

68 SECONDS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE OF
COLOR WHO SURVIVED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE OF COLOR WHO
SURVIVED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Sexual violence is a pervasive and devastating issue in the United States (U.S.). According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), a person in the U.S. is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds. While there are several studies that document heteronormative assaults on White, college-aged women, few studies examine the sexual violence experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color. An intersectional framework illuminates the compounded oppressive experiences for LGBTQ+ people of color and presents six stories that illuminate how narrators described the reasons for their sexual assaults with respect to their intersectional positionality. Narrators' experiences throughout their childhoods as well as their mental health following their assaults are explored, noting consistent needs for intentional shifts in conversations regarding sexual violence treatment and prevention to include specific mention of intersectional identities. Given the predominant focus of White, cisgender, college-aged women in the extant literature, the implications and limitations for an intersectional framework to guide a narrative inquiry regarding sexual violence are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to the Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network (RAINN; RAINN, 2022) someone in the United States is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds. Sexual violence remains a pervasive problem in 2022 (Mazza et al., 2020). A review by McCauley and colleagues (2019) found one in three women and one in six men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes. Furthermore, the Centers of Disease Control (CDC; 2020) acknowledged sexual violence is a public health crisis due to their assessment that one in four college-aged women will experience it in some capacity.

White, cisgender, college-aged women are most represented in the extent literature on sexual violence (McCauley et al, 2019). As a result, existing laws, prevention efforts, and mental health treatments are most applicable to this population (McCauley et al., 2019). Consequently, there is little representation of how individuals with intersectionally different identities experience sexual violence or potential mental health consequences (Armstrong et al., 2018). RAINN (2022) reported 21 percent of transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming individuals have been sexually assaulted within their lifetimes. Furthermore, RAINN (2022) also noted that people of color are more at risk for experiencing sexual violence while White people are more likely to report it due to an availability, resources and privilege to do so.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence effects everyone (Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization (WHO; 2020) a survey of 15 countries showed that sexual violence is an international problem. According to the CDC, “sexual violence refers to sexual activity when consent is not obtained or not given freely.” Consistently, RAINN (2022) defined sexual violence as “an all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse.”

While the CDC and RAINN have consistent definitions for sexual violence, the U.S. federal government leaves much room for interpretation. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, sexual assault is defined as “any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by Federal, tribal, or State law, including when the victim lacks capacity to consent” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). However, the definition fails to identify what is and is not considered consent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). This may be a function of the overall culture that reinforces sexual assault while failing to teach its citizens how to obtain consent (Richmond & Peterson, 2020).

In other words, sexual violence can be described as sexual behavior that was perpetrated without the consent of the others’ involved (Mellins et al., 2017). Therefore, sexual violence is a broad term wherein a variety of behaviors may occur (Mellins et al., 2017). In addition to the variability in specific behaviors, there is also much variability in the identities of survivors as well as how susceptible an individual may be to experiencing sexual violence due to their intersectional identities (Armstrong et al., 2018; Heintz & Melendez, 2006). Given this variability, the current study will refer to sexual violence as any form of touching, verbalization, or sexual contact that was perceived by

the receiver as sexual and lacked freely-given, uncoerced consent, as is consistent with the extent literature (Mellins et al., 2017).

Gaps in the Literature

The majority of studies examining sexual violence explore the experiences of White women who have been assaulted by White men (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). Moreover, these studies primarily used college students as their participants, thus resulting in a greater understanding of how sexual violence impacts White, college women, while failing to capture the experiences of those with different identities (Armstrong et al., 2018).

As an example of how other groups have different experiences, RAINN (2022) reported Native women are twice as likely to experience sexual violence than any other race or gender. This is arguably due to their sociocultural positionality (Naples, 2009). Similarly, a study by Catabay and colleagues (2019) found Black women are significantly more likely to experience sexual violence than White women. However, despite this knowledge, few studies examine the way in which people of color experience sexual assault (McCauley et al., 2019; Armstrong et al., 2018).

