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**Leaving the Past (Self) Behind:  
Non-reporting Rape Survivors' Narratives of Self and Action**

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**Leaving the Past (Self) Behind:  
Non-Reporting Rape Survivors' Narratives of Self and Action**

**Abstract**

Using a symbolic interactionist framework, this study considers the narratives of non-reporting rape survivors. We use interviews to examine the complex processes that inform a survivor's decision not to report. Rape is not interpreted as an isolated event; it is something that is seen as caused by, connected to, and affecting the survivor's sense of self and agency. Rape forces the survivor to reconstruct a sense of agency in the aftermath of the traumatic attack. Rather than report the rape, the survivors constructed narratives that direct blame and accountability toward the 'old self.' This less visible, yet still agentic strategy, allows the survivors to regain a sense of agency and control. As a result, a more positive, optimistic self can be constructed, while pursuing legal justice would force them to reenact an 'old' self that cannot be disentangled from the rape.

**Keywords:** identity; narratives; non-reporting of rape; rape survivors; survivor agency; symbolic interactionism

2017 became the year of the ‘silence breakers’ (Zacharek et al., 2017) as survivors of sexual assault reinvigorated the cultural narrative around sexual violence by vocally and visibly uniting around two simple words, ‘me too.’ The #MeToo movement’s success in encouraging women to speak up about their assaults has had a tremendous impact in demonstrating the pervasiveness of sexual assault. Despite the success of the movement, countless women likely chose not to speak up. As social activists continue to place an emphasis on making instances of sexual assault more visible, the less visible forms of coping continue to be overlooked and misunderstood.

Much emphasis has been placed on getting survivors to take action and report the rape. Still, a large majority of rape survivors do not report the crime (RAINN). This problem is especially acute on college campuses (Fisher et al., 2003). Previous scholarship has largely viewed non-reporting as a problematic form of inaction (Weiss, 2010), asking question such as, why do rape survivors fail to report (Sable et al., 2006)? How do we get survivors to report (Eelson and Pare, 2005)? What *factors* determine whether a survivor reports (Alderden and Long, 2016)? These efforts are vitally important, but can have the unintended consequence of implicitly taking away agency from rape survivors by failing to acknowledge other, less visible, forms of action as legitimate. For some survivors, bringing the perpetrator to justice may not be their primary concern. Thus, the decision not to report may be an expression of agency and control.

Issues of agency have, of course, been an important point of contention in discussions about rape and sexual assault (Dunn, 2005). The emphasis on reporting focuses on agency that is overt and socially ‘visible.’ Visible actions, however, only

account for a fraction of the actions individuals engage in on a daily basis. There are also internal processes that are common and crucially important to social life (Scott, 2018). Thought processes, such as constructing a narrative about self-identity, are forms of action (Strauss, 1993). A *decision* not to report is not ‘nothing’ (Scott, 2018). Understanding why so many survivors choose not to report necessitates viewing non-reporting as a form of action (see Hlavka, 2014).

Although these thought processes may be internal, they are not isolated—they are a form of interaction with the world. Yet, they may be overlooked by a means/ends scheme that prescribes reporting as the desirable end point. Not only may some survivors not desire the ends society prescribes for them, for many the desired ‘end’ is not clear at all. Further, even if the desired end was clear, it may change as they progress forward. The means/ends reporting scheme artificially obscures the more fluid process through which survivors move forward (see Azarian, 2017; Strauss, 1993).

By paying attention to the stories non-reporting rape survivors tell, we can gain understanding of the social worlds that are all too often silenced (Polkinghorne, 1988) and give voice to social actors (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). This perspective is needed given the discernable decrease in focus on rape and sexual assault among feminist sociologists in recent years (Martin, 2016). Specifically, we employ a symbolic interactionism perspective from which to consider ‘rape’ and the experiences of sexual assault survivors. This entails viewing ‘rape’ as a symbolic object and considering how a survivor’s interpretation of the event impacts the meaning that they assign to the self. We use interviews with five non-reporting rape survivors to explore how the survivors negotiate a narrative of self as they interpret their experience and subsequent course of

action. It is only by first listening that we can truly understand how to think about the problems related to coping with a sexual assault.

