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THE EFFECTS ON SEXUAL ASSAULT ON SURVIVOR'S SEX LIVES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This research aims to understand the affect that sexual assault trauma has on survivors' sex lives and romantic relationships. Using a qualitative research method of interviews, ten female-identifying sexual assault survivors from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) were asked about their history, attitudes, and behaviors on sex and relationships. An intersectional approach combined with a feminist lens was utilized in order to understand the lives of these survivors' post-assault with a sociological perspective. The findings revealed that participants received inadequate formal education on consent in schools. I discovered intimacy challenges both romantically and sexually, where participants revealed a hesitancy and even avoidance to intimate interactions. Relatedly, a struggle in reintegration into society as sexual assault survivors was found to be evident. This study expanded on previous research on the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and femininity and its contribution to violence against women. Societal norms such as hook-up culture were also found to be correlated with sexual assault. This study contributes to the existing and expanding research on women who experience sexual assault and their experiences thereafter.

Introduction

On December 14, 2014 President Barack Obama announced a White House Task Force to protect college students from sexual assault. The objective of this campaign was four-fold: to identify the scope of the problem through surveys, to help prevent campus sexual assault, to help schools respond effectively when a student is assaulted, and finally to improve and make more transparent, the federal government's enforcement efforts (Department of Justice, 2014). The call for action against the rampant nature of sexual assault has been at a large scale level for years now, even calling on the highest level of political power. President Obama (2014) stated that, *Sexual violence is more than just a crime against individuals. It threatens our families, it threatens our communities; ultimately, it threatens the entire country. It tears apart the fabric of our communities.*

As this quote suggests, the impact of every act of sexual violence not only affects the individual, but the community that they reside in. Though this issue has long standing roots and has garnered the attention and awareness of many, the healing process and reintegration to society of survivors is often overlooked. The aftermath experiences of survivors beg the importance of research as sexual violence has unfortunately shown to penetrate and persist. For every act of sexual violence, there is a survivor seeking resources and support.

Using qualitative data through interviewing sexual assault survivors on University of California, Santa Barbara's (UCSB) campus I ask: How does sexual assault affect survivor's sex lives and romantic relationships? With the complexity and layers to this cause-and-effect relationship, I will focus on how survivors' formal and informal sex education influenced their perceptions on sex, and how they make sense of their trauma depicted through their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs toward sex and relationships. Moreover, my findings will uncover the various ways survivors processed their trauma. Because the primary at-risk group are female identifying undergraduate students with perpetrators that are male-identifying (Armstrong, 2018), my interviewees were all from this population. My location of research collection at UCSB was salient as the UCSB Crime Log revealed a total of 10 instances of rape were reported within the span of 53 days both in campus housing and within Isla Vista, the city where the university resides in. With the statistic that 20% of female students report their instances of rape (RAINN 2020), we can assume that there are about 8 more rapes that occurred within this time period that went unreported. Though UCSB is not alone in its frequent occurrences of rape, it remains a university with a reputation of unbridled party culture. With rapes and unwanted sexual advances being cultivated and most often in environments involving drugs and alcohol (Lawyer et al. 2010), this university provided an appropriate case to analyze the aftermath of sexual assault for female identifying college students.

A social psychological perspective was utilized in order to identify how individuals' thoughts, feelings, and emotions on their trauma come into play as they interact with their environment. Previous research has focused on the capacity for prevention and this research intends on adding to this by retrieving first hand data from survivors in their healing process. There is a

necessity to identify what survivors seek in order to process their experiences as it can lend a hand in what communities and institutions can do to acknowledge, listen, and support those affected.

Because psychological distress is strongly correlated to experiencing sexual assault, it is essential that resources are available to those in need. Many universities, including UCSB, have integrated campus resources specifically to serve the needs of sexual assault survivors. The two main resources that UCSB offers are Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and Campus, Advocacy, Resource, and Education (CARE). These two offices provide similar services that revolve around advocacy and support. However, previous research has shown that the utilization of campus resources by sexual assault survivors often go unused and have even shown to have poorer mental health outcomes after use (Graham et al. 2019).

In the first section of this paper, I reveal how I collected my data, my methodology, and who my specific subject population was. The discussion of my findings of this research and how it contributes to current research on sexual assault trauma is found next. I break down my analysis into four subsections including: *(1) Sex Education, (2) Sexual and Romantic Relationships, (3) Positionality on Gender Roles and Hook-Up Culture, and (4) Survivor Resources and Reform*. All these elements showed to be salient in survivors' perspectives on their trauma. Finally, I conclude this paper with final remarks and implications of this study as it relates to sexual assault's effects on sex lives and romantic relationships.

Data and Methods

Data collection occurred between January 2023 and March 2023. Participants were selected from a pool of UC Santa Barbara undergraduate students. The purpose of this specific place of data collection was to collect data from a four-year university with a diverse population. The subjects that were recruited fit specific criteria for this study. All the participants were female-identifying UCSB undergraduates with a history of sexual assault perpetrated by a male identifying person.

