuals who would blame her for her assault and accuse her of destroying her assailant's life. These comments reinforced the gendered norms by which women are meant to live by. For example, the comments specifically responsabilize her because she graduated from university the previous year and therefore had no reason to go to a fraternity party, despite the fact that she was there with her sister who attended that specific university. She was also villainized for "wanting to destroy a good man's life," which is another prevalent rape myth in Western society.

I found the first comment at the end of the article: What was a college grad doing at a frat? I didn't understand. Did we just read the same article? I closed the report. (Miller, 2019, p. 48)

In summation, as shown within this sub-theme, each woman's choice to not disclose was affected by the gendered and rape ideologies prominent within Western society. Furthermore, when a woman was not given a choice of whether to disclose and had their assault exposed, ideologies around sexual assault and innocence were prevalent and expressed by those around them who knew of the assault through verbal and nonverbal actions. The main finding here is that regardless of a woman's choice to disclose or not to disclose, ideologies around who and what a

female sexual assault victim is will be expressed by society and be prevalent within the minds of each woman.

Several similarities arose between my findings and those of the literature. Firstly, as stated above, typically, women go through an evaluative process when deciding to disclose (Ahrens, 2007; Reich et al., 2022). In this way, before deciding on if and to whom they should disclose, women weigh the odds of if they will be believed. This process is affected by the predominant gender norms and rape myths which circulate in society. Typically, when a woman feels she does not fit within these standards, ergo, she will unlikely be believed; she will choose not to disclose to protect herself from further victimization (Ahrens, 2007). This was proven within my findings by Boudreau, Ditson, and Freedman, who all weighed the positives and negatives of disclosing to specific individuals. For example, though Boudreau would not initially report her assault to the police, she would tell her husband because she felt he would believe her. The evaluative process, to me, is one of the most important aspects of disclosure because these women just got their choice defiled and now must come to terms with it. Women need this period to settle and understand what happened and then make their own choices based on their circumstances.

Another similarity found between my research and the current literature is the understanding that choice is reflective of someone's social surroundings (Ullman et al., 2020). In this way, a woman's social standings and intersectional characteristics also played a factor in their decision to disclose. These intersectional characteristics included the type of relationship each woman was in and their adherence to stereotypical gender roles, behaviour and looks. Within my research, this was true for several women; for example, Boudreau, who was in a polyamorous relationship bisexual, and a mother felt she would be blamed due to her identity of being bisexual and in a polyamorous relationship with her husband. This, as I showed above, completely affected

her decision to report her sexual assault to the police and also tell those closest to her, like her parents.

In addition to having similarities to the literature, my data was distinctly different regarding choice, as I did not encounter what would help sway women's choices to disclose. In this way, none of the women in my data explicitly shared what reactions, comments, or behaviours would help them to disclose. Though this was not stated, from other things said and explained, I understood that each woman's reasonings for not disclosing to certain individuals were the current beliefs around sexual assault, ideas about innocence, and their fear of being held responsible.

Choices and Motivations on how and why to Disclose

As defined by Rufa et al. (2022), disclosures can take place in various settings through either informal or formal sources. When analyzing my data, each woman disclosed their assaults to both informal, their parents, friends, and significant others, and formal, counsellors, doctors, nurses, and police officers. Additionally, each woman disclosed their instance or instances of sexual assault to the public through their memoirs. Within my data, all women initially disclosed their assaults in a verbal manner. In this way, each woman's first experience of disclosure was done in a face-to-face manner with either someone close to them that they trusted or with a police officer.

Starting with face-to-face disclosures, all the women in my study had this type of disclosure, and they left either a positive, negative, or simply no meaning at all within each woman's life. Boudreau, who told her husband about her assault immediately after it happened, when she got home, felt that she was believed and fully supported. This belief and support came from his willingness to listen and comfort her, as well as his patience with the entirety of her assault and subsequent disclosure. When explaining this disclosure, Boudreau writes in depth about her husband's body language and the effort he put into the words he uses. This support, in turn, helped

her gain the strength to not only go to the hospital but get therapy as well. Once getting therapy and having quite supportive interactions, belief, a lack of blame and responsabilization, she would then go on to tell her parents and write articles about her assault. Boudreau's experience seems to show that through supportive and kind interactions, she was able to heal and find justice in her own mind.

Similarly, Freedman, who would tell her friends a few years after her assault, would feel a mix of emotions. In Freedman's case, she found that when disclosing face to face, she was met with supportive behaviour, apprehension, or indifference, each creating meaning and internalized feelings about her assault. Regarding the supportive behaviour, Freedman would feel believed and thought she was not to be blamed. These interventions would also lead her to want to help others going through similar situations; this was done on a trip to Africa, where she shared her story and heard the stories of several girls and women, which would create significant meaning for Freedman and lead to her ultimate disclosure to the world within her teaching and writing. Regarding apprehension, Freedman would take this interaction to mean she was different or that what happened separated her from the world. In this case, Freedman had several individuals who were not sure how to be around her after her assault. Ultimately, through face-to-face interactions, each woman would create meaning that would influence their further disclosure decisions. In this regard, Ditson, who was brushed off when she initially asked her friend if she was assaulted while she was drunk would not disclose for quite a while.

Shifting the focus to cellular interactions, several of the women in my study disclosed their instances of sexual assault through the phone. Freedman, immediately after being taken to the police station in Paris after her assault, called both her parents. For her, this was a supportive and positive experience as both her parents were kind, calm and rational, immediately producing a plan

for getting her home and then getting justice. Freedman highlights that both her parents phrased their speech in terms of concern while also being patient and listening to her. Ultimately, Freedman would take the tone used in this conversation to mean her parents believed her. After this interaction, Freedman was able to calm herself slightly as both her parents worked to console her, and they were incredibly reassuring.

It was really hard to talk to my mom for the first time. I burst into tears as I told her what had happened and from thousands of miles away she tried to console me (Freedman, 2014, p. 32).

Having a similar experience to Freedman, Sebold also disclosed her sexual assault to her mother on the phone. During Sebold's disclosure, her mother was quick to reassure and comfort her, taking over and doing everything to make her transition home calm. The few disclosures which took place via a phone call were reassuring and worked to calm each woman's nerves. To me, these instances were of great meaning to each woman because they gave them the reassurance and support needed to continue with their search for justice. Additionally, it worked to make the transition home more soothing as these women knew they were believed, loved, and supported regardless of their next actions.

Boudreau, who disclosed her assault to both her sister and parents weeks after her assault took place, also felt comforted by their responses. The larger picture here is that regardless of when the disclosure via telephone took place, these interactions seem to have been vital to each woman. For example, without her parent's support and belief, Boudreau would not go on to publish her articles detailing her assault and lifestyle.

The last type of interaction I discovered was media and literacy. In this case, each woman interacted with others who would read their work, myself included. Regarding written disclosure,

each woman in my study wrote a memoir narrating their assaults and the subsequent years following it, while a few also found other media sources where they chose to disclose. For example, Boudreau wrote several articles highlighting her assault and how her life had changed due to it. Boudreau's articles included one about taking her autonomy back after her assault and one outlining her assault and life in general. Similarly, Ditson, after finding an online post written by a former friend about her own sexual assault, decided to write her own post and have that friend, in turn, read it. Differing from both women, Freedman chose to write about her assault, but in a way that would be academic, she chose to write about her assault and the subsequent years in a way that would help individuals understand post-traumatic stress disorder, gender norms and the overall view and effects that sexual assault has on women. In disclosing their assaults through written text and interacting with individuals this way, each woman found meaning and comfort. Overall, all the women in my study found comfort in writing about their assaults.

Regarding types of disclosure, the literature found that several avenues are available. These included both informal and formal sources. Looking at informal sources, the literature highlights women's disclosures to their partners, friends, and family members. In terms of formal disclosure, the literature highlights police officers, therapists, nurses, etc. Furthermore, the literature explains what makes these experiences either positive or negative. Positive experiences can be classified as those which were supportive and included the victim being believed, listened to, offered support, etc. (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Milliken et al., 2016). In contrast, negative experiences included the victims being blamed, not believed, told they were deserving etc. (Ahrens, 2006; Rufa et al., 2022)

Though the literature highlights this, my research did not find any explicit notions of disclosure experiences being positive or negative. In fact, these adjectives are overly simplistic, as

none of the women in my study specifically stated their experiences were good or bad. The closest I got to this finding was that one woman in my study expressed that she felt believed.

Impacts to Victims when the choice is made to Disclose

Throughout my data, I found that the type of disclosure interactions did not seem to affect the experience each woman had highly. In fact, I would say that what affected these experiences was women's ability to choose when and to whom they disclose. Furthermore, these experiences were affected by the rape myths individuals have. In this way, when one of the women, Freedman or Sebold, disclosed their assault to the police, they were immediately believed because their assaults and general dispositions after their assault matched society's belief of a sexual assault victim.

I decided to like Sergeant Lorenz and to think of him as fatherly. I could not fathom that he might not believe me (Sebold, 1999, p. 52).