### **The Symbolic Meaning of Rape**

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) suggests that people can only understand the world through a symbolic toolkit that is learned, negotiated, and refined through an ongoing process of interaction with social others. The social world is constructed and maintained by assigning meaning to objects (Blumer, 1969). With this approach we can view the word ‘rape’ as a symbol that has come to signify a certain meaning, which encourages a preferred interpretation (Weiss and Colyer, 2010). Through social interaction, the meanings associated with the concepts of ‘rape’ and ‘reporting’ have become normalized, appearing to be objective and stable. In reality, these meanings are not inherent and can only maintain a stable definition through the process of social maintenance. It is only in moments that the working consensus is disrupted that the façade is exposed (Goffman, 1959).

When many people think about ‘rape,’ they typically imagine ‘stranger rape,’ an incident involving a clear survivor and a previously unknown perpetrator (Hughes et al., 2003). For some sexual assault survivors, the dominant social narratives about rape may be at odds with the confusion that can result from an acquaintance rape (Dunn, 2005). For women who are the survivors of sexual assault perpetrated by someone they know, perhaps even a loved one, the lived experience does not always fit within this pre-existing understanding (Leisenring, 2006). Rape is not an isolated event, it is something that is seen as being caused by, connected to, and affecting the survivor’s life and identity.

### **Constructing Meaning through Narrative**

Symbolic interactionism also suggests that people rely on constructed meaning to interpret the self (Jenkins, 2008). A person can only truly begin to understand who they are by imagining how they appear to social others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). These projected interpretations are used to help assign meaning to the self—to know who one is, what they are like, and how they fit into the world.

As with other objects, the self is typically assumed to be objective and stable. Humans have an inherent need to construct a coherent sense of self (Loseke, 2007), even though the self is fluid and socially negotiated (Jenkins, 2008). For example, people may imagine a past self and a new self after having undergone an important transformation (e.g., a born-again Christian). This symbolic separation between a past and present self obscures the more fluid and interactive process through which the self is constantly adapting to specific situations, changing, being reinterpreted, and so on (Strauss, 1993).

One of the primary ways that people come to establish a seemingly stable self is by constructing and telling narratives. In many ways, the self is only capable of being realized through narrative practice (Davies, 2015). Narratives are temporally bounded and establish cause and effect relationships between actors and events within the story (Polkinghorne, 1988; Polletta et al., 2011). Narratives allow people to order, interpret, and communicate their understandings of the world (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). An individual can symbolically order seemingly disparate experiences, and posit relationships between different story elements, in order to construct a coherent account of life events (Azarian, 2017; Loseke, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1991). The evolution of the self, similarly, is constructed and ordered over time as the narrative unfolds (Davies, 2015). In this way, a seemingly stable notion of self is established by integrating various iterations

of the self, past events, and projected futures, into a coherent narrative arch (Davis, 2002).

Narratives about the self are not just a personal affair—they are constructed through interaction with the social world (Polletta et al., 2011). Personal narratives exist within sociocultural contexts that contain complex systems of meaning (Azarian, 2017; Strauss, 1993). The stories a person feels they can tell may be constrained by prevailing norms and values, institutional regulations, widely available social narratives, and so on. Individuals will have an acute awareness of how others will perceive certain stories, as well as an internalized understanding that certain accounts of their life and/or actions are simply not to be told (Polletta et al., 2011).

Of particular importance is the influence of widely circulated social narratives. These narratives create a well-established framework that may be used to interpret and react to specific events or actions. However, socially circulating narratives tend to rely on simplistic, black and white depictions, where characters and moral evaluations are clear-cut (Loseke, 2007). These stories may play important social functions (e.g., raising public awareness that sexual assault is a pervasive issue), but they can also be quite constraining because they do not always accurately reflect the complicated experiences individuals may have. For example, survivors of acquaintance rape may struggle to view the event as ‘rape’ because it is at odds with the widely available ‘stranger rape’ narrative. Survivors may struggle to view themselves as ‘pure’ victims, interpret the event as less traumatic than the stories circulated in society, and/or fixate on actions they perceive to have contributed to the rape (Wood and Rennie, 1994).