Fliers, email, and in-class and campus club meeting announcements were utilized to recruit participants. Those who were interested received my contact information and scanned a QR code from the fliers. The scanned code led them to a Google form where they were able to self-identify if they fit the study. The Google form also included screening questions about the assault experienced so that the individuals that participated could be identified as experiencing assault from a male-identifying perpetrator. I utilized Siegel et al.'s (1990) definition of sexual assault of sexual assault being sexual contact under pressure of force with sexual contact meaning touching the victim's sexual parts, touching the perpetrator's sexual parts, or sexual intercourse. After those who inquired with these preceding recruitment tasks, a total of 10 participants were then interviewed.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour. They were carried out in rented private library spaces and offices on the UCSB campus. Interviews were semi-structured; all participants were asked a set of central questions; the conversation was largely steered by the participant in order to ensure that they were able to tell their stories in their own way. All questions were open-ended, encapsulating their experiences of romantic relationships and sex lives. The participants were allowed to answer as many or as little as they wanted to for each question.

Due to the fraught subject matter, it was important for the interviewees to be comfortable with trusting me. An integral part of gaining their trust was informing them that I, too, identify as a survivor of SA and that I am aware of the devastating healing process that one goes through after such a traumatic event. The personal interest that I have for this research was therefore made known to the participants.

Analysis

This current study examined how the trauma of sexual assault affects survivor's sex lives and romantic relationships. Through the method of qualitative data retrieval by interviews, the study identified patterns among survivors' behaviors and attitudes surrounding sex and their interpersonal relationships. The following results section identifies and interprets these findings in four chapters: (1) *Sex Education*, (2) *Sexual and Romantic Relationships*, (3) *Positionality on Gender Roles and Hook-Up Culture*, and (4) *Survivor Resources and Reform*.

Chapter 1: Sex Education

Formal Sex Education

To begin the interview, I asked participants about their education on sex both formally and informally. The motive behind asking was to identify how their attitudes were initially shaped around sex during formative developmental stages. Formal education was classified as sex education classes that were administered by a school curriculum. All but one of the participants received some sort of formal sex education through their schooling ranging from the ages of 11 to 18. The content of the material covered topics from basic anatomy to how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Christy recalls her sex education being "rudimentary" and "bare minimum" in what a school could teach about sex. For most participants, if their sex ed classes discussed coitus, the teachings maintained a neutral attitude around it. Elizabeth recalls the following:

"It was taught in the way of like, 'you guys are gonna do this soon'. It was just so like, straight forward. No emotion behind it... this is how you get pregnant. And like, that's how you avoid getting pregnant...it was really just, like, matter of fact..."

The unbiased nature around sex when it came to participants' formal education reveals that sex was not being taught to them with a negative nor positive connotation, rather something that was human nature and bound to occur at some point in their lives. In all reports, there was a notion that schools taught that there was nothing to be feared about when it came to sex and the negotiation practices of sexual consent.

I was also interested in if participants were formally taught about consent and how that material was brought up. For most participants, it was something that was not ever taught. But for the couple that did discuss consent, it was brief. Kennedy recalls the brevity of the lesson saying "[In] Middle school we got the "consent is tea" video... [we] just got like a general like, explanation. And then we had an activity of like, is this consent? Is this normal?". The video Kennedy refers to is a cartoon-style video that uses the activity of making a cup of tea for someone in reference to how and when someone should have sex with someone, which is only when they consent to 'having tea'. She followed up by saying that it was interesting that consent was taught to her in a metaphorical way with the tea video rather than something that

was personified and put into real life scenarios. For the participants that were fortunate enough to be formally taught about consent, the data revealed that it was not effortful nor granted the seriousness that it needed. Another participant recalled her sex education as the "briefest sex ed unit". She told me "We had rudimentary sex education at school. Like, kind of the bare minimum that they can do...we got like, the most basic like puberty talk in like, fifth grade like periods and stuff...in high school, like freshman year in high school they did like the briefest sex ed like unit. It was like a few days long." Consent was viewed as an afterthought, if even mentioned, after the biological aspects of sex were taught.

Though the act of sex was mainly taught to participants with neutral positionality, the data clearly points out that consent is not a topic of importance in education systems as it is rarely ever a part of curriculum in both public and private schools.

Informal Sex Education

Informal education of sex was also an interest of mine in order to understand how participants were brought up understanding sex through the influences of their social circles including their family, friends, and media portrayals. In regards to learning from their family members, all participants that were comfortable enough to discuss it with their parents preferred to confide in female family members. Some participants had relationships with their mothers that they did feel that they could talk about sex if they wanted to, but even so, conversations were kept to a minimum. Two participants had similar experiences of remaining reserved on the topic: "I don't really talk to my mom about that type of stuff. My grandma was really open about it. And she would like if I want to talk about it with her, like, ask her questions like she would answer but I just don't feel comfortable talking to my family about it."

Danielle says similarly that:

"No, I really never did [talk about sex with my family]... it was one of the few things that my mom like would not like shoot [down] like if I want to talk to her about it, but... I'm definitely a pretty private person."