In this way, the experience of sexual assault disclosure is, without a doubt, connected to the ideological beliefs surrounding sexual assault and patriarchal protection. Contrastingly, Boudreau, being in a polyamorous relationship and being covered in tattoos, was fearful that she would be blamed for her assault and was unwilling to report it to the police because of this. In fact, Boudreau did not even want to tell her nurse that she was assaulted; she only disclosed this situation because her husband convinced her and because she needed immediate medical care for vaginal tearing.

You know some people in that community. I've been told they have these sorts of pre-arranged agreements, you know? And maybe sometimes wires get crossed, or miscommunicated (Boudreau, 2023, p. 39).

Additionally, Miller, who individuals did not believe fit in with the stereotypical sexual assault victim image, she was older than the perpetrator, the perpetrator was a good standing member of society, etc., was harshly targeted by the media and online individuals.

He was only nineteen! She hooked up with a freshman? Doesn't that make her the predator? Haven't you ever heard of gang rape in India. There are women out there suffering real abuse and you want to call this assault. Bored suburban kids can't keep it in their pants. Lame. It's not like he dragged her. If she had a boyfriend why wasn't he there? Mother of the year award. What kind of mom dumps her two daughters at a frat party? Not trying to blame the victim but something is wrong if you drink yourself to unconsciousness . . . She didn't even go to Stanford. Did she pass out with her underwear off while peeing? Whatever happened to the buddy system? I, for one, am not convinced there was a crime of the felony magnitudes charged here, and possibly no crime at all aside from consensual lewd behavior. Did he give her a roofie? If not, why would any woman get so drunk? (Media Post)

I have never allowed myself to get so drunk that I don't know what I am doing (Miller, 2019, p 58).

Furthermore, women's relationships with their families were a contributing factor to how they experienced disclosure. Regarding relationships to family, the common theme which occurred was that the closer a family was to each other, the better each woman's response to disclosure was. In the case of Miller, we see that her family was incredibly distraught by the news that their daughter had been sexually assaulted. Furthermore, her family was supportive throughout her court proceedings. Like Miller, Sebold's family was also supportive, though a bit more distant due to

their general personalities. On the opposite end, Ditson, who had a volatile relationship with her family, was not believed and even blamed for being sexually assaulted.

I was able to see that the type of sexual assault, amount of violence, visible signs of assault, etc., affected the disclosure experience each woman faced. Furthermore, relationships with family members and friends altered the response each one received. The closer each woman was to her family, the more support she gained. Where this theme got a bit confusing is that although the severity of assault affected women's sexual assault disclosure, their relationships with their family and friends seemed to counteract this. In this way, regardless of the signs of sexual assault each woman received, if they had a good relationship with their families and friends, they were believed and gained support.

Fear of Disclosing

The last sub-theme I encountered was fear of disclosure, particularly towards parents and significant others/partners. I wondered here whether some women were afraid to tell certain people, and if so, why? Boudreau, Miller, and Ditson all expressed that they were incredibly worried about how their parents would react and, therefore, tended to tell their parents quite a while after their assaults. Boudreau, who initially believed her parents would be disappointed or ashamed of her, was pleasantly surprised once she chose to tell them.

They weren't ashamed at all, but they were angry – angry at the person who had hurt their child and angry there was nothing, essentially, they could do about it (Boudreau, 2023, p.).

Miller, having a similar thought process to Boudreau received support from her parents. Both were quick to validate her feelings and offer emotional and physical affection. Unlike Boudreau and Miller, Sebold had a vastly different experience. She chose not to tell her parents

about her assault because she believed they would blame her. Due to the encouragement of a counsellor, Sebold decided to tell her mother, who immediately blamed her.

Regarding the literature, some women were very fearful of disclosing their instances of sexual assault. This finding was completely supported by the literature, as many authors have found that women, being affected by their social standing and sexual assault ideologies, are afraid to disclose because they believe they will be blamed.

In summation, the first theme encountered within my research deals with disclosures, specifically, the multitude of disclosure interactions women went through, the varying experiences faced due to ideologies and beliefs about sexual assault as well as the relationship each woman had with their disclosure persons, the choice to disclose, and lastly being afraid to tell their parents about their assaults.

The Significance, Norms, Stereotypes, and Social Construction as it Pertains to the Holdings of Mainstream Ideological Beliefs Surrounding Victims of Sexual Assault in Western Societies

As highlighted within my theoretical framework, ideology is the persistent discourse within society that dictates individuals' actions and sustains the broader social structures and practices already in place (Zizek, 2009). The second theme which emerged throughout my data specifically dealt with gender ideologies. Gender ideologies, as previously defined, are the beliefs and discourse surrounding gender and dictating the appropriate behaviours and actions of each gender (Butler, 1999/2004). The sub-themes found within this more prominent theme include gender norms, rape myths, real versus fake sexual assault victims, and gender rules.

As will be illustrated, the theory of ideology, along with the concepts of gender norms, patriarchy and violence, is quite pertinent to this theme. In fact, this theory and concepts make up the whole section, as gender norms, rape myths, and gendered rules were the main theme

throughout each memoir. To end, this section will highlight how similar these findings were to that of the previous literature. Additionally, I will highlight findings that were not heavily present within the literature.

Gender Norms

Throughout each memoir, the presence of gender norms and stereotypical gendered roles was prominent. This sub-theme was linked with the concepts of gender norms, patriarchy, and violence. As mentioned above, gender norms are the behaviours and attitudes that are expected and accepted by each gender. This concept is distinctly related to patriarchy, as patriarchy illustrates how gender norms came to be. Furthermore, patriarchy dictates that women are in a subordinate position to men, and this allows for gender norms and rape myths to be created *in the male perspective*. Regarding violence, this sub-section will show that not only does each woman experience a form of subjective violence, visible crime with a visible culprit (Zizek, 2008), through their sexual assault, but they also experience objective violence through their disclosures and systemic violence in the way society understands and treats sexual assault. Objective violence, as understood by Zizek (2008), is the type of violence that is invisible to subjective violence; it is subtle and comes in the form of systemic and symbolic. Symbolic violence is understood to be the forms of violence shown throughout the language, whereas systemic violence pertains to our institutions and how they harm society (Van Der Linden, 2012; Zizek, 2008). Systemic violence is the violence that is inherent within social and political structures. This violence is supported through institutions and policy (Zizek, 2008). In this case, symbolic and systemic violence were inherent throughout each memoir.

Regarding gendered norms, each woman expressed that they were present, through words and actions, within their instances of disclosure. In this sense, during disclosure, each woman

experienced ideologies through side comments, blatant insults, and stereotypical assumptions. Highlighting this, Boudreau explains that within our society, one of the main gendered norms taught to them is that women are not meant to push back against men; they are meant to be subservient and conform to the behaviours expected of them.

This was the world where women were labelled hysterical, dramatic, and over-sensitive when they dared push back even the slightest against the patriarchal society that had raised them to associate modesty and obedience with safety (Boudreau, 2023, p. 5).

Further expressing the gendered norms which are imposed on girls and women, Freedman discusses the ways in which girls have been socialized to look and behave a certain way. In this way, society creates these rules that women must follow to be respected and treated with some semblance of equality. Highlighting gendered rules, Boudreau expresses that from an early age, girls are socialized to monitor their behaviours in order not to offend or disrespect men. These rules completely responsabilized for any harm that might come to them while also removing accountability from men. Highlighting the true harm of these rules, Boudreau further extends her thought.

To me, these unofficial rules of girlhood always seemed to deliver an odd message: we're dammed if we do and dammed if we don't, so take all the precautions anyway (Boudreau, 2023, p. 6).

What these gender rules do is responsabilize women and make men unaccountable for their actions. If these rules are disregarded, women are blamed for their victimization and labelled as a whore or slut. Furthermore, men do not have the same rules, nor are they held to the same standard of self-preservation as women. This is symbolic violence as these ideologies concerning women are expressed through words. Furthermore, this violence is ingrained in society as it is freely

expressed by formal, police officers, nurses, doctors, and informal systems, family members and friends.

In addition to being visible in disclosure, gendered norms and gendered ideologies were present within the minds of each of these women, regardless of the disclosures they had or did not have. In this way, the gendered norms and rules are so prominent within our society that women, before even outwardly experiencing them from another person, think of them. This is because, as Freedman explains, women are taught how to act from an early age. This, again, is ideological, as well as symbolic and systemic violence as each woman has heard or seen these norms throughout their life and has then internalized them, fully knowing if they do not fall within these norms, they will be invisibilized and responsabilized or when they are harmed. In this way, these gendered norms are so fully integrated within our society that they fully influence how women view themselves.

Rape Myths

The second sub-theme that is very pertinent to my research is rape myths. Rape myths, as highlighted in the previous theme, are the “prejudicial, stereotypical, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Burt, 1980, p.). These myths are typically understood as the beliefs used to support and perpetuate male sexual violence and function to responsabilize women while also restricting sexual assault knowledge that is representative of the reality that women face. As found by Sampert (2010), these myths continue to be prevalent.