Narratives about the self are, thus, both active and agentic, while also being



socially bounded (Polletta et al., 2011). Assuming a survivor has agency need not imply that she does not face long odds against systematic and structural power imbalances, biases, and injustices. A decision not to report may be the consequence of perceived social barriers that the survivor does not wish to face. Indeed, the possibility of receiving negative reactions from those in positions of power like police officers is a well-established barrier to reporting (Cohn et al., 2013). When a survivor who reports a rape is met with incredulity or blame, they may choose to stop speaking about the rape all together (Ahrens, 2006). Thus, sexual assault survivors can simultaneously be constrained by social factors so that certain modes of action become less desirable, while also displaying agency in assessing the situation and deciding how to move forward.

Personal narratives are, therefore, a crucially important, but often socially ‘invisible’ site of action for rape survivors. We use interviews with five non-reporting rape survivors to demonstrate how survivors of rape use narratives to negotiate the trauma of rape. The narratives the women construct about their life experiences shed light onto the world that rape survivors experience, helping us to understand the complicated web of meaning that surrounds the interpretation of, and reaction to, rape.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study is based on the analysis of five interviews with female undergraduate students at a large state university in the Southwest of the United States. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of this study, our objective was to provide a deeper understanding of sexual assault survivors and in-depth information about their lived experiences. For this reason, in-depth interviews were used. We attempted to reach out to

all survivors of rape regardless of gender or reporting status, but our focus on non-reporting emerged organically as we recognized that only female non-reporters chose to contact us to participate. To sample the population, we contacted members of the community who are involved in raising awareness and support for survivors of sexual violence (Women's Studies and female leadership organizations and a community organization that assists survivors). We provided those contacts with appropriate recruitment information so that potential participants could be informed discretely and without pressure, allowing them to decide if they wished contact us and participate.

In total, five women contacted us to participate in the study. The participant sample included women between the ages of 18 and 24 with diverse racial identities including two Black women, two white women, and one Hispanic woman. Of the women who participated, two also identified as members of the LGBTQ community. Because these differences did not appear to affect the overarching narrative process, we do not highlight them in the analysis (see Discussion). Although our sample is small, the interviews still provided rich insights about the social reality of non-reporting survivors, thereby ascribing to the notion that, 'it is much more important for the research to be intensive, and thus persuasive at the conceptual level than aim to be extensive with intent to be convincing, at least in part, through enumeration' (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006: p. 494).

### **Positionality**

This study was prompted by two researchers' interest in women's rights and desire to promote social justice on college campuses. We reached out to campus and community experts on sexual assault, met with the director of Women's Studies,

participated in multiple rape awareness events, and interviewed the director of a local community organization that assists survivors. We expected to learn more about potential solutions for preventing sexual assault on college campuses, but our focus organically shifted toward the importance of hearing the stories of survivors. This encouraged us to recruit participants who would be willing to share their stories of sexual assault. Our recruitment material indicated that the purpose of the study was to give voice to survivor's experiences of sexual assault. The study's purpose was, in fact, what prompted some of the participants to contact us and share their stories.

Once participants were recruited, we conducted the interviews. Depending on which one of the two researchers the participant contacted, we determined a location and time for the one-on-one interview. As an extra precaution to protect participants, they were given their interview transcript to read so that they could identify any parts they wished not to be included in the analysis. None of the participants requested that information be removed from the analysis.

### **Analysis**

After the researchers conducted and transcribed all of the interviews, they began the analysis. To ensure that the analysis was minimally impacted by the personal connections made with the survivors or the researchers' focus on social justice, a third researcher who was previously unfamiliar with the study and the topic area was brought in to participate in the analysis and interpretation. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using an inductive coding approach. Initially, a line-by-line analysis of each interview was conducted and labels were assigned to the relevant pieces of information in a process of open coding. These codes were then constantly compared against the data

and the literature and then narrowed into final themes. Additionally, the interpretation process was interactive, with the researchers discussing their thoughts and collaboratively forming a shared interpretation. At each stage of the coding process, the researchers would communicate with one another to ensure that the themes being developed were consistent with each researcher's interpretation of the data. Throughout the analysis, the codes were compared against one another and in relation to the original data to ensure that the developing themes were relevant to the entire dataset (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### **Findings**

Our analysis of the participants' narratives revealed a consistent set of key themes that helped construct an overarching storyline that allowed the survivors to come to terms with their rape and regain a sense of control and agency, despite choosing not to report their rape. The survivors' accounts consistently demonstrated that the rape serves as a traumatic event that shatters pre-existing routines and includes loss of agency and control, which disrupts how the survivor interprets and understands the self, leading her to search for ways to regain agency, thereby restoring and reconstructing a 'new self,' which is accomplished by detaching and leaving behind the 'old self.' Specifically, the women constructed narratives about a new self that sheds 'rape' as a central identity by leaving their old self behind.