A consistency that was found was that family members were not a primary source of information for any of the participants. The reasons for this varied as some participants were not comfortable discussing the topic with family members, grew up in religious households, or learned all they felt that they needed to know from other sources such as friends and media.

My findings revealed that friends and peers were a main way that participants discussed and learned about sex. Most recall beginning to talk about it in middle school in a manner that resembled 'gossip' or 'girl talk'. And for some, this was where their initial idea formation on

what sexual assault was formed. Leslie recounts her first memory of loosely discussing assault with her friends in high school:

"I'm sure [my friends and I] talked about like, things surrounding consent...but I don't really think that, at least from my experience in high school, like people really didn't come out saying they've been raped or anything like that sexually assaulted or anything. So there was really not that much talk of consent, because it also seemed like there wasn't much violation of consent."

In Leslie's perspective, she accounts the lack of consent talk to the non-existence of sexual assault in her own life and her peer's lives at that time. The idea that assault wasn't a typical occurrence held true for most participants that were exposed to the idea of sexual violence prior to experiencing it themselves. However, a couple participants were lamentably exposed to such abuse first through personal experience and their peer's experiences. Specifically, Joann recounted her first conversations with friends surrounding the issue coming from their own experiences with a violation of their consent. "[I] had a lot of friends that I feel like, got assaulted..and it wasn't necessarily something that we call assault." Moreover, another interviewee, Gloria, had her first conversations on the topic after experiencing trauma:

"But also just like, you know, experiencing sexual abuse at a young age, and then having a lot of friends when I was in elementary school also experiencing it. And we would like to share experiences about it. Yeah, that's kind of how I was introduced to like, sex, I guess."

The spectrum of how these survivors recall conversations on consent with friends and family reveals a lack of formal and informal education on sexual boundaries within interpersonal relationships. No participant had a particularly in-depth conversation that maintained the gravity of consent with friends nor family.

Furthermore, media portrayals of assault were also how some women found their first exposures to not only sex, but also assault during their teen years. A notable source of media that showcased assault scenarios were TV shows and movies. Some participants also account social media as a vessel of knowledge on the subject, crediting "feminist twitter" and the 2016 election of Donald Trump. One confounding source of informal education was pornography with one participant explaining that she "consumed a lot of porn at a really young age...because I didn't know that...kind of influenced...my perception on sex."

There were a variety of responses as to where and how participants got their initial perceptions on sex and consent. However, something to be noted is that in all of the depictions of sexual education both formally and informally, none of them covered consent in a specific or in depth manner.

Chapter 2: Sexual and Romantic Relationships

The next section of the interview had questions specifically pertaining to the participants' experiences with sexual assault. It was important for me to present the questions in a way that the survivors could specify how their sex lives and relationships were pre and post assault. The dichotomy of their answers was an essential part in answering my research question.

Prior to Sexual Assault

The element of romantic relationships pre-assault was assessed through asking participants what qualities and characteristics they looked for in significant others or people they were interested in prior to their trauma. For those that this was applicable to, three of the interviewees found that having a friendship prior to dating was a pattern that they saw in who they were interested in. Descriptors such as charismatic, safe, respectful, funny, "in a good fraternity", and tall came up. One interviewee described her type as, "people that like, could have...a good time like party...people that are like, super like wild." A couple of women recall their experiences with past romantic relationships to being "juvenile" and "innocent". Only one interviewee mentioned something specific about consent. Kennedy relayed to me that: "But I do think that I didn't necessarily prioritize someone who just had a really, like, under a good understanding of like, how you use consent, like what consent looks like, what that means for two people. I don't really think that like understanding...[was] there."

The ways in which these 10 women described what attracted them to people prior to their traumas are coated with innocence and simplicity. {expand on this} as are coated with innocence and simplicity. {expand on this}

I then asked participants about their sexual history and their views and experiences with sex prior to their assault if it was applicable to them. I utilized this part of the interview to identify how their ideas of sex that we discussed previously influenced their sexual encounters. The responses ranged as one's sexual history is individualized to a person due to a multitude of forces. Sexual intimacy experiences differed from being in long term relationships to being a "late bloomer"

A notable experience of one interviewee was having sex as something that didn't carry much weight. Aleah describes her positionality on sex as:

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"Sex was just, again so debased, so devalued to me, that...I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know. I mean, obviously, I knew what sex was. But... it wasn't something of importance to me, because I never found myself in a situation where it was treated as such..."

There was a wide range of experience levels and orientations toward sex found among survivors' past sexual histories. All of them mentioned different things about what they valued and how they described their sexual experiences.