This theme, as will be shown, is not only related to gendered norms, but it is also related to violence, specifically symbolic and systemic violence. In this way, like gendered norms, rape myths are expressed through the ways in which individuals excuse rape, and responsabilized women and create stereotypes around who can be raped and what rape must look like. Rape myths

work to shift blame onto victims allowing them to be dismissed or ignored (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). These myths are ultimately supported by the institutions and policies in place that allow professionals not only to use them to dismiss women but also allow the reoccurring teaching and spreading of these myths within the media. Common rape myths include women precipitate rape, women lie about rape, rapists are strangers, good men do not rape women, a rape victim will always show signs of rape, and husbands cannot rape their wives, among many more which have continuously been proven false (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Edwards et al., 2011; Franuik et al., 2008). Within my study, these myths were both present during disclosure and in the minds of each woman.

The first rape myth which I encountered was based on how the victim looked. In this way, women who looked like they had faced a violent ordeal, who looked like they tried to fight off their attacker, and who fit within the stereotypical beauty and romantic standards were responded to with understanding and kindness. For example, Freedman, who was violently assaulted and therefore showed signs of violence, came from a middle/upper-class family, etc., was able to go through legal proceedings in Paris, France, leading to the arrest and incarceration of her assaulter. On the opposite end, Miller, whose assault was not as violent, was perpetually blamed by the media for her assault. Similarly, Boudreau does not fit within any of the norms for a sexual assault victim, she knew her assailant and chose to go on a date with him due to her polyamory and belief individuals would say she deserved to be assaulted due to her lifestyle.

Another myth which I encountered was that of a woman wanting to ruin a man's life. Both Miller and Boudreau encounter this. Miller's name was anxiously dragged through the mud during her legal proceedings, where individuals were accusing her of wanting to destroy a top athlete's life. Unsurprisingly, even the media fully supported this notion that Miller's assailant was the

victim by continuously highlighting him as a university student, a man on his way to the Olympics, etc., while Miller was simply referred to as the woman or victim.

I scrolled to the end of an article and saw, the woman is recovering at a hospital. Turner, a freshman, was a three-time All-American high school swimmer and state record-holder in two freestyle events . . . I saw hospital run seamlessly into record-holder. The final line: If convicted Turner, who raced in the London 2012 U.S. Olympic trials, could face up to 10 years in prison (Miller, 2019, p. 47).

Another instance where rape myths were directly displayed to a victim was during Sebold's legal proceedings when an officer felt the need to tell her his niece had been 'ruined' due to her sexual assault. The insinuation here is that this officer's niece is somehow now undesirable. This is something Sebold also felt herself because when she first went home after her assault, no boys would look at her, and she believed she was ruined.

I cried. The words "nice boys" entered my mind. I had seen how Jonathan looked at me and was now convinced: No nice boy will ever want me. I was all those horrible words used for rape; I was changed, bloodied, damaged goods, ruined (Sebold, 1999, p. 109).

Although many rape myths were expressed by outside sources, the majority of myths I encountered came from the women themselves. These myths, which were no doubt ingrained into them from the society they grew up in, Canada and the United States, seemed to have an incredible sway over their lives and how they viewed themselves. These internalized myths also dictated if women believed themselves to be real victims.

Regarding these, I was able to identify several similarities between them and the current literature. In fact, I was able to identify quite a few rape myths that were present during disclosure and within the minds of each woman. Starting with disclosure, the first myth I came across was

that rapists are strangers. Though this has been proven false, the current Western belief is that women are not typically raped by someone they know (Krahé, 2016). This was also disproven in my data when two out of the three women were raped by men they knew. The next myth I came across was that women must look like they had put up a struggle to survive. This myth was exemplified by both Freedman and Sebold, who both showed signs of a struggle. All this is to say that the women who disclosed their assaults and matched this myth were believed and given support by various formal systems. On the other hand, Boudreau goes against the myth that women do not know their assailant was not believed when she disclosed it to a nurse. In fact, she was told she may have misunderstood the situation due to her polyamorous lifestyle. My findings on disclosure were supported by the literature in that rape myths do affect disclosure and the perceptions of sexual assault.

Within the minds of each woman, rape myths were also present, and they were vital in each woman's decision on whom and if they should disclose their assault. It was vital to know if they even saw themselves as a real victim or someone who caused their own suffering. This just went to show how ingrained these myths are within society and how dangerous they are since all these women are victims of sexual assault yet not all of them were believed nor helped.

What Makes a Real Vs. Fake Victim

After being sexually assaulted, though each woman may have felt like a victim, it is truly society that dictates their victimhood. For all the women in my study, I would say that they were given the title of victim either by formal or informal sources. However, only the women labelled as real victims by the criminal justice system are the ones truly recognized as such. This theme was highly related to the concept of symbolic violence, gendered norms, and rape myths.

For example, though Boudreau was recognized as being a victim by her husband, family members, therapist, and employer, she never felt as though she would be given that title by formal sources, such as a police officer. Boudreau specifically felt this way due to her lack of compliance with the gender norms women face. Contrastingly, Sebold, Freedman, and Miller were all formally given the title of victim by the legal system, police officers, lawyers, etc. Despite this label, Miller still felt as though she had to defend her victimhood as she was continuously blamed through online sources.

Within this sub-theme, an interesting phenomenon that came up was the idea that these women did not want to be labelled as victims. They did not want to be seen differently; in fact, they wanted their lives to go back to normal.

I wondered how in an instant my identity had been reduced to the blacked-out and raped woman. This person who could never be a role model, at best a cautionary tale. If anyone ever found out, I understood I'd be publicly disgraced, permanently branded (Miller, 2019, p. 60).

Overall, this theme, dealing with the ideologies and beliefs that surround sexual assault, included gendered norms and rules, rape myths, and the idea of a real versus fake sexual assault victim. Ultimately when analyzing these sub-themes, the commonality is that most of the women in my study were held responsible for their instances of sexual assault, either by themselves, someone in their life, or even a stranger. These ideologies are undoubtedly connected to the aftermath of each woman's assault, as will be discussed below.

Regarding the previous literature, I found the ideologies surrounding and affecting the women who were sexually assaulted in my research to be quite similar. In this way, within my research, I found that the want to disclose was severely impacted by gender norms, rape myths,

and gendered rules. Furthermore, I found that within my research, the media, via the internet or offline, was a main contributor to the sexual assault ideologies women knew of.

These findings were quite like the current literature around sexual assault, as many authors have found that rape myths and gender norms overwhelmingly impact the current views of sexual assault. As understood by Burt (1980), sexual assault is severely impacted by the current Western ideals, rape myths. These include myths such as women precipitate rape, women lie about rape, women want to be raped, and lastly, real rape involves a stranger. As shown above, the women most likely to be believed were the ones who suffered severely violent rapes, fit within a stereotypical image of a “good girl,” and did not know their assailant.

Though my findings were similar in the above regard, they did depart from the current literature in that ideologies were expressed more in the minds of the women in my study. In this way, during disclosure, as explained earlier, women evaluate and predict responses based on the ideologies and beliefs they know to circulate in society. In this way, though each woman wrote about the various ideologically charged experiences they had, ideological assumptions were more present within their minds. I believe this is because the texts I analyzed are memoirs and gave me insight into each woman's struggles as well as their interactions. For example, before even choosing to disclose their sexual assault, several women in my study recounted the rape myths and gender norms that they would and would not fit with. Within my research, even after disclosing and gaining support from family members, friends, or partners, each woman continued to experience ideological responses and beliefs, which swayed their actions in the aftermath of their assault.

Furthermore, like the literature, I found that within my study, women were understood to be real or fake victims of sexual assault due to their adherence to rape myths and the ideal victim

trope. The ideal sexual assault victim is someone who fits within the gendered norms, and rape myths and can establish their credibility (Randall, 2010). Within my study, the women who could do this were given the title of victim by formal sources, while the others were ignored, blamed, and responsabilized.

Overall, my findings on how sexual assault is influenced by sexual assault ideologies, rape myth, gendered norms, and patriarchal standards, are fully supported by the literature. Furthermore, women's want to disclose is hindered by the gendered norms by which they find themselves fully ingrained due to the societal standards set out for women. To end, my findings were slightly different from the current literature in that the women disclosing were the ones who had the most ideological views. This could be due to the fact that I analyzed first-person memoirs, whereas most authors undertook extensive interviewing processes. Due to my data, there could be things that are missing, more experiences, full explanations about interactions, disclosure of persons' verbal and non-verbal behaviour, etc. Regardless of this, the women in my study who had been sexually assaulted thought of the myths and norms surrounding them quite often, consciously and unconsciously, and it influenced their decisions.

Violence, Aftermath, and Resilience of Victims

The third central theme prevalent within my research was the aftermath of each assault. Each woman, regardless of the type of sexual assault or response they experienced, faced tremendous subjective violence as well as lasting subjective and objective violence, including blame, anger, and fear. This theme is highly related to violence, though I would not claim this to be only subjective or objective, but also in the realm of internalized ideologies, gender norms and rape myths.