As is demonstrated below, when the survivors considered the possibility of reporting, they imagined that the reporting process would not be in their control. Conversely, the decision not to report helped facilitate the restoration of control of their narrative. The survivors were able to achieve agency, healing, and distance from the trauma *because* they decided not to report. Instead, they enacted a less visible form of

agency by constructing an internalized narrative in which the old self was detached in order to construct a newly imagined self, free from the constraints of the object of rape.

### **A Break in Routines**

Labeling an experience as ‘rape’ may be a complex, messy, and ongoing process of considering and evaluating their own thoughts as well as the thoughts of others in their environment (Higginson, 1999). The women we talked to all engaged in an active negotiation process where they sought to understand how and why the rape occurred and the implications the event had for the self. These narratives all start with the recognition that the seemingly ordered and intelligible world they had come to know had been disrupted in a significant way and would no longer be what it once was. Jane, for example, differentiates between the detrimental but routine interactions she had with her boyfriend and the event she defines as rape:

*Like at this point I was like he already hits me I don't think it could get any worse...I thought that nothing could be worse than like getting beat on but that was definitely like ten times worse...And when he held me down...Like I knew that that was it...Even though I kept fighting I knew in the back of my mind like this is really happening.*

Jane’s account juxtaposes the sexual assault with an unhealthy, but ostensibly manageable, abusive relationship. When the rape occurred, however, she ‘knew that that was it.’ At this point, Jane becomes acutely aware that a dramatic point of no return has occurred—the event was unmistakably unique and would serve to rupture the life to which she had become accustomed.

For the women in this study, the disruption to normal routines was further complicated by the fact that each woman was assaulted by someone she knew. The rape is contextualized within the more routine interactions that occurred between the survivor

and the perpetrator. Grace makes a point of stating, ‘I invited him in because I trusted him because we were friends before we started messing around.’ Grace relies on her pre-existing but, in retrospect, misguided *trust* in the perpetrator. Their previously established routine of ‘messing around’ entangles the perpetrator’s actions and Grace’s own sense of agency, responsibility, and blame. Although the rape cannot be separated from the pre-existing relationship, the rape and the immediate aftermath are undeniably shocking events. Grace explains the anguish she experienced:

*I tried to kick him and stuff but then he grabbed my legs and lifted them up...It hurt. I didn't want to scream because I felt like I could probably ruin his life if that happened. I cried the entire time until he was done and I didn't do anything. I just cried.*

It is particularly telling that as Grace is being brutally assaulted, her response and actions are mitigated by her concern that she ‘could probably ruin his life.’ Grace cannot view the rape as a detached experience distinct from her feelings for the man she had intertwined with emotionally and physically. The more intimate the pre-existing relationship, the less likely it is for a rape survivor to view the rape as a clear-cut situation with a clearly prescribed response, such as reporting the event (Koss et al., 1988). The people a person associates with, especially if they are in a romantic relationship, play an important role in determining a person’s self-identity and sense of self-worth (James, 1890). If a person is assaulted by a friend or loved one, then they may feel that it reflects badly on the self because the relationship was self-defining.

Indeed, even though all the women recognized the assault as a problematic event, they were not always comfortable labeling the event ‘rape.’ Nicole was too drunk to fully remember the night she was raped by her best friend, but she confronted the perpetrator and asked what happened:

*I said, 'did we have sex?' And he said, 'are you serious?' And I said, 'no really did we have sex?' And he said, 'yes.' and so I don't know if he assumed that I remembered. I'm not quite sure. Obviously, I guess he did.*

Nicole later stated, 'Do I want to say he forced himself on me? Maybe not. I don't know.' Her story illustrates a lengthy process of constructing the meaning of rape (Burnett et al., 2009). For Nicole, this process involves not only her interpretation of the interaction, but the perpetrator's interpretation of the event (see Wood and Rennie, 1994). Acquaintance rape survivors often struggle to initially label the event rape because society assigns 'rape' seemingly obvious meanings that lead to the assumption that what does or does not constitute 'rape' should be straightforward.