Post-Sexual Assault

The same questions were asked, but instead they were about their sexual and romantic relationships after they experienced sexual assault. I asked participants what qualities they look for in a significant other. There was a noticeable shift in what survivors sought in someone that they would have potential romantic and sexual relations with. Though being humorous and outgoing was not completely off the table, they were simultaneously no longer the primary thing survivors recount looking for now. A multitude of them used the words such as safe, respectful, trusting, communicative. The stark difference in descriptors used transformed into a more serious tone. Safety was a common thread that most survivors mentioned being an important trait. With one participant even going so far as to say "I feel like for men a lot of the time it is like... you're unsafe until you're proven to be safe." Interviewee, Madeline, even pointed out that a green flag with her current boyfriend was witnessing him advocate for other survivors. In terms of sex after experiencing assault, survivors ranged in their readiness to reintroduce intimacy back into their lives. For some participants, a similar attitude toward sex as to being something that is devalued or even a tool for coping was a pattern that was found. Aleah says, "[Sex] doesn't hold as much value as it probably should. I think it probably declined more after...my value and care for it has...definitely gone down since then."

Marsha reflected by saying "...certain aspects of [sex lost value]. I was just like, 'I guess I'll just do this because like they want to I don't really care like if like I don't care about it that much then they really care about it like it's not going to affect me...'"

"I think again, I was a little bit mad, like, at the universe for my situation...And so then I was just like, You know what? I'm already like, I've already kind of like, I guess, dirtied myself in that way. Like, I don't really care at this point.", was a comment Leslie made. Boundaries toward sexual situations changed into a more guarded attitude for a majority of survivors, whether that meant requiring a timeline of when they would be comfortable having sex with someone or only having sex when it will be a pleasurable experience for themselves. Another commonality between sex attitudes among respondents was an aversion to any sexual intimacy. Some aforementioned that sex was something that they were apprehensive or even avoidant from.

"Initially, I was just like, so like repulsed by even like the idea. Like I just like couldn't even imagine ever...I just like didn't want to have sex...I didn't even really like thinking about it, because it was just like I was...like that kind of a sense of repulsion." Kennedy shared a similar idea when saying, "I actually haven't like been with anybody sexually since... Because it's something that like, I definitely am, like, really nervous about it. I feel like it's created like a big like insecurity in me definitely am, like, really nervous about it."

The general response to sexual trauma shown with these survivors' sex lives depicts an undoubtable shift in how they perceive sexual situations.

Chapter 3: Positionality on Gender Roles and Hook-Up Culture

The societal and systemic forces that create an environment where sexual assault against women was something that I wanted to dissect and get first hand perspectives from other survivors. My preliminary research pointed toward gender roles and hook up culture being two prominent sources that cultivates a sexual violence.

Men's Roles in Sexual Assault

The interviews revealed an awareness that these survivors had of men's unawareness of what crimes they were committing. Most of the interviewees believe that their assailant is not aware that they sexually assaulted them. The reasoning for their cluelessness differed, one interviewee, Nicole, accounts her assailant's lack of accountability as being a "product of his environment" while Madeline perceives that her assailant has no understanding at all of what he did to her. Two participants gave credit to the assailant's unaccountability due to their young ages. Elizabeth says "I do recognize also he was 14 and he should never have done anything. But I feel like you're still redeemable at the age of 14... I don't think he recognized [what he did] because...he kept texting me...just wanting to know like things about my life. So, I blocked him."

Discussions about men post-assault elicited a kaleidoscope of emotions for many of the women that I interviewed, from fear, to anger, to disgust and deeming them automatically safe was no longer a given to some of them. Here are some of the responses that I received from participants when asking them about their perspective on men now: Elizabeth points out her anxiety around men in social situations saying,

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"I definitely [feel anxiety around men now] ...when I like go out like with my friends. I immediately feel sick. Like, I feel like I need to, like run away. Yeah, like, it's definitely like a very, like, anxious experience."

Madeline states her disappointment in men,

"And it was so easy for me afterwards to just find all of the ways in which the men in my life and my friends' lives have either failed me or them or are just horrible intentionally."

And it's really hard to look past it once you feel like you've been completely destroyed by a man."

Aleah brings up her long held negative perception of men,

"I feel like from a very young age, I was like, men don't like care about anyone's feelings when they want something."

Veronica shared her distrust in men,

"Like, it literally just made me grow up like thinking like, you can't trust them...you can't trust men at all. Like, doesn't matter who it is, like, they all just want the same thing." All of the emotions shared by these women about men were painfully negative and prove to be one of the lasting effects that assault has had on them. For these survivors, men as a whole were put under an umbrella that categorized them as unsafe, distrustful, and unaccountable.

Women's Roles in Sexual Assault

A devastating commonality that I found when interviewing female-identifying sexual assault survivors were underlying feelings of shame and/or doubt about the assaults that happened to each of them. Seven out of ten interviewees mentioned some feelings of self-blame, gaslighting, or shame. One survivor even admitted that "that was very much my situation is that for a very long time, I deeply blamed myself and the fact that that had happened, and part of me still does."

There are structures and norms within our society that create this idea for women that get violated that it's their fault. Though to feel blame and shame is not explicitly taught to women

just like how men are not explicitly taught to be unaccountable and forcefully sexual, there is a culture that subliminally permits and enforces this.