Violence

Violence, as previously stated, is inherent to every social system and consists of three main forms, subjective, objective, and systemic. Though each form of violence is present within my data, a predominant form of violence faced by each woman in my study was subjective violence. Subjective violence, as articulated by Žižek (2008), is the most common form of violence. This violence always has a visible culprit and is typically the result of an individual's subjective views and beliefs. Exemplifying this violence, Freedman was violently assaulted both vaginally and physically, leaving her with a plethora of injuries. Similarly, Boudreau had severe injuries around her vagina due to her assault. In addition to being physically injured during their assaults, each woman knew who their assailant was and could pick them out. As the memoirs I analyzed focused on each woman's experience of sexual assault, I was unable to assess the reasoning or beliefs of their perpetrators. Regardless of this missing factor, each woman faced subjective violence physically and mentally, as well as knowing their assailant and having someone to blame.

Blame and Anger

Regarding self-blame, each woman believed themselves to be responsible for their instance of sexual assault. Exemplifying this, Boudreau highlights that after her assault, she was very quick to blame herself for the assault while also being angry for trying to fight back. Furthermore, when Boudreau thinks of her family, specifically her sons, she characterizes herself as being selfish for not only going on her date but also not being able to defend herself. Boudreau believes that because she fought back, she put herself at more risk and also put her children at risk of not having a mother.

I'd almost fucked it all up. I would never be so selfish again (Boudreau, 2023, p. 28).

In addition to blaming herself, Boudreau also felt immense anger at not only her assailant but also herself, further internalizing the belief that she should have known better. Like Boudreau,

Freedman also felt an incredible amount of anger for all the individuals involved in her assault, her assailant, the assailant's lover, and her friend, though only the assailant harmed her. Unlike Boudreau, Freedman blamed her assailant and friend for her sexual assault.

I had been desperate to hear his voice and feel his support, but I had also wanted to talk to him because I was seething; I had a lot of questions, and I wanted some answers. Who the hell was Robert? How well did Roditi know him? What did Roditi have to say about him? Was Roditi sorry for what had happened? How long had they been lovers? What sort of information did Roditi give the police about him? How much time had Stream spent with Robert before I had arrived? Were they buddies? Had the three of them had dinner together? Gone out on the town? Shared some laughs? (Freedman, 2014, p. 48).

Like Freedman, Sebold held great resentment over her rapist. Though she never blamed herself for her assault, she, throughout her legal proceedings and coming decades, would continue to be incredibly angry at the way her assailant had changed her life, at the hold he had over her life.

Like Boudreau, Ditson blamed herself for her assaults for a long time, though her perspective was due to the treatment she received as a child. All the women in my study held severe blame, either for themselves, such as Boudreau and Ditson, as well as for their assailants and the people around them.

Ultimately, each woman was affected by their assault, and it led to the internalization of the violence they faced. This blame and anger shifted to fear which derailed most of the women in my study's life.

Fear... Public Gaze

In addition to blame and anger, all women had an overwhelming sense of fear, fear of the unknown, fear of how others would now perceive them, fear of men, etc. To start, one of the biggest things the women in my study found themselves being afraid of was the male gaze. As all these women were assaulted by men, this was to be expected. Boudreau, perfectly summarizing this fear, highlighted that:

Since the assault, the spotlight of the male gaze- of any gaze really- was unbearable, and I did everything I could to avoid it. I'd coloured my platinum blonde hair the darkest, plainest shade of brown. All form-fitting or revealing clothes had been replaced with baggy, oversized outfits (Boudreau, 2023, p. 70).

In addition to fearing the male gaze, the women in my study also became fearful of how the world, in general, would see them and took measures and actions to adapt to these external beliefs (ideology). For example, Boudreau changed her entire wardrobe (from tight to looser clothing) and hair colour (from blonde to brown) in order to not only avoid the attention of others but also so she could never be seen as asking to be sexually assaulted. Similarly, Sebold, throughout her court case, went through the same process of changing her wardrobe to look more presentable and innocent so that people would have no reason to blame her for her assault. In this way, Sebold actively tried to fit in with the perfect victim trope, wanting to be seen as completely blameless and deserving of support. This is fully supported by gender norms and sexual assault ideologies as women are expected to dress modestly and to prevent themselves from being assaulted, not put themselves in any situation that could result in victimization, etc. These women, while illustrating ideology through the belief of others on how they should look and behave, also show ideology through their actions. Ultimately, due to the ideologies circulating society concerning gender norms and rape myths, these women internalized what

they had and continued to understand about sexual assault victims and follow it to be treated as someone deserving of help instead of blame.

On my feet I wore my Pappagallo pumps. I had fretted that morning because I could not find nude hose. I had black and I had red, neither of which was an appropriate choice for the virgin coed the grand jury would expect. I borrowed a pair from my resident advisor (Sebold, 1999, p. 202).

Building off this fear, the women in my study also became quite apprehensive of intimacy with their partners. In this way, some women in my study were utterly disgusted by having physical contact with their partners. Interestingly enough, the other women in my study went in the complete opposite way, trying to prove to themselves that they did not fear intimacy and jumped right into a relationship after being assaulted.

In addition to the above fears, the women in my study were genuinely afraid that they would be harmed again. Each woman consciously had plans to never be found in precarious situations and always had an escape plan. This again meeting the gender norms that women are to always be in safe zones and if they are not, it is their fault they are harmed.

If I needed help, I could run to the CVS two streets over (Miller, 2019, p. 151).

In summation, in the aftermath of sexual assault, all the women in my study went through various stages of blame, anger and fear, all of which would lend to the person they would become in the long run.

Regarding the current literature, I found that my findings within this sub-section were quite supported, specifically in terms of how rape myths and ideologies lead to self-blaming and fearful attitudes. As understood by Dobkins and Tavcer (2023), rape myths have created a narrative that puts an onus on women to not only protect themselves but also fit within these

myths if or when they are assaulted. Moreover, these myths allow society to dismiss and ignore victims, taking away their opportunity to gain justice along with any support that could help alleviate the fear and anger they could be feeling. In addition to creating a society that dismisses and blames women, women have also internalized these ideologies and rape myths which can lead to them struggling to come to terms with what happened to them and seek help. This, in turn,, can lead to a prolonged period of self-blame and fear where women ultimately, the literature and my findings coincide in that rape myths and current ideological assumptions surrounding sexual assault and women not only lead to feelings of self-blame only lead to but prolonged feelings of self-blame, anger, and fear.

Exploring the Development of Personal Growth and Self-Healing for Victims

The last theme that occurred throughout my research was a change in self-perspective and personhood for each woman. In this way, each woman in my study went through a severe change in who they were, an overall transformation of self through healing and personal growth. This theme fell within the scope of ideology but not in that each woman chose to abide by them; rather, each woman took what happened to them and chose to ignore the gendered norms and rape myths and take back their lives. These women chose to show others that the ideologies surrounding sexual assault are most often not true and that they should not hold anyone back from healing. Furthermore, within this theme, I was able to identify the fluctuation of the self. The self, as understood by Goffman (1959), is socially constructed through interactions/encounters with others. Building on this, Williams (1986) articulates that the self takes on a threefold approach, the “official self,” the “performer self,” and the “personal identity.” These presentations of self are employed by individuals to coincide with the individuals around them. In this way, individuals present themselves in a very specific way to get others to think of them in that way. For example,

an individual who wants people to believe they have money will present a self that looks well off. Throughout my data, the self-presented by each woman changed and evolved. To start, each woman compared the self they were to the ideal sexual assault victim, causing them to take on specific traits or change things about themselves. For example, Boudreau would change her clothing to be less noticeable, whereas Seabold would take on a more modest appearance to be believed in court. Ultimately, here I saw that the self each woman presented to the world and to themselves was affected by the ideologies about sexual assault. As time went on, each woman's depiction and explanation of themselves seemed to change in a positive way. Overall, each woman's self was affected by their disclosure interactions and the subsequent healing they would go through.

Within my research, each woman seems to have achieved a variation of healing through disclosure, legal proceedings, and counselling. By healing, I mean each woman returned to their former or a better version of themselves where they had come to peace with what had happened and how it had changed and shaped their life. Throughout each of these processes, the women in my study were able to let go of their self-blame, anger, and, most importantly, fear of the world. Boudreau illustrated her healing through her writing and through her ultimate take back of her life. Furthermore, Boudreau sought out healing by leaning on the people in her life and continuing with her counselling. For Boudreau, the aftermath of her assault, though still traumatized, was a healed person. A person can take back their life and continue to experience new things, such as writing her first article or attending a Margaret Atwood retreat.

Like Boudreau, Freedman was able to heal through immersive therapy and through further disclosure of her assault. For Freedman to heal, she first went through a process of shedding her embarrassment and coming to terms with the fact that she was not invincible. Freedman came to a

new perspective where she was able to accept what happened to her and use it to help others, which in turn helped her. Like Boudreau, Freedman would go on to teach others about sexual assault and even volunteer with a program to counsel young women in Africa who had been sexually assaulted.