Consistent with these reports, a study by Arlee and colleagues (2019) found people of color are more likely to experience sexual violence than White individuals. This is likely a function of the fundamental differences in privilege that exist between White people and people of color (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2018). Therefore, it is arguable that an intersectional framework – a framework that would intentionally learn how identities potentially influence one’s vulnerability to experience sexual violence – is warranted (McCauley et al., 2019). This is especially true when

considering the intersectional experience of LGBTQ+ people of color due to the combination of sexism, cissexism, and racism, as the resultant power dynamics contribute to a higher likelihood for this population to be sexually assaulted (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Intersectional Framework

The systems of racism, sexism, classism, cissexism, and so on, govern socialization in the U.S. (Collins & Bilge, 2020). According to an intersectional framework, individuals have a degree of privilege and oppression depending on how they identify within the respective systems. This variability in privilege results in differences in an individual's ability to have agency over their own circumstances (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality delineates the way in which individuals experience the world through their unique positionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Given the current study's interest in learning more about LGBTQ+ people of color's experiences with sexual violence and mental health, an intersectional framework will provide an invaluable lens through which the researcher will conceptualize the complexity of sexual violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people of color (Armstrong et al, 2018).

An intersectional framework is justified given the sociocultural complexities that LGBTQ+ people of color experience. The emphasis on context that intersectionality allows for is especially important for populations that are not well-represented in the literature (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Even though there have been several movements for equality throughout history, there tends to be a population neglected from the conversation (Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, original efforts to obtain gay rights was an important commentary on sexism, but failed to consider how queer people of

color experience oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Furthermore, while the civil rights movement has been essential, it did not address the oppression of women or members of the LGBTQ+ population (Collins & Bilge, 2020). An intersectional approach to studies allows for a more authentic view of human experiences given how these simultaneous systems reinforce privilege and oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Chan and Erby (2018) used an intersectional framework to better understand intercultural queer couples' experiences with systems such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Their results suggested that given the unique experiences of intercultural queer couples, an intersectional approach is critical to validating the complexities of their experiences (Chan & Erby, 2018). Furthermore, an intersectional approach creates a lens through which an individuals' identities intersect to provide authentic and contextually appropriate integrity to a study's findings (Chan & Erby, 2018).

This integrity is rooted in the acknowledgement of how sexism, racism, and cissexism create spectrums of power differentials that ultimately influence an individuals' susceptibility to experience sexual assault (Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Chan & Erby, 2018). A common misconception, arguably rooted in sexism, is the notion that sexual violence occurs because the perpetrator had an uncontrollable sex drive that was elicited by the survivors clothing, body, or behavior, to name a few (Hayes et al., 2013). Several studies have debunked this stance on victim blaming and instead found that sexual violence is more likely perpetrated due to a need to exert power over another person rather than the need to satisfy a sexual urge (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Groth & Birnbaum, 2013).

Therefore, the social power dynamics evident through an intersectional lens create persistent situations in which those with the most privilege have more opportunities to exert power over others (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Groth & Birnbaum, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2020). It is therefore not a leap to suggest that those who have a more oppressed positionality are thus more vulnerable to have power exerted over them – even in the form of sexual violence (Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated that LGBTQ+ people of color face an increased likelihood they will be sexually assaulted (Arlee et al., 2019). However, despite this increased vulnerability, there are few studies that examine how sexual violence manifests within this population (Arlee et al., 2019). The continued focus on White women has unintentionally invalidated the stories of survivors whose assaults differed from that of the literature (Hackman et al., 2017). This focus additionally made existing prevention efforts and mental health treatment approaches most appropriate for White women while neglecting to find those that would be useful for LGBTQ+ people of color (Hackman et al., 2017; McCauley et al., 2019; Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). As a result, known mental health treatment modalities do not appropriately address the needs of LGBTQ+ people of color (McCauley et al., 2019).

Uninformed Mental Health Care

Given the push for empirically supported and evidence-based practices in the mental health field, the extent literature about sexual violence has informed the way in which mental health professionals treat sexual violence (Geraets et al., 2020). However, when it comes to survivors who are LGBTQ+ people of color, the existing literature fails to encompass the complexities of their experiences (Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015).