The Impact Hook-Up Culture has on Sexual Assault

An aspect of my findings that was unexpected was the salience of hook-up culture in Isla Vista and the perpetration of sex. I asked participants if they felt that there is a cultural pressure to participate in the casual sex and sexual situations that are involved in hookup culture. There was overwhelming feedback of agreement in the idea that pressure to participate is extreme. August contributes her perspective by saying that:

"I just feel like that kind of that when you have an expectation, and especially the expectation that like, that's what you do freshman year, like, that's what we were doing when we went out like you were expected to fuck...that kind of expectation breeds, in my opinion...situations where women are just unsafe."

The social pressure of participating in something because your whole cohort is supposedly doing it is strong, especially when students are first years living in dorms that are co-ed buildings. Emma had similar opinions of the impact that hook up culture has on sexual assault rates on the campus. She says that

"...it's hard to...set boundaries with somebody that you don't know. And it's hard to communicate in a way that like you both are on the same page, right? And so it's like, if you're not comfortable enough with each other, to the point where you can...share what you are and are not like, okay with in an honest way...it makes it so much easier [for assault]."

The casualness of sex when it is expected to be a one time occurrence with someone doesn't cultivate a space for either party to communicate their needs, wants, or boundaries. As intimate as coitus is, it still is less intimate than one expressing their boundaries when it's a one-night stand.

There was variance in whether or not participants involved themselves within hook up culture, but those who did recount that it was either a symptom of their sexual assault trauma or the cause. Aleah reflected on her participation in hook-up culture saying, "I think that the last time I chose to participate in hookup culture...I didn't have any value for my body because it had just been mistreated, like over and over." Alternatively, other participants experienced their described sexual assault experience during a hook up situation.

Chapter 4: Survivor Resources and Reform

UCSB Resource Utilization and Processing Trauma

The two resources at UCSB for sexual assault survivors are known as Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) and Campus, Advocacy, Resources, and Education (CARE). I was curious how often these resources were utilized and if they were actually assisting survivors in their paths to recovery and safety.

Out of ten interviewees, only three of them utilized CAPS and one of them for reasons outside of sexual assault. The helpfulness of this resource from those who used it to help them find support for their experience as survivors varied. One participant recalls a rather negative experience saying that

“ I contacted CAPS, and they got me a meeting. [It] was me reliving the entirety of my trauma, like detailed explanation of what had happened. And by the end of the 45 minutes, she was just like, ‘well, that’s horrible. I’m sending you a link to CARE...If you want to get more therapy, here’s a list of providers in the area. And that was basically the end of the session.”

She explained to me that after her first session, the wait time for another one was 3 weeks which was counterproductive as her mental health was the worst that it was in that time that she was seeking help, so the lack of immediacy was disheartening to her. Along with this, she felt that there was no resource that she could find that would protect her against nor educate her on how to protect herself from her assailant. She found the lack of resources and slow response time astounding as it is something that happens so often on UCSB campus grounds. She decided to not pursue another session with CAPS after this experience.

On the other hand, Gloria felt that when she reached out to CAPS she received everything that she needed. She commended their quick response time and ability to get her into her first session. A negative aspect to the process was that she was only able to get two sessions as she was working with a postdoctoral student that moved to a different facility. She expressed the need for consistency in the people that provide sessions so that their progress could continue. When I asked the other seven interviewees why they didn’t utilize CAPS their reasons varied. Some already had their own therapists from outside resources and others found the process to be unattainable. Olivia said that they were unable to get her an appointment for months due to the sheer volume of students that needed appointments and the lack of therapists they had. Others didn’t have a complete idea on what CAPS was, so in turn they decided not to reach out for an appointment.

CARE, a specialized on-campus resource that provides several different modalities of service to sexual assault survivors was utilized by none of my interviewees. When asked why they did not use the resource, it came down to a lack of clarity in what they offered and the connection it had to UCSB. With what survivors knew about CARE, they were deterred by the idea that advocates were also undergrads which instilled the notion that there was a lack of confidentiality. Some interviewees had never even heard of CARE or if they had they did not really know what they did for survivors.

The two resources that are provided to UCSB survivors of sexual assault were used by a minority of my participants and even those who did utilize them felt that they fell short in one way or another.

Survivors' Ideas on Reform

It was important to me to get first-hand knowledge on what survivors felt they needed or wished that they had for sexual assault rates to decline. Though I am aware that the eradication of this issue is far from attainable in the near future, those who have experienced such trauma have a level of awareness of precautionary resources and instruments that could potentially be productive in the road to eradication.

My interviews revealed that consent education at an early age is a way of reform that can begin the conversation of boundaries. Madeline says that "teaching kids that like it's okay to set boundaries. Like, you don't need to give somebody a hug if you don't... it's never too early to just be like...their bodies [are] their own and people don't get to touch them." This idea of starting to teach young children that they have bodily autonomy came up in numerous conversations. Another interviewee acknowledges that the lack of consent education is a causal factor to why assault happens,

"I think early education on consent, because I think a lot of people, I mean, a lot of people do know what they're doing is wrong. A lot of people also don't even recognize it. Like I said, like, if you're 14 years old, and you're doing things and you have a girlfriend that you're really crazy about and you like you have all these hormones in your brain. You don't recognize that not saying like, just not saying no, but not saying yes, either isn't consent, right. So, making sure that like that is ingrained."