Regarding the self, throughout my research, each woman had a similar “official self.” The “official self,” as articulated by Goffman, is the character or face we show to the world. This self is highly affected by ideologies and societal norms. Highlighting their “official selves,” both Sebold and Miller explain the ways in which they had to change their attire and overall character during their court proceedings. For example, Miller, before her first day in court, would go out and buy new clothing that would be considered modest and respectable. Similarly, Sebold would borrow nude stockings and a proper pair of heels for her hearings. Both these cases illustrate that the self shown to the world is one that is affected by the ideologies of gender norms, a real rape victim, a “good girl,” etc. On the other hand, Boudreau would go through a transition of “official self” where she would change her appearance completely to hide from the world. As mentioned above, each woman went through a shift due to their healing. This healing would cause a change to each woman’s self that they would show the public. For example, Boudreau would go back to her original attire, which was bold and bright. This healing, as mentioned above, came with the rejection of the current ideologies concerning sexual assault. In this way, this new self came about due to these women overcoming the ideologies that had made them doubt their victimhood and innocence.

Overall, within my research, each woman has a shift in perspective and personhood, the self. This shift led to the healing and personal growth of each woman and would aid them all in writing their memoirs and aiding the world in understanding sexual assault.

Unfortunately, the literature was not connected to the previous literature I had reviewed. These findings were not supported nor found within the literature I was able to access.

Section 2: Discussion

As the findings from my research have clearly been outlined, this section will answer the research question that guided this thesis. To reiterate, the question I set out to answer is: What ideologies and ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change in self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.? This question was based on my curiosity to understand women's experiences of sexual assault disclosure. Furthermore, it stemmed from my previous understanding of sexual assault and the mistreatment of victims. Overall, in answering this question, I wanted to know how sexual assault victims are treated by both informal and formal sources when they disclose and what this says about Western society.

To keep this section as clear as possible, I will divide my research question into two parts, starting with how ideological assumptions are present during and after a sexual assault disclosure and what effect these ideologies had on the women in my study after their assault and subsequent disclosure.

What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure?

As illustrated throughout my findings, ideologies and ideological assumptions are indeed present during instances of sexual assault disclosure. Furthermore, they are present before and after

disclosure due to their ingrained nature within Western society. These assumptions were experienced by all five of the women in my study and included gender norms, gendered rules, rape myths and violence.

Ideologies, as previously defined, are the unconscious and conscious beliefs, behaviours, and practices that are prominent within our society and work to uphold the dominant social structure (Zizek, 2009). As highlighted in my literature review and theoretical framework, the predominant social system is one of patriarchy. Patriarchy, as underscored by Akgul (2017), is an ideological perspective referring to control and power between individuals, in my case, between women and men. Within Western society, the members of the dominant ruling class have for an exceptionally long time been white, cis men who create the narrative and what society should look like. One of the narratives they created is how women should look and behave. Furthermore, they have created an image of who can and cannot be a sexual assault victim. The following subsection will illustrate this narrative.

Gender Norms

Gender norms, as understood by Butler (1999/2004), are the beliefs and practices (also known as ideologies) that dictate the designated male and female behaviours, attributes, and practices. Further expanding on gender norms, Borgerson (2005) illustrates that gender is performative and that women will act in specific ways to gain social acceptance.

For each woman in my study, gendered norms were present before, during, and after their instances of sexual assault disclosure.

Starting with the overwhelming presence of gendered norms each woman had before their assaults; each woman expressed within their memoirs that women were socialized and taught to behave in a specific way. Boudreau (2023) explains that women today are expected to be modest

and obedient to stay safe. Furthermore, women are expected to behave in a certain way, even when they do not agree nor believe the norms circulating society. Ditson, also having varying experiences with gendered norms, expressed that during her youth, she was taught that girls were not meant to enjoy sex; in fact, she was consistently told that boys would try and trick girls into having sex. All this teaches girls is that boys can do whatever they want and not get in trouble for their actions, while girls must preserve their innocence. Further experiencing gendered norms that villainize women for the actions of men, Ditson's father continuously critiqued her clothing choice and justified it by blaming her and telling her that she was not allowed to tempt men.

Regarding the gendered norms present during disclosures, I found that each woman's experiences with previously taught gendered norms affected their willingness to disclose and when. For example, Boudreau falling outside the stereotypical gendered role of a married woman with kids, fully believed she would be blamed if she chose to report her assault to the police. Furthermore, she felt she would not be believed. This feeling was fully correct since, during her disclosure to a nurse, the nurse insinuated her assault was a misunderstanding and blamed it on Boudreau's lifestyle.

Shifting the focus to the time after disclosure, each woman continued to feel the weight of gendered norms and external beliefs. Take Miller, for example; during her criminal proceedings, she did everything she could to fit within the "good girl" model so she would have no reason to be blamed for her assault. She chose to fit within the stereotypical norm created for women, dress modestly, try to fit within the conventional beauty standards, etc., because she knew she would be taken seriously this way. Also illustrating this, Seabold went through the same thought process during her criminal proceedings, needing to wear nude tights and the proper heels to be taken seriously and be seen as a woman who did not want to be assaulted. The interesting thing about

both these women is that though their assaults had a twenty-year difference, the norms for how a woman should look and behave in court seemed to stay the same, illustrating that these gendered norms have an incredible hold within our society and have become internalized by women.

The problem with this internalization of gendered norms is that women who feel they do not fit within it, like Boudreau or Ditson, feel as though they do not deserve justice. They feel as though they are not worthy of social help and blame themselves, and as I will show, this completely derails their lives.

With gender norms also came the idea of gender performance. We see here that for women to be accepted by society and seen as individuals worthy of support and care, they must abide by these rules even if they did not believe in them. Furthermore, we see that women who do not abide by the stereotypical gendered roles are shunned and blamed when something terrible happens to them. In this case, both Boudreau and Miller exemplify this. Boudreau is a polyamorous woman covered in tattoos, and Miller is a twenty-three-year-old woman going to a university frat party with individuals younger than her. These gender performance stereotypes were prominent during instances of disclosure and within the minds of each woman. Once again, the women in my study internalized these views, which led them to self-blame and a period of categorized by internalized violence and trauma.

In addition to both gendered norms and performance came the idea of the ideal sexual assault victim and who is worthy of being a victim. In this sense, to be seen as facing a violent attack and deserving of empathy and justice, women are forced to present themselves in a certain way that abides by society's understanding of a "good woman."

In summation, gendered norms, rules and rape myths were prevalent before, during, and after instances of sexual assault disclosure. What I understood by these findings is that women

who have been sexually assaulted are judged based on stereotypical and biased beliefs that will always work to responsabilize them. Furthermore, this showed me that individuals do not really understand how sexual assault works.

In addition to gendered norms and performance, several women in my research expressed that gendered rules had been passed down to them from the people in their lives. Regarding these rules, each woman in my study, at one point or another, was told how they should behave, what they should wear, etc., for them not to be harmed in any way and to continue being seen as a “good girl.” Though I did not experience these rules, I have come to understand they are quite prevalent within North America and are known by both women and men.

These rules were never explicitly expressed anywhere but in the minds of each woman within their memoir. In this way, each woman knew the rules and had been taught them, but they were not something that was outright expressed by others during disclosure interactions.

Patriarchal Standard

Building off of gendered norms, patriarchal standards were also prominent within my research. Patriarchy, as understood by Akgul (2017), is the ideological beliefs or ideas that refer to the control and power balance between individuals. In my case, I was specifically looking at how there is a power imbalance between women and men that places women in a subservient position where they no longer create their own rules or gendered ideal. Throughout my findings, patriarchal standards were prominent and affected women’s choice to disclose their experiences and feelings after revealing their sexual assault in general. These patriarchal standards were most consistent when reviewing the gendered norms each woman explained and understood to be true. Furthermore, they were present in the ways each woman discussed figures of authority as being predominantly male.

To conclude, as illustrated here, gender norms, gendered rules, rape myths, and patriarchal standards are present before, during, and after an assault. The result of these ideologies, as highlighted above, is that women must consciously decide who and if they should disclose their instances of sexual assault. Furthermore, these ideologies highlight that women are typically responsabilized for their assaults if they do not fit into the stereotypical role of a female sexual assault victim.

What effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.?

As explained within my findings, the above ideological assumptions about women and sexual assault do affect women's experiences of disclosure. Moreover, the ideologies also affect women's lives after disclosure. In this way, as will be explained below, each woman in my study, regardless of the disclosure experience they received, went through a period of lasting objective violence where they felt inner blame, shame, and fear. Interestingly, though, after getting through this process, each woman healing through a process of discarding and dismissing the ideologies that seemed so particularly important before, therefore breaking, at least in part, the patriarchal narrative.

Effect of Assumptions on Disclosure

As answered above, yes, there are ideological assumptions that women face during disclosure, and yes, this does affect their experience not only of disclosure but also their lives after the fact. As shown in the subsection, *Disclosure Experiences*, women's adherence to rape myths and gendered norms had more supportive experiences than the women who fell outside of this box. For example, though Boudreau did not initially report her assault to the police due to her lack of adherence with an actual sexual assault victim, she did meet with a detective who went on to describe how hard

going through legal routes would be for her due to her lifestyle. During this disclosure, Boudreau characterizes the detective's words as “landing like punches to the gut” (p 97). After being explained how difficult the process would be and how criticized she would be for her lifestyle choices, Boudreau chose not to report. In this instance, the ideologies surrounding women and sexual assault were expressed by the detective, though not in an entirely blaming way, and this caused Boudreau to shut down for a brief period. On the other hand, during her disclosure, Seabold felt incredibly believed and supportive, going as far as to highlight that she felt her detective believed her and that she liked him. Both these instances go to show that belief and support are factors that weighed heavily on each woman's experience of disclosure.