The intersectional systemic forces from which individuals derive power also simultaneously and disproportionately oppress others (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Often, oppression manifests in the form of a microaggression. According to Sue and colleagues (2007), a microaggression is a seemingly minor indignity that furthers discrimination against marginalized individuals. The accumulated effects of microaggressions can cause several detrimental mental health consequences (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). This is a critical consideration that distinguishes LGBTQ+ people of color from the rest of the population due to their duality in experiencing sexism and racism (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

As a result, LGBTQ+ people of color who have survived sexual assault have a unique mental health experience that is not well-documented in the extent literature (Schmitz & Tabler, 2019). Many studies examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals or people of color, and fail to conceptualize the complexities LGBTQ+ people of color experience with their mental health (Armstrong et al, 2018; Schmitz & Tabler, 2019).

This gap in the literature has serious implications for the health and well-being for LGBTQ+ people of color. Studies have demonstrated the devastating effects sexual violence can have on survivors' mental health (Wadsworth & Records, 2013). According to RAINN (2022), sexual violence survivors are more likely to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), increase substance use, contemplate and/or attempt suicide, experience turmoil among their existing relationships, and are overwhelmingly more distressed than survivors of other types of violent crimes. Given the rate of sexual violence, it follows these consequences are occurring at similar rates. However, it is

largely unknown to what extent as the literature fails to represent one of the most vulnerable populations – LGBTQ+ people of color (Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Therefore, an intersectional framework is needed to provide authentic and contextual information regarding how LGBTQ+ people of color experience sexual violence as well as any mental health consequences (Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Important Contextual Considerations

Given the capacity for an intersectional framework to denote an individual's unique experiences due to their various identities, it would be remiss not to acknowledge important current events that may influence the findings. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted people of color (McBride, 2020). In fact, when adjusting for age in the number of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native populations were almost twice as likely to die than White individuals (Hill & Artiga, 2022).

Furthermore, since the start of the pandemic in 2020, there has been a substantial rise in violence against Asian people (Sims et al., 2022). A study by Choi and Lee (2021) found that not only rhetoric regarding the pandemic influenced anti-Asian hate crimes, but the need for a vaccine and mask-wearing itself spurred anti-Asian sentiment as they acted as continuous reminders of COVID-19.

Additionally, George Floyd's death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer as well as continued medical mistreatment of Black patients further demonstrated the existence of institutional racism and its systemic power structures that maintain it (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). The following wave of the Black Lives Matter movement

thus attempted to illuminate the fatal consequences of these power structures (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). However, despite the marches and protests in support for the movement, the self-reinforcing social hierarchies continue to dictate not only systemic power dynamics, but an individual's ability to have agency over their experiences as well (Dave et al., 2020; Ho, 2021). Therefore, in keeping with the intersectional lens, it is important to note how these experiences may have influenced the findings in the current study.

The Current Study

Research Puzzle

There is a significant deficit of information about LGBTQ+ people of color regarding sexual violence (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). The extant literature, although improving, tends to examine the experiences of White, straight, cisgender women survived by male perpetrators (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). Consequently, there is little acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ people of color and how their experiences that White women have.

This predominant overview of White survivors not only contributes to the microaggressions LGBTQ+ people of color experience through maintaining silence regarding their stories, it identifies a serious gap in the literature (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). This gap widens when considering the lack of studies examining mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors of color.

Statement of Purpose

The current study will explore experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color who have survived sexual violence. Using an intersectional framework, a qualitative narrative

inquiry will be conducted to illuminate individual experiences of the sociocultural power dynamics that contribute to sexual violence perpetration. Given the likely mental health consequences of sexual violence (RAINN, 2022), the current study will also aim to illuminate the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color as well as how they perceived their recover experiences thereafter. The findings derived from this study will thus have implications for future sexual violence prevention and intervention modalities.

Research Questions

A narrative inquiry will be used to address the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color who have survived sexual assault? How do narrators describe the reasons for their assault?
2. What were the mental health and recovery experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color after the sexual assault(s) experience?