Nicole, who is in a same-sex marriage, understands the legal definition of rape and uses this meaning to inform her understanding of the event as a 'rape' stating, 'I want to hold him accountable because he was sober. He was the one in his right mind.' At the same time, Nicole struggles with this definition of the situation. Nicole cannot help but blame herself and states, 'I feel very shameful, and regretful, and guilty that I don't remember it, that I possibly could have egged it on...' For many women, the experience of being raped does not match the narratives about rape that have been socially circulated. They are then forced to reconcile their own experience against the backdrop of these limited and often oversimplified narratives (Loseke, 2007).

### **The Disruption of Self**

Each survivor's struggle to make sense of rape goes beyond understanding rape as an event that occurred in her life—rape is an event that becomes deeply connected to a survivor's understanding of herself. For the women in our study, the rape marked a loss of control and agency that disrupted their narratives about the self. Nicole explains, 'rape,

sexual assault, sexual harassment takes away [our] autonomy...that kind of taints how we see ourselves and how we see our control...that's at the very core of us to act [for] ourselves and rape takes that away.' Regaining control was of utmost importance to the survivors in this study who felt helpless. Sandra states, 'I guess it makes me feel helpless...the power feels like it was stripped from me.' For the survivors, this loss of agency and control fractured their understanding of the self. Humans have an inherent need to construct a coherent sense of self (Loseke, 2007), even though the self is constructed and maintained through a more fluid process (Strauss, 1993). When this sense of stability and cohesiveness is disrupted, a survivor may be left reeling to regain control.

Loss of control and agency can lead to a perceived loss of self-worth. Tricia states, 'And it was like sitting there feeling worthless and like realizing that this has happened to me...and this feeling that I have of emptiness inside of me is not, like it's not me.' Jane echoed a similar sentiment stating, 'One minute I felt important and the next minute I felt like I didn't matter.' Tricia and Jane's accounts demonstrate an existential crisis that results from experiencing an event that previously seemed outside of the realms of possibility. In an instant, they are forced to renegotiate a self they spent a lifetime constructing and negotiating. They are left with questions about whether their lives have any meaning or value. Tricia and Jane had to confront an identity that they never imagined they would have to enact—the identity of a 'rape survivor.'

Such a disruption can leave a survivor struggling to return to 'life as normal.' Now, previously routine and habitual events no longer mean the same thing. For example, Jane states, 'I wasn't happy for [my birthday]. I pretended to be because I didn't



want any “oh well why are you not excited?” But I wasn’t happy because I was messed up in my mind.’ While Jane struggled internally, she also made active decisions to project ‘life as usual’ to her friends and family. Grace explained, ‘I didn’t want to eat. Everything was affected. My GPA, my emotions, my mental health, everything even my physical health.’ Sandra also stated, ‘And then I was really emotionally distant like I didn’t want to be touched, I didn’t want to talk, I didn’t want to be hugged.’ For the survivors, the rape event resulted in an extremely salient break from their established sense of mind, body, and self.

### **The Restoration of Self**

Although the sexual assault experience left all of the survivors struggling to make sense of their lives, the women all told a story about regaining agency and constructing a ‘new’ self. Whereas, immediately after the rape, the narratives of self were disrupted and disordered, the women we spoke to were able to reestablish order and control over their narratives by symbolically constructing an ‘old self’ and a ‘new self.’ Sandra describes her new, positive self concept:

*I’m in a lot better place than I was when it happened. I’ve stopped putting it out of my mind..I’m not blaming myself anymore...I guess I feel like I’m having that self-confidence and that power that I feel from myself to be able to do normal things coming back.*

Sandra was able to accomplish the creation of a ‘new’ self by redefining herself while also locating a new audience of ‘others’ to observe, reaffirm, and support her new identity. She goes on to state:

*I feel less shame I guess... Like I feel like my future is bright. That I can overcome this and actually use it to help other people before something happens to them or whenever they need someone to relate to or talk to if it does happen.*

Sandra's narrative moves beyond the restoration of an old self to the projection of a 'bright' future, where she can provide help and support for others. Notably, Sandra's interest in helping others is externally focused. Her desire to be there for others reaffirms the image of a new self that has learned from experience, knows better than the 'old self,' and is in a position to offer guidance to those who may not know better.