Integrating consent education into a formal curriculum was a synonymous idea among survivors. Some also believe that surrounding yourself with a positive group of friends that you morally align with has a huge impact on what behaviors one engages in and can lead a person

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into a positive direction. It was also helpful to have parents raise their children with an understanding of what is right and wrong. This is especially important when it comes to intimate relationships and cultivating a safe environment where children feel comfortable to talk to their parents about situations.

Conclusion

Consent Education Falls Short

By and large, participants revealed the lackluster efforts by the American education system to teach consent and their knowledge of consent heavily depended on their social circles and media portrayals. This led participants to become somewhat oblivious or naive to the notion that sexual assault occurs and the high rate that it does for female-identifying people like themselves. Moreover, the absence of consent education may be a driving force in survivors of sexual assault not knowing how to communicate. Additionally, and more saliently, it may be a leading cause of assailants committing sexual violence and make the choice to defy boundaries when they are communicated.

As stated previously, interviewees confided in their family and friends about sexual interactions. In these scenarios, conversations also have aforementioned sexual boundaries within their interpersonal relationships. Participants also relied on social media and TV shows as a vessel of learning about sex and sexual assault. With media being a primary resource of how individuals perceived sexual interactions, this may have distorted their views on how sexual assault occurs as it is often dramatized. This is often not how assault occurs, more often than not it is committed by someone the victim knows [RAINN 2021]. This reveals a lack of normativity in discussing consent within society and a distortion of views on sexual assault during formative developmental years.

Survivors Face Intimacy Challenges Post Assault

Notably, all participants experienced a shift in opinions of who they seek out for intimate relationships, both sexually and romantically. There was an added shielding of their vulnerabilities in when and who they involved themselves with. Safety and communication were seen as added variables that survivors needed as a prerequisite to engage in intimacy with. The primary personality traits became much more serious and non-negotiable, though traits such as being humorous and personable were not overlooked, they were just no longer the first things that survivors commonly sought out in order to meet their criteria. The necessity of safety in a sexual and/or romantic partner may be a characteristic that is sought out by survivors more than it is for those who have not experienced sexual assault.

A newfound sense of guarding or protectiveness was also observed as a change in survivor's behaviors in sexual situations. A majority of participants sustained attitudes of precaution when it came to engaging in sex after their assault, with some even being completely avoidant of it. By holding such protectiveness of one's sexuality, it may be an inhibiting factor to the enjoyment of sex for survivors.

These interviews revealed a significant shift in how survivors perceive and interact within romantic and sexual encounters.

Societal Gender Roles Perpetuate Sexual Assault

The current research confirmed previous findings on the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity and femininity playing a role in violence against women. Most participants had created a generalizable standard of men being unsafe, distrustful, and unaccountable. Remarkably, the women being interviewed assumed that the men that had assaulted them had no desire nor the awareness to take accountability for their actions. This perception can be correlated to societal gender roles and the lack of accountability taken by men in everyday situations and reflects the findings found in the previous section about consent education. A majority of survivors interviewed revealed feeling shameful and responsible for their assault. This can be connected to previous research on the preeminence of shame culture and the societal structures that enforce the idea that women are responsible for their assault. A symptom of poor consent education is the subconscious permissiveness and enforcement of the shaming of victims and the acceptance of assailants' lack of accountability.

One of the prominent facets of society that perpetuates sexual violence against college-aged women is hook up culture, as shown in both previous research and the findings in this current study. With the niche reputation that UCSB has as a "party school," there is a connection between this perception and the prevalence of hookup culture. With most participants admitting to feeling pressures to participate in this culture, there was a correlation found between casual sexual encounters and a lack of boundary communication. This was due to the fact that a "one time thing" doesn't give space for either participant to productively communicate their boundaries and wants.

UCSB Survivor Resources Need Reform

In regards to the resources provided by the university for sexual assault survivors, all but one survivor revealed that neither CAPS nor CARE provided what they needed in order to process and heal from their trauma. For CAPS, the long wait time for appointments and lack of consistency in who provides the services were expressed by the few that utilized the resource. For both resources, a lack of clarity on what they offered was a common response as to why survivors did not seek help from them. Specifically for CARE, the confusion of what services were offered deterred many from inquiring about help and the perception that their undergraduate peers worked within the center left a sour taste in some as they questioned the confidentiality of the services.