Regarding informal sources, I found that the above assumptions did not affect disclosure. Each woman, except for Ditson, was readily believed by their families and immediately garnered support. Ditson's experience was quite different from the others in that when she told her mother, she was blamed. This blame came from the fact that her parents believed her to be promiscuous and drink too much, responsabilizing her for not being a “good girl” who does not get themselves into precarious situations.

Ultimately, as illustrated throughout my findings, the ideological assumptions around sexual assault may affect disclosure. Unlike the literature, I did not find that disclosure experiences were explicitly labelled as either positive or negative. In fact, no woman in my study categorized their experiences as such. The closest I got to this belief was when women said they felt believed.

What effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.?

As explained within my findings, the above ideological assumptions about women and sexual assault do affect women's experiences of disclosure. Moreover, the ideologies also affect women's

lives after disclosure. In this way, as will be explained below, each woman in my study, regardless of the disclosure experience they received, went through a period of lasting objective violence where they felt inner blame, shame, and fear. Interestingly though, after getting through this process, each woman healing through a process of discarding and dismissing some of the ideologies relating to rape myths and gendered norms that seemed so very important before, therefore breaking the patriarchal narrative. In this way, each woman went through a process of growth where they became consciously aware of the ideologies and myths dictating their victimhood and believability and decided to move forward because they knew what happened to them.

Effect of Assumptions on Disclosure

As shown in the subsection, *Disclosure Experiences*, women who fit within the stereotypical rape myths and gendered norms had a more supportive and helpful experience than those who deviated from this expected norm. For example, though Boudreau did not initially report her assault to the police due to her lack of adherence with an actual sexual assault victim, she did meet with a detective who went on to describe how hard going through legal routes would be for her due to her lifestyle. During this disclosure, Boudreau characterizes the detective's words as “landing like punches to the gut” (p 97). Ultimately after being explained how difficult the process would be and how criticized she would be for her lifestyle choices; Boudreau chose not to report. In this instance, the ideologies surrounding women and sexual assault were expressed by the detective, though not in an entirely blaming way, and this caused Boudreau to shut down for a brief period ultimately. On the other hand, during her disclosure, Seabold felt believed and supportive, going as far as to highlight that she felt her detective believed her and that she liked

him. Both these instances go to show that belief and support are factors that weighed heavily on each woman's experience of disclosure.

Regarding informal sources, I found that the above assumptions did not affect disclosure. Each woman, except for Ditson, was readily believed by their families and immediately garnered support. Ditson's experience was quite different from the others in that when she told her mother, she was blamed. This blame came from the fact that her parents believed her to be promiscuous and drink too much, responsabilizing her for not being a “good girl” who does not get themselves into precarious situations.

Ultimately, as illustrated throughout my findings, the ideological assumptions around sexual assault do affect disclosure. Unlike the literature, I did not find that disclosure experiences were either positive or negative. In fact, no woman in my study categorized their experiences as such. The closest I got to this belief was when women said they felt believed.

The Aftermath of Disclosure

Regardless of the disclosure each woman had, they all went through a process of blame, anger, and fear. In this way, each woman had lasting internalized violence that manifested itself within their lives.

Regarding blame, even if women in my study felt believed and supported, they still internalized what happened and found blame within themselves. For example, Boudreau, who was believed by her family, friends, and therapist, still blamed herself for her assault because she chose to go on a date with the man who hurt her. On the other hand, Ditson, who had no support from her family, also blamed herself because she felt she had put herself into precarious situations and should know better.

Though each woman went through this process of blame, I would say that the ones who had unsupportive and blameful disclosures tended to blame themselves more than the others. In this way, I recognized that the women who had these experiences turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms. For example, Boudreau turned to alcohol, and Ditson completely shut down and ultimately went through a string of bad relationships, all of which resulted in her further sexual victimization. It is pertinent to see here that the women having “bad” disclosures are those who deviate from the social norms, those whom are already treated differently and outcasted. On the other hand, those who had supportive experiences had healthier coping mechanisms. For example, Freedman went back to school, and Miller decided to enrol in a program for the arts. Ultimately though each woman blamed themselves, the women who had “bad” disclosure experiences seemed to be more outwardly affected.

In addition to blaming themselves, each woman, again, despite their disclosure response, felt fearful. In this way, the women in my study were afraid of their physical environment and the way they would be perceived by society. Furthermore, most of the women became afraid of the male gaze and being around people in general, causing significant disruptions to their lives, family dynamics, jobs, school, etc. For example, Boudreau was not able to work for a few weeks, and when she did go back to work, she had completely changed her hair colour and clothing so she would be unnoticed.

For these findings, I found a slight correlation to disclosures. In this way, I believe that the few women in my study who had unsupportive, blameful, and outright insulting reactions during disclosures felt more fearful to disclose further and ask for help. For example, Ditson, who had a very adverse reaction from her mother, would then quit counselling and have a string of volatile relationships. Miller, also facing negative comments online, feared people recognizing

her and knowing she was a sexual assault victim. I would say that having a hard disclosure experience created a more fearful experience for the few women in my study.

To summarise, as illustrated, the above ideological assumptions did influence women's disclosure and their experiences afterward. During disclosure, the women who fit within the neurotypical gender norms and rape myth stereotypes were more readily given belief and support. On the other hand, those not fitting within these norms were either blamed, not believed, or simply told how hard the process of gaining justice would be because of their lifestyle. In addition, the experiences women had during their disclosure did affect their lives afterward. In this way, I found that the women who had unsupportive and unhelpful disclosures experienced internal violence at a slightly higher rate than the other women.

Healing

Though each woman did face significant internalized blame and fear, they also all overcame and grew significantly as women from their sexual assaults and disclosures. In this way, each woman in my study took what happened to them and shared it in various forms so that others could understand sexual assault and the reality behind what really happens after a woman is sexually assaulted. For example, Freedman, throughout her teaching and writing, worked to disprove the current ideologies around women and sexual assault, ergo, changing the narrative to be one that is accurate. Similarly, Seabold and Miller both described their legal process so that women could understand the process.

Ultimately, at the end of each memoir, I found that the women in my study broke free from the patriarchal, ideal victim narrative and used their experiences and new knowledge to help others. What they were genuinely doing is trying to change the Western view of sexual assault.

Conclusion

With the research, I aimed to comprehend women's experiences of sexual assault disclosure. To do this, I asked the question: What ideological assumptions, gendered norms, patriarchal norms, and forms of subjective and objective violence, are present during and after women disclose their instances of sexual assault, and how does this shape their experiences of disclosure? Furthermore, what effect do these assumptions have on women's experiences of disclosure and after disclosure, change is self-perspective, lasting violence, etc.?

The overall answer to the above research question is that there are various ideologies and ideological assumptions present during and after disclosure; these include gendered norms and rules dictating how women should act, rape myths dictating who can be a victim of sexual assault, and ideal rape victim trope. Regarding how this shaped their experience, first, these assumptions affected their decisions to disclose. In this way, due to the generational teaching of these ideologies to women, each woman had these beliefs and assumptions in their head and around them before they even went to disclose. These beliefs and assumptions present not only inside their head but also in the external world ultimately influenced their decision to disclose. After making this decision, based on their adherence to these ideologies, the women who disclosed, specifically to formal sources, were met again with ideological assumptions. In this way, with my data, ideological assumptions were more readily expressed during formal disclosure experiences with police officers, nurses, doctors, security guards, etc. It was less likely that any of the women experienced these beliefs from their families.

Concerning the second half of this question, I would say that regardless of their disclosure experience, each woman has lasting effects from their assaults which manifested themselves through internalized blame, anger, and fear. Though this was the case, I did find that women who

had less supportive experiences had a more debilitating reaction in comparison to the ones who were believed and could get justice. To end, each woman also went through a change in self-perspective where they let go of the ideological beliefs and patriarchal standards that dictated their victimhood and chose to rise above it.

In completing this research, I have gained valuable insight into how women in Canada and America experience sexual assault disclosure. Furthermore, I have identified the limitations within the current research and the necessity for change within our society. In this way, my research has proven that the current view of sexual assault is one that blames and revictimizes victims if they do not conform to the ideal sexual assault victim prototype. Recognizing this as a large systemic problem, I believe further work needs to be done on the media production of sexual assault victims, education of sexual assault responders, and a general re-education of Canadians.