Tricia shared a similar description of her 'new' self and her ability to contribute to other people's lives. She stated:

*It makes my day just to hold someone's door open for them and for them to tell me have a great day. Like that gives me worth...and if I can be ok day by day then I know that year by year it will be better and that I can change someone else's life.*

The focus on helping others suggest a new conception of self that is optimistic and future oriented.

The desire to move forward and leave the rape behind is not surprising, of course, but in order to do so, the survivors we talked to gained control over their narrative by symbolically leaving their old selves behind. By reclaiming their narratives in this way, the women were able to assert agency that helped mitigate the loss of control they felt after the rape. For many of the women, this meant assigning some of the blame to their old selves as a way of taking back their agency. Nicole explains her feelings of self-blame and says, 'you really want to convince yourself that it is you. Because if it's you, you have your control back.'

For them, the old self becomes a symbolic object that represents past mistakes and ignorance. Indeed, without exception, every survivor began her narrative with a critique of her 'old' self and prior behaviors. Jane, who was raped by her boyfriend, began her story by critically reflecting on her prior actions with that boyfriend. She states, 'I felt

bad because I let it get to that point and I should have left or broken up with him earlier.’

Jane explains further, ‘At the time, it didn’t matter; now it does. And I felt like it was probably because I didn’t know my worth.’ Jane constructs her old self as naïve and ignorant of her worth. In doing so, she clearly establishes a ‘new’ self that is more self-aware, more understanding of who she is and who she is supposed to be.

By demonstrating that she now knows that the old self was the ‘wrong’ self, the survivors were able to create order and meaning in their narratives of self. In doing so, the stories the survivors told also incorporated and responded to some of the social constraints inherent in their situation. For example, as the women relived their ‘old’ selves, they made frequent derisive comments regarding their past partying and drinking behaviors. Grace begins the interview by criticizing her ‘old’ self as a partier who made poor decisions. She states, ‘I wanted to do that [partying] a lot but then I just went off the wall.’ Grace describes the various actions her ‘old’ self used to perform including ‘messaging around’, ‘drinking’, and ‘letting all of her inhibitions loose.’ Grace explains, ‘I put myself in those situations and even so I allowed people to do that to me and I thought it was okay.’ In highlighting her old self’s naivetés, Grace affirms that her new self knows better. Similarly, Tricia reflects on her ‘old’ self’s lack of identity stating, ‘I didn’t know who I was’ before criticizing her prior actions by declaring, ‘I came to [college] and I kind of went crazy.’ Tricia’s narrative account is centered around proving the old self’s lack of knowledge about her true self, whereas the new self has come to have a better mastery of the world.

In this way, the women’s decisions to criticize past behaviors and decouple the past ‘old self’ serves as an effective technique for restoring agency, while moving past

self-blame. Identifying and interpreting the old self as an object allows them to create order and stability by directing blame and shame towards a self that is clearly distinct, thereby allowing them to construct a ‘new self’ that is agentic, but that has also shed the shame, ignorance and trauma of the old self.

### **Imagined Courses of Action and Reporting**

All of the women in our study told stories about regaining agency and control over their life. Yet, none of the women reported the rape. The lack of reporting has typically been viewed as a sign of inaction and/or lack of agency. Many of the socially circulated narratives about rape present reporting as the necessary action that a survivor must take in order to regain agency and receive justice (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Yet, the decision to remain passive or active implies a false dichotomy about the courses of action available to a survivor that, in reality, are very complex and seldom clear-cut. By imagining potential courses of action, the women display agency, even if they choose not to act (Scott, 2018). At the same time, during this active process of imagining potential courses of actions, survivors may be acutely aware that they face certain social constraints. In particular, survivors may perceive they lack control over the way certain courses of action will unfold (including legal processes and institutional constraints) and/or they will be subject to unfair and misinformed judgments by social others.

As college students, the participants in our study were particularly aware that the context of a college campus provides a social environment that is both particularly conducive to rape, as well as unreceptive to reporting. Previous studies suggest that college campuses foster a rape culture in which date rape is an accepted part of campus activity (Burnett et al., 2009). The women in this study expressed feelings of

powerlessness in this context when they told stories about assaults they saw happen to other women on the campus. Nicole tells a story about attempting to stop a fraternity man from having sex with a woman who was so intoxicated ‘her eyes are in the back of her head.’ In her attempts to stop the rape, she got thrown out of the party because she ‘made a scene.’ Similarly, Grace shares a story about attempting to stop people at a party from humiliating and grabbing a girl who was ‘super drunk’ when her friends stopped her and ‘told her not to do anything.’