Implications and Ideas for Further Research

Further research may want to expand on the findings on sex education that is provided by different school districts in various states as this current study only examined California school districts. Research on desired qualities in significant others and sexual partners can be expanded upon by comparing findings of survivors and those who have not experienced

assault in order to further identify what societal systems are at play within intimate settings. Similar research can be expanded upon in other university settings in order to make findings more generalizable. This study's findings were very limited in who was studied, therefore further research should be done on other groups of sexual and gender identities. Moreover, there is a need for extended research on how university settings can further understand and assist sexual assault survivors in processing and healing from their trauma

Qualitative research carried out through interviews provide a unique outlook on how individuals account for their experiences. A way research could continue to be developed would be to focus on the perceptions and positionalities that survivors have on how they make sense of their trauma. No survivor experiences sexual assault in the same exact way, so the implications in how they react, reflect, and process their trauma is highly varied by how they were assaulted. Furthermore, the interviewees disposition toward the interviewer has the power to affect what information is dispelled and how the overall interview is conducted. As I made participants aware of the fact that I, too, am a survivor of sexual assault, this may have had an impact on how much they were willing to share with me. This research can be expanded upon by incorporating different interviewees with different backgrounds and identities.

This current research study expanded on previous research on sexual assault survivors' perceptions on their sex lives and romantic relationships and the possibility of further expansion is discernable.

References

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Methodological Appendix

Recruitment Letter



Participants Needed for
Research Study on Sexual
Assault Survivors

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?
Sexual assault survivors who are
female-identifying UCSB undergrads.

**WHAT WILL PARTICIPANTS BE ASKED
TO DO?**
Volunteers will be audio recorded while
interviewed about their attitudes, beliefs,
and behaviors in their romantic
relationships and sex lives post-trauma.
**Participation will be confidential.*

Interested?
Scan this QR Code for more
info!

Questions?
Contact Sarah Teodoro:
sarahteodoro@ucsb.edu



**Research carried out by a
student in UCSB Sociology
Honors Thesis Program*

Teodoro

Hi, my name is Sarah Teodoro and I am a fourth year in the Honors Sociology Program. I am currently looking for participants for my senior research project. I am researching the effects of sexual assault trauma on sex lives and relationships. My data collection will be done through interviewing UCSB undergrads who are survivors. If this research sounds like something you would be interested in participating in, I am going to pass around info sheets to everyone with more information and a QR code you can scan with next steps for participation. I will be here after class/meeting if you have any questions, and my contact information is also on the info sheet if you prefer to contact me through there.

Participant Form for Sexual Assault Research

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study! This 5 question form is to identify the desired subject population. This information will remain confidential and only the primary researcher will view your answers. All information collected will be deleted if you no longer desire to participate. If you do participate, your information from this document will be deleted after research is completed. For questions/concerns contact the researcher at:

sarahtedoro@ucsb.edu or my course teacher, Professor Hannah Wohl at: hwohl@ucsb.edu

* Required

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research study is to identify the effects that sexual assault trauma has on survivors' romantic relationships and sex lives. This research is being conducted by myself, Sarah Teodoro. I am a current UCSB undergrad in the Sociology honors program. Participation is completely voluntary and completely anonymous. After completion of this Google form and you are contacted for further participation, an interview will take place. If you choose to be in the study, I will audio record an interview with you to learn more about your attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within your romantic relationships and sex lives post-trauma. The interview will last about 45-minutes to 1-hour.

It will be conducted on UC Santa Barbara's campus in reserved private library study rooms or offices.

1. Are you a current UCSB undergraduate student?

* Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

2. Are you female-identifying?

* Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1luN4uIEFTx4bzNCUi8xNZTL9hHDrELDhY4scxs6jcvq/edit>
1/4 12/6/22, 3:01 PM Participant Form for Sexual Assault Research

Sexual Assault Questions

The following questions will ask about your experience with sexual assault. This subject matter can be difficult to digest, so I encourage you to take your time and do what you need to in order to maintain your mental wellness. These questions may be mildly discomforting, but if you find these questions highly triggering, this study may not be best suited for you and it is recommended that you do not complete this Google form.

Campus & UC Resources

Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education (CARE):

<https://care.ucsb.edu/home> Counseling & Psychological Services

(CAPS): <http://caps.sa.ucsb.edu/>

UC Systemwide Sexual Violence Prevention & Response

Site: <https://sexualviolence.universityofcalifornia.edu/>

3. Have you experienced sexual assault by a male-identifying person?

* For this research, sexual assault is defined by sexual contact under pressure or force, with sexual contact meaning touching victim's sexual parts, touching the perpetrator's sexual parts, or sexual intercourse (Siegel et al. 1990).

* Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

4. How many times have you been sexually assaulted?

* Mark only one oval.

Once

More than once

Contact Information

By filling out the following contact information, you are consenting to be reached out by the researcher within the next few days. This information will remain confidential and only the primary researcher will obtain your email address.

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1luN4uIEFTx4bzNCUi8xNZTL9hHdrELDhY4scxs6jcvg/edit/2/4> 12/6/22, 3:01 PM Participant Form for Sexual Assault Research

5. What is your email? *

Consent Form

Interview Information/Consent Form

Purpose:

You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Sarah Teodoro through the Sociology Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research study is to identify the effects that sexual assault trauma has on survivors' romantic relationships and sex lives.

Procedures:

If you choose to be in the study, I will audio record an interview with you to learn more about your attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within your romantic relationships and sex lives post-trauma. The interview will last about 45-minutes to 1-hour. The interview will be conducted on UC Santa Barbara's campus in reserved private library study rooms or offices.