This thesis's findings ultimately contribute to the current research on sexual assault disclosure in several ways. Firstly, my research illustrates women's lived experiences of sexual assault disclosure and the changing nature of it. Additionally, my research broadens the scope of ideology and how sexual assault is affected by it, something that as of yet has not been explored fully. Lastly, my research has shown that sexual assault disclosure never ends. Each instance where a woman discusses her experience of sexual assault is another disclosure. The ever-evolving nature and consistently continued discourse illustrate that applying definitive terms to describe them, such as positive or negative, is arbitrary as it limits the continuity that is disclosure. Experiences of disclosure can change and fluctuate depending on a variety of factors, as I have illustrated, such as a woman's adherence to gender norms, their age, the person they are telling, and their comfort in disclosing their assault, among others.

Next Steps

The next phase of my research involves gaining entry into a Ph.D. and conducting a comprehensive review of formal responses to sexual assault disclosure. Having gained a deeper understanding of the prevailing sexual assault ideologies and their impact on victims, I am keen to investigate how formal systems, such as law enforcement, medical professionals, and educators, respond to instances of sexual assault. Additionally, I aim to explore the formal and informal modes of sexual assault training within these systems. This endeavour is aimed at gaining insights into the circulation of sexual assault ideologies and contributing to policy changes aimed at addressing this issue.

In my current role as a Policy Analyst with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, I am well-positioned to delve into the types of sexual assault sensitivity and response training that officers undergo. This will enable me to contribute to the development of new training programs and policies aimed at reducing the prevalence of sexual assault ideologies, rape myths, and gender norms when individuals disclose instances of sexual assault. Additionally, it will give me access to current data and subjects to interview for when I begin my Ph.D.

References

- Adom, D., Yeboah, A., & Ankrah, A. K. (2016). Constructivism philosophical paradigm: Implication for research, teaching and learning. *Global journal of arts humanities and social sciences*, 4(10), 1-9.
- Ahmed, S. (2016). Interview with Judith Butler. *Sexualities*, 19(4), 482-492.
- Ahrens. (2006). Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(3-4), 31–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9069-9>
- Ahrens, C. E., & Aldana, E. (2012). The Ties That Bind: Understanding the Impact of Sexual Assault Disclosure on Survivors' Relationships with Friends, Family, and Partners. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 13(2), 226–243.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2012.642738>
- Ahrens C. E., Campbell R., Ternier-Thames N. K., Wasco S. M., Sefl T. (2007). Deciding whom to tell: Expectations and outcomes of rape survivors' first disclosures. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 38–49.
- Akgul, F. (2017). *Patriarchal Theory Reconsidered: Torture and Gender Based Violence in Turkey*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-49766-2
- Allen, J. A. (1994). The Constructivist Paradigm: Values and Ethics. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 8(1-2), 31–54. https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v08n01_03.
- Althusser, L. (2006). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation). In *The anthropology of the state: a reader*.
- Baldwin-White, & Bazemore, B. (2020). The gray area of defining sexual assault: an exploratory study of college students' perceptions. *Social Work*, 65(3), 257

265.<https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa017>.

Bell, H. (2016). *Understanding Patriarchy*.

Borgerson, J. (2005). Judith Butler: on organizing subjectivities. *The Sociological Review*, 53(1_suppl), 63-79.

Boudreau, E. (2023) *Crying Wolf: A Memoir*. Book*hug Press.

Boudreau, E. (2023). *Eden Boudreau's affecting memoir "Crying wolf": Read a sneak peek of her story of sexual violence and road to recovery*.
[the-star.com.https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2023/03/23/eden-boudreaus-affectingmemoir-crying-wolf-read-a-sneak-peek-of-her-story-of-sexual-violence-and-road-to-recovery.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2023/03/23/eden-boudreaus-affectingmemoir-crying-wolf-read-a-sneak-peek-of-her-story-of-sexual-violence-and-road-to-recovery.html)

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021A). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive content/thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. WILEY.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021B). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) content/thematic analysis?, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18:3, 328-352, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019) Reflecting on reflexive content/thematic analysis, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11:4, 58-597, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using content/thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Brennan, C. (2003). *Alice Sebold Biography*. Encyclopedia of World Biography.

<https://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2005-Pu-Z/Sebold-Alice.html>

- Brennan, S., & Taylor-Butts, A. (2008). Sexual assault in Canada, 2004 and 2007 (p. 12).
Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.
- Brittan, A. (2020). Meanings and Situations (RLE Social Theory). Routledge.
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive content/thematic analysis. *Quality & quantity*, 56(3), 1391-1412.
- Buddie, A. M., & Miller, A. G. (2001). Beyond rape myths: A more complex view of perceptions of rape victims. *Sex roles*, 45, 139-160.
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism* (Third edition.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Butler, Judith. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge New York and London.
- Butler, J. (1986). Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies*, (72), 35-49.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 217-230.
- Burt, M. R., & Albin, R. S. (1981). Rape myths, rape definitions, and probability of conviction. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 11, 212-230.
- Campbell, R. (2006). Rape Survivors' Experiences With the Legal and Medical Systems: Do Rape Victim Advocates Make a Difference? *Violence Against Women*, 12(1), 30-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801205277539>
- CAMPBELL, WASCO, S. M., AHRENS, C. E., SEFL, T., & BARNES, H. E. (2001). Preventing the "Second Rape": Rape Survivors' Experiences With Community Service Providers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 16(12), 1239-1259.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/088626001016012002>

Cappuccilli, E., & Ferrari, R. (2022). The Feminine Ferment: Marx and the Critique of Patriarchy. In *Global Marx* (pp. 58-73). Brill.

Carbone-Lopez, Slocum, L. A., & Kruttschnitt, C. (2016). Police Wouldn't Give You No Help: Female Offenders on Reporting Sexual Assault to Police. *Violence Against Women*, 22(3), 366–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215602345>

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Content/thematic analysis of qualitative research data- Is it as easy as it sounds?. *Currents in pharmacy teaching and learning*, 10(6), 807-815.

Catherine M. Reich, Gwendolyn D. Anderson & Richard Maclin (2022). Why I Didn't Report: Reasons for Not Reporting Sexual Violence as Stated on Twitter, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 31:4, 478-496, DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2021.1912873

CBC/Radio Canada. (2023, May 17). *Crying Wolf by Eden Boudreau | CBC books*. CBCnews. <https://www.cbc.ca/books/crying-wolf-by-eden-boudreau-1.6764119>

Couser, G. T. (2012). *Memoir an introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Cotter, A. & Savage, L. (2019). Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces.

Dawadi, S. (2020). Content/thematic Analysis Approach: A Step-by-Step Guide for ELT Research Practitioners. *Nepal English Language Teachers Association Journal*. Volume 25, Number 1-2.

Department of Justice Canada (2019). Just Facts. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf/pf/2019/docs/apr01.pdf>

Ditson, D. M. (2023). *D. M. Ditson*. D. M. Ditson Writes. <https://dmditson.ca/about-me>

Ditson, D.M. (2019). *Wide Open*. Coteau Books.

Dobkins, V., & Tavcer, D. S. (2023). Sexual violence in Canada. In *Sexual Violence Policies and Sexual Consent Education at Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions* (pp. 10-45).

Routledge.

Dukes, J. (n.d.). What is a Memoir? Retrieved from

<https://celadonbooks.com/whatisamemoir/#:~:text=%22Memoir%22%20Definition,narrative%20spans%20their%20entire%20life.>

Dworkin, E. R., Pittenger, S. L., & Allen, N. E. (2016). Disclosing sexual assault within social networks: A mixed-method investigation. *American journal of community psychology*, 57(1-2), 216-228.

Edwards, K. M., Turchik, J. A., Dardis, C. M., Reynolds, N., & Gidycz, C. A. (2011). Rape Myths: History, individual and institutional-level presence, and implications for Change. *Sex roles*, 65, 761-773.

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia.

Fitzgerald, L. F., Swan, S., & Fischer, K. (1995). Why Didn't She Just Report Him? The Psychological and Legal Implications of Women's Responses to Sexual Harassment. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51(1), 117-138.

Franiuk, R., Seefeldt, J. L., & Vandello, J. A. (2008). Prevalence of rape myths in headlines and Their effects on attitudes toward rape. *Sex roles*, 58, 790-801.

Freedman, K. (2014, March 17). *Biography*. Karyn Freedman. <https://karynfreedman.com/about-karyn/biography/>

Freedman, E. (2019). *One Hour in Paris: A True Story of Rape and Recovery*. Freehand Books.

Gerring, J. (1997). A Definitional Exercise. *Political Research Quarterly*, Dec., 1997, Vol. 50, No. 4. (Dec. 1997), pp. 957-994

Glesne, C. (2010). Ways of Knowing. In *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*. Toronto: Pearson (p.5-14).

Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. (n.d.)

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85002x/2019001/article/00017-eng.html>

Griffin, V. W., Wentz, E., & Meinert, E. (2022). Explaining the why in# WhyIDidntReport: An examination of common barriers to formal disclosure of sexual assault in college students. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37(15-16), NP14716-NP14745.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hall, E. R., Howard, J. A., & Boezio, S. L. (1986). Tolerance of rape: A sexist or antisocial attitude. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 10,101-118.