Further, the women in our study assigned self-blame for behaviors that they knew others would see as partially responsible for their assault. Grace explains, ‘I was someone who messed around so why would anyone even believe [me]?’ When Tricia was asked why she thought others would view the rape as her fault she said, ‘because I was drunk, because I had gone to the party, because I had let him in the room, because I was wearing a dress.’

Additionally, when the survivors imagined formally reporting the rape, they saw a process that would not likely accomplish much, and would also result in victim shaming (see Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Nicole made the decision not to report, in part, because she thought that rather than achieving justice, she would be subject to more judgment, ‘its his words versus mine and supposedly his words are saying that I egged it on...its just a recipe for more humiliating experiences for me. I don’t think anything would happen to him at all.’ Sandra echoes a similar sentiment, sharing that she ‘was told by other people that there is a lot of victim blaming.’

The survivors’ narratives indicated that they were hyper-aware of the perceived judgments of various ‘others.’ It is widely accepted that ‘rape culture’ contributes to

internalized feelings of shame, self-blame, and self-loathing (Leisenring, 2006). Jane explains:

*I didn't want to go through the whole like court process. And like well tell your story again, tell it again, tell it again. I felt like that was going to be holding me back from a lot of stuff. And then I didn't want people thinking that I was stupid. Because I think I was stupid. But I didn't want people like, 'well you stayed. Well what did you do to make him do that?' Basically switching the roles like I was the bad guy. Like I was the reason that it happened. And I already feel like it was my fault and I didn't want to keep hearing it.*

By imagining the judgment of generalized others, Jane feels trapped in her old self—lacking the agency to move beyond the ‘naïve’ self that made mistakes and trusted the wrong people. She imagines other people will see her the way she sees herself—as someone who ‘was stupid’ and was at ‘fault.’ The survivors indicated that after assessing the situation, they felt reporting would not help them restore agency, but instead would cause them to lose even more control—unable to achieve anything through the justice system, while also being judged for their behaviors.

None of the survivors we spoke to reported being raped to the police, yet the survivors communicated a story of personal transformation, healing, and hope. For them, reporting would have caused a further loss of control during a time when regaining a sense of agency was of paramount importance. Instead, the survivors in this study found agency by constructing a narrative that included an ‘old’ self toward whom blame for the rape was directed, thereby allowing the women to reclaim a sense of control over the events in their lives. As Sandra explains, ‘there is such a lack of control that if we are able to blame ourselves we are able to put ourselves kind of in control of that situation even if it’s a negative control.’

The survivors indicated that they were able to achieve agency, healing, and distance from the trauma *because* they decided not to report. In order for the women in our study to establish a new self that shed ‘rape’ as a central identity, they had to leave their old self behind. The survivors in this study elected to cope with the rape by reimagining and reconstructing a new self that has control and agency. For them, the decision to report was perceived as a course of action that would expose them to the judgment of others and cause them further loss of control, which would ultimately keep them tethered to a self that cannot be disentangled from the rape.

### **Conclusion**

As it turns out, the decision not to report a sexual assault can be very active and, for some women, the best way they know how to regain a sense of control over their lives. The women’s decisions not to report were a form of self-preservation enacted to protect against a further loss of control. The internalized and often invisible process of narrative and identity construction in which the survivors engaged was a crucial component of their survival strategy.

Yes, the survivors we talked to communicated a sense of self-blame, shame, and an awareness of the ‘rape culture’ that surrounds them, but they also told a story of self-empowerment, survival, and hope. When familiar routines and established identities are disrupted people must take time to sort through what they thought they knew about themselves to determine how they will move forward after the disruption. By taking a step back to listen to the lived experiences of rape survivors and interpret their stories through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we can begin to understand why for some rape survivors it is incredibly difficult to immediately distinguish between ‘victim’ and

‘perpetrator’, ‘rape’ and ‘sex.’ The world rape survivors actually experience is inherently more complex and fluid than the stories society tells about how people are supposed to interpret and understand rape.