I ask that you do not identify yourself or others during the interview process in order to maintain confidentiality.

You can skip questions that you do not wish to answer and/or stop the interview at any time.

Risks:

As a participant you may be subject to potential trauma triggers and discomfort.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:

You may refuse to participate and still receive any benefits you would receive if you were not in the study. You may change your mind about being in the study and quit after the study has started.

Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to you anticipated from your participation in this study.

Payment:

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality:

The results of this research may be presented at a conference and shared with other researchers. Individual privacy will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Your identity will not be made known in written materials resulting from this study. The audio tapes from the interviews will be stored securely through a UCSB Box storage account. They will then be transcribed and quoted in the final research project. After the completion of research, the audio recordings and transcriptions will be disposed of and deleted off of the UCSB Box storage account.

Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena.

Teodoro

We may use or share your research information for future research studies. If we share your information with other researchers it will be de-identified, which means that it will not contain your name or other information that can directly identify you. This research may be similar to this study or completely different. We will not ask for your additional informed consent for future use of your de-identified data.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the research, you can contact me at sarahtedoro@ucsb.edu and/or (916)934-9938 or my course teacher, Hannah Wohl at hwohl@ucsb.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807 or hsc@research.ucsb.edu. Or write to the University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-2050

Campus and UC Resources

- Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education (CARE): <https://care.ucsb.edu/home>
- Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS): <http://caps.sa.ucsb.edu/>
- UC Systemwide Sexual Violence Prevention & Response Site: <https://sexualviolence.universityofcalifornia.edu/>

Interview Guide

*Give participant consent form to look over while I discuss consent form and have participant consent verbally

**Notify participant that I am not a mental health professional and that there are campus resources with trained professionals that can assist them if needed: they are the following– Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education (CARE): <https://care.ucsb.edu/home> Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS): <http://caps.sa.ucsb.edu/> UC

Systemwide Sexual Violence Prevention & Response Site:

<https://sexualviolence.universityofcalifornia.edu/>

*Instruct participant to not mention their own names or to identify any other person involved

- When you were growing up, how did you learn about sex?
 - Was sexual assault ever apart of your education on sex?
- If you can recall your romantic relationships prior to your experience with sexual assault, what were qualities of the partnership that you enjoyed?
 - Eg) physical touch, quality time, deep connection
 - What were the qualities in these past relationships that you valued the most?

*Transition into questions about sexual assault–reiterate that participant can take all of the time that they need, skip any questions, and stop the interview at any time.

*I will mention here that my passion for doing this research stems from personal experience and that I empathize with the interviewee with how fraught this subject matter can be and I want to be a source of comfort to them in the ways that I am able to be.

- What age were you when your (most recent) last experienced SA?
- When looking for a significant other, do you feel that experiencing SA has changed what qualities you prioritize in someone?
 - Has your criteria for a significant other changed?
- How have you been navigating sexual experiences post assault?
 - Have there been any specific challenges to your sex life since your experience of sexual assault?
- Have you been in a relationship after your assault?
 - *if the survivor has been* How have you navigated your intimacy/relationship boundaries?
 - *if the survivor has not been in a relationship since* Do you feel that your experience affects your readiness to be in a relationship?

*Transition into final questions

- Have you ever utilized UCSB resources as a survivor?
 - If so, which ones?
 - How was your experience with them?
- You have been through something that is truly horrendous to say the least, and your willingness to talk about is just one way that showcases the vast amount of resilience that you possess. How have you seen your resilience from this experience come to light?

*Thank the participant for everything. Allow them the opportunity to regulate the body by remaining in the space for the rest of reserved time if needed.

*Provide participant with campus resources once again

Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education (CARE): <https://care.ucsb.edu/home>

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS): <http://caps.sa.ucsb.edu/> UC

Systemwide Sexual Violence Prevention & Response Site:

<https://sexualviolence.universityofcalifornia.edu/>

Code Book

- Sex Education
 - Friends/Family
 - Class
 - Exposure to SA

- Sexual History
 - Age of First Sexual Activity
 - Age of Most Recent SA
 - Age of Romantic Interest Start
 - Virginity

- Sex in Relationships
 - Priority in Relationship
 - Communicating Sex Boundaries
 - Safety Signs in Sex

- Sexual Assault (SA)
 - Survivor's experience
 - Experiencing SA in future
 - Perspective on SA
 - Relationship with Assailant
 - Characteristics of Assailant

- Characteristics
 - Of SA Assailant
 - Of SO before SA
 - Of SO after SA

- Post-Trauma
 - Characteristics of SO after SA
 - Sex after SA
 - Self Pleasure after SA
 - Red Flags in Intimate Settings
 - Men Post Trauma
 - Identifying as a Survivor w/ SO
 - Processing Trauma
 - Sex Readiness Post Assault

- Emotions
 - Shame
 - Fear

- UCSB Resources
 - CAPS utilized
 - CAPS not utilized
 - CARE not utilized
 - CARE utilized
- Intersectional Causes of SA
 - Women role in SA
 - Men Role in SA
 - Hook-up culture pressure