Hamilton, R. (2012). *THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN A study of Patriarchy and Capitalism*. In *The Liberation of Women (RLE Feminist Theory)*. Taylor & Francis Group

HarperCollins Canada. (2023) Discover Author, Emily Winslow Books and Biography. Retrieved from <https://www.harpercollins.ca/author/cr-160846/emily-winslow/>

Heinämaa, S. (1997). What is a woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the foundations of the sexual difference. *Hypatia*, 12(1), 20-39.

Henninger, Iwasaki, M., Carlucci, M. E., & Lating, J. M. (2020). Reporting Sexual Assault: Survivors' Satisfaction with Sexual Assault Response Personnel. *Violence Against Women*, 26(11), 1362–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219857831>

Javadi, M. and Zarea, K. (2016). Understanding Content/thematic Analysis and its Pitfall. *An International Nursing Journal. Journal of Client Care*.

- Joffe, H., & Yardley, L. (2004). Content and content/thematic analysis. *Research methods for clinical and health psychology* (pp. 56-68). London: Sage.
- Johnson, H. (2017). Why Doesn't She Just Report It? Apprehensions and Contradictions for Women Who Report Sexual Violence to the Police. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 29(1), 36–59. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.29.1.36>
- Kang, K. D. (2018). Language and ideology: Althusser's theory of ideology. *Language Sciences*, 70, 68-81.
- Krahé, B. (2016). Societal responses to sexual violence against women: Rape myths and the “real rape” stereotype. *Women and Children as Victims and Offenders: Background, Prevention, Reintegration: Suggestions for Succeeding Generations (Volume 1)*, 671-700.
- Krips, H. (2018). Ideology and its Pleasures: Althusser, Žižek & Pfaller.
- Laclau, L. (1996) The death and resurrection of the theory of ideology, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1:3, 201-220, DOI: 10.1080/13569319608420738
- Lanthier, Du Mont, J., & Mason, R. (2018). Responding to Delayed Disclosure of Sexual Assault in Health Settings: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 19(3), 251–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016659484>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2013). *The constructivist credo*. Left coast press.
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 18(2), 133-164.
- Lorenz, K. (2022). How Do Investigation Experiences Shape Views of the Police? Qualitatively Exploring Sexual Assault Survivors' Interactions With Police Detectives and Subsequent Views of the Police. *Crime and Delinquency*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287221120186>

Maguire, M. and Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a Content/thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars. URL:

<http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishej/article/view/335>

Maynard, M. (1995) Beyond the 'big three': the development of feminist theory into the 1990s, *Women's History Review*, 4:3, 259-281, DOI: [10.1080/09612029500200089](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029500200089)

McQueen, Murphy-Oikonen, J., Miller, A., & Chambers, L. (2021). Sexual assault: women's voices on the health impacts of not being believed by police. *BMC Women's Health*, 21(1), 1–217. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-021-01358-6>

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Victim definition & meaning. Merriam-Webster.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/victim>

Michelle E. Kiger & Lara Varpio (2020) Content/thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131, *Medical Teacher*, 42:8, 846-854, DOI:10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030

Miller, C. (2023). <https://chanel-miller.com/>

Miller, C. (2019). *Know My Name*. Viking.

Murphy-Oikonen, & Egan, R. (2022). Sexual and Gender Minorities: Reporting Sexual Assault to the Police. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69(5), 773–795.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1892402>

Mwita, K. (2022). Strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research in social science studies. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478), 11(6), 618–625.

Nickerson, C. (2023, April 21). *Impression Management & Self Presentation (Goffman)*. Simply

- Psychology. [https://www.simplypsychology.org/impression-management.html#:~:text=To%20Goffman%2C%20the%20self%20was,2001%3B%20seelon%2C%201992\).](https://www.simplypsychology.org/impression-management.html#:~:text=To%20Goffman%2C%20the%20self%20was,2001%3B%20seelon%2C%201992).)
- Nickerson, C. (2023). Social reaction theory (criminology). Simply Sociology. <https://simplysociology.com/social-reaction-theory.html>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Content/thematic Analysis Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Orchowski, L. M., & Gidycz, C. A. (2012). To whom do college women confide following sexual assault? A prospective study of predictors of sexual assault disclosure and social reactions. *Violence against women*, 18(3), 264-288.
- Packman, C. (2016). Towards a violent absolute: Some reflections on Žižekian theology and violence. *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 3(1).
- Paul Lewandowski Professional Corporation. (n.d.). Section 271 - sexual assault. CRIMINAL CODE OF CANADA. Retrieved November 18, 2022, from <http://www.criminalcode.ca/criminalcode-of-canada-section-271-sexual-assault/>
- Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999). Rape myth acceptance: Exploration of Its structure and its measurement using the Illinois rape myth acceptance scale. *Journal Of research in Personality*, 33(1), 27-68.
- Pilarska, J. (2021). The constructivist paradigm and phenomenological qualitative research design. *Research paradigm considerations for emerging scholars*, 64-83
- Randall, M. (2010). Sexual Assault Law, Credibility, and “Ideal Victims”: Consent, Resistance and Victim Blaming. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 22(2), 397

434. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwl.2010.0025>

Rufa, Carroll, K. K., Lofgreen, A., Klassen, B., Held, P., & Zalta, A. K. (2022). “You’re going to look at me differently”: A qualitative study of disclosure experiences among survivors of military sexual assault. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 35(3), 901–913.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22797>

Sall & Littleton, H. (2022). Institutional Betrayal: A Mixed Methods Study of College Women’s Experiences With On-Campus Help-Seeking Following Rape. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 23(5), 584–601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2022.2079795>

Sampert, S. (2010). Let Me Tell You a Story: English-Canadian Newspapers and Sexual Assault Myths. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 22(2), 301–328.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jwl.2010.0019>

Sartori, G. (1969). Politics, ideology, and belief systems. *American Political Science Review*, 63(2), 398-411.

Sebold, A. (n.d.). *Alice Sebold Biography: List of works, study guides & essays*. GradeSaver.

<https://www.gradesaver.com/author/alice-sebold>

Sebold, A. (1999). *Lucky*. Hachette Book Group.

Sharpe, M. (2006). The Aesthetics of Ideology, or ‘The Critique of Ideological Judgment’ in Eagleton and Zizek. *Political Theory*, 34(1), 95-120.

Sheehy. (2012). *Sexual assault in Canada law, legal practice, and women’s activism*. University of Ottawa Press.

Smith, G. (2006). *Erving Goffman*. Routledge.

Starzynski, L. L., Ullman, S. E., Townsend, S. M., Long, L. M., & Long, S. M. (2007). What factors predict women’s disclosure of sexual assault to mental health professionals?

- Journal of Community Psychology, 35(5), 619–638. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20168>
- Starzynski, Ullman, S. E., Filipas, H. H., & Townsend, S. M. (2005). Correlates of women's sexual assault disclosure to informal and formal support sources. *Violence and Victims*, 20(4), 417-432. <https://doi.org/10.1891/088667005780927593>
- Starzynski, L. L., Ullman, S. E., & Vasquez, A. L. (2017). Sexual assault survivors' experiences with mental health professionals: A qualitative study. *Women & Therapy*, 40(1-2), 228-246.
- Study.com. (n.d.) Hegemony: Theory & Examples. Study.com. (n.d.). <https://study.com/academy/lesson/hegemony-definition-examples.html#:~:text=Hegemony%20is%20the%20political%2C%20economic,others%20in%20the%20same%20region.>
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Content/thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 2, 17-37.
- Ullman, S. E. (2010). Why, how often, and to whom do women disclose, and what factors influence whether disclosure is healing? Talking about sexual assault: Society's response to survivors; talking about sexual assault: Society's response to survivors. (pp. 41-57, 210 Pages). Washington, DC, Washington: American Psychological Association, American Psychological Association.
- Ullman, S. E., O'Callaghan, E., Shepp, V., & Harris, C. (2020). Reasons for and experiences of sexual assault nondisclosure in a diverse community sample. *Journal of family violence*, 35, 839-851.
- Van der Linden, H. (2012). On the violence of systemic violence: A critique of Slavoj Žižek. *Radical Philosophy Review*, 15(1), 33.

- Van der Veer Martens, B. (2015). An illustrated introduction to the infosphere. *Library trends*, 63(3), 317-361.
- Walby, Sylvia. (1990), *Theorising Patriarchy*, London: Blackwell
- Walker, L. (2023, March 9). *The book nook: Interview with eden boudreau - blog - lori walker*. DIY MFA. <https://diymfa.com/reading/book-nook-eden-boudreau/>
- Williams, S. J. (1986). Appraising Goffman. *British Journal of Sociology*, 348-369.
- Worsham, L., & Olson, G. A. (1999). Hegemony and the future of democracy: Ernesto Laclau's political philosophy. *JAC*, 1-34.
- Zhang, Y.; Rios, K. (2021). "Understanding Perceptions of Radical and Liberal Feminists: The Nuanced Roles of Warmth and Competence". *Sex Roles*. 86 (3–4): 143–158. doi:10.1007/s11199-021-01257-y. S2CID 243479502.
- Žižek, S. (Ed.). (1994). *Mapping ideology*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2009). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso Books.
- Zizek, S. (2008). *Violence*. Picador.