The survivors’ narratives demonstrate that the negative connotations associated with rape become deeply intertwined with their own sense of self. The rape is not an isolated event, it is something that is seen as being caused by, connected to, and affecting the survivor’s life and identity. The survivor is now forced to reconstruct a sense of agency in the aftermath of a devastating attack that left her feeling powerless. Thus, the survivor cannot interpret herself as an ‘innocent victim’—such a label does not fit within the world these survivors actually understand and experience. Instead, these survivors attempt to cope with the rape by directing blame and accountability toward the ‘old self.’ In constructing a symbolic representation of a previous self, the survivors seek to detach their current self from the rape event. They acknowledge that it happened, that it has changed them and will forever affect the world they know, but they also associate it more directly with a self that no longer exists. As a result, a more positive, optimistic self is constructed. For these survivors, pursuing legal justice only serves to force them to reenact their old self, to continue to be blameworthy, ignorant, and naïve.

The construction and maintenance of the self is fluid—changing in meaning and interpretation depending upon the context. Yet, symbolic objects, such as the self, can come to be interpreted and constructed as if they were stable and concrete. Thus, the symbolic construction of a ‘past self,’ ‘raped self,’ and ‘new self’ allow a survivor to provide order and coherence to their narratives of self, obscuring the more complicated and interpretive nature of the self.



Our five interviews illustrate how these particular survivors assign meaning to rape and construct narratives of self for themselves, but we cannot expect that every woman interprets, communicates, and acts toward sexual assault in the same manner. A wide array of symbolic coping strategies, no doubt, exist. The college sample used here is a limitation because the drinking and hook up culture prevalent in many college environments may increase a survivor's likelihood to blame their own behavior. Nonetheless, it also reflects the complicated process through which decisions to report will include an active consideration of the particular constraints inherent in specific sociocultural context.

Our sample is further limited by the fact that it was up to the women to contact us to participate and, as such, the women in our study may have developed coping mechanisms that differ from the women who were not willing to speak to us about their stories. Decisions not to report due to a perceived lack of control and decoupling the past self are not strategies that all survivors will employ. Regardless, our study demonstrates how agentic and important the 'invisible' actions of non-reporting survivors are. These less visible forms of coping with a rape are much more complicated and interconnected than the stories told about rape in society. It is also particularly telling that we found so many consistencies across all five interviews. In particular, all of the women we spoke to condemned the 'old self.' Despite the small sample size, this consistency suggests that this is an important symbolic strategy many rape survivors often use.

The narrative construction of self and meaning we found is notable and warrants further discussion and understanding. This paper details one common narrative device survivors of sexual assault may use, yet more research is needed to identify and examine

other symbolic strategies survivors may employ. Further, one of the main contributions of this manuscript is to draw attention to the need to listen to the stories sexual assault survivors tell. In this regard, our paper seeks to help prioritize the voices of sexual assault survivors, rather than focus on causal relationships. Although this approach is not novel, it is far too uncommon (see Martin, 2016).

Scholars and activists often seek to uncover the factors that cause the non-reporting. Such an approach may quietly, but strongly, reinforce generalizations about survivors that do not appear malicious, but nonetheless degrade their perceived social status. By focusing on the ‘victims’ inaction, these narratives naturally suggest non-reporting survivors are passive, meek, and emotionally unstable—possibly rendering their agency and actions invisible.

To be clear, we are not arguing *against* reporting. Social mechanisms that work to deter sexual assault, as well as assure social justice, are vitally important. This much is obvious. At the same time, it is irresponsible to assume that outside observers understand what survivors of sexual assault are going through and that we know better than they do. It is crucial that we first listen to rape survivors and give them agency and voice in the process.

This study is but one small attempt to acknowledge that scholars need a better understanding of the world rape survivors actually experience. The complexities of indicating, interpreting, and communicating the meaning of rape most likely occur over time and involve not only the interpretations of one’s own actions, but an interpretation of the other available cultural resources. This study sought to draw focus to the need to pay more attention to the agentic, but less visible forms of coping in which rape survivors

engage. If scholars and social activists continue to focus exclusively on visible forms of action, we may continue to overlook the less visible survival strategies many individuals choose to enact and risk further stigmatizing those who do not choose to share their story.

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