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), a fundamental pillar of narrative inquiry (NI) is the notion that each individual lives a storied life and it is through these stories that a narrator and a researcher interact to create meaning. In short, these stories, or narratives, provide insight in to the way individuals experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As both a phenomenon, (i.e. the story told) and methodology (i.e. the inquiry in to the story), NI provides an opportunity to structure an individuals' experiences in the context of biographical narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, the way in which an individual shares their story, the people, or characters that arise throughout the story, the context in which they both experienced the events of the story as well as when they tell the story, and the way the researcher learns the story are imperative to the meaning the researcher may derive (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a result, the learned stories are more than an isolated event but rather a function of a predisposed social narrative that assigns meaning to each event (Patton, 2015).

Rationale for intersectional framework. Intersectionality provides a framework to understand the overall context in which these assaults occur (Chan & Erby, 2018; Armstrong et al., 2018). It illuminates the compounding oppressive systems that create power imbalances, thus leaving LGBTQ+ people of color vulnerable to sexual violence

(Armstrong et al., 2018). Therefore, each LGBTQ+ person of color's survivor experiences is no longer an isolated case study, but rather an important experience that is both a product of socialization and an example of the severe consequences of inequitable social systems (Armstrong et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2015).

Furthermore, an intersectional framework has unique implications for the counseling psychology field (Chan & Erby, 2019). Given the field's emphasis on social justice and use for evidence-based practices, there is a critical need for information about what LGBTQ+ people of color uniquely endure (Geraets et al., 2020; Armstrong et al., 2018).

Narrative Inquiry

In addition to the contextual integrity that an intersectional framework maintains, an NI allows for a better understanding of the perspectives and meaning LGBTQ+ people of color attach to their specific experiences (Chan & Erby, 2018; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It accomplishes this by illuminating an individual's story with respect to their culture as well as the context in which they choose to share their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The researcher is placed in a unique position as the vessel through which these stories are told. However, unlike methodologies that require the researcher to examine the data from an outside perspective, Connelly and Clandinin (1989) assert the need for the researcher to join narrators in their story. They maintain that the retelling and sharing of a story adds meaning to it through the use of dialogue and the way the story is told (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989). At any given moment, a narrator has a history of experiences that have shaped their present reality and is actively changing to influence their future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, when narrators share their

experiences, the researcher becomes a part of the experience of the story. Together, the researcher and the narrator mutually create meaning not only through the interaction of their individual histories, but through the ongoing communicative process that occurs when narrators share their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989).

As a result, the researcher comes alongside the narrator to co-create research findings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989). Prior to interviews with narrators, researchers have their own histories, experiences, and questions they aim to answer throughout their pending interaction with narrators (Wickins & Crossley, 2016; Connelly & Clandinin, 1989). During the interview, they learn of the narrators' experiences with respect to their previous understandings and research aims (Wickins & Crossley, 2016). They thus form their questions and dialogue with narrators to structure how the interaction such that the research questions are addressed (Wickins & Crossley, 2016). In this way, the researcher is both neutral and not neutral as they learn about narrators' histories while contributing their own theoretical perspectives and understandings based on their personal involvement in the overall context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989; Wickins & Crossley, 2016).

For example, a study by Matthews (2020) used a narrative inquiry to better understand the familial perspectives of families with same-sex parents. In doing so, Matthews (2020) interviewed several families who reported feeling more stress regarding enrolling their children in school than heterosexual parent couples. These findings illuminated how family systems and heteronormativity influence the unique experiences of same-sex parents (Matthews, 2020).

Similarly, the current study will aim to better understand LGBTQ+ people of color's survivor and mental health experiences. However, instead of using a family systems framework such as Matthews (2020), this study will use an intersectional framework. Therefore, the information obtained will be rooted in context of the intersectional experiences instead of the family experiences noted in Matthews (2020) study. Furthermore, it will include the intersectional experiences of people of color within the LGBTQ+ community – a perspective that is critically neglected in the existing literature (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Narrators

A total of six narrators were recruited using criterion-based sampling and thus met the following criteria: (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, (c) identified as a person of color, (d) identified as a survivor of sexual violence. Furthermore, each narrator denied having experienced their sexual assault within the past six months as well as having an active legal proceeding as a result of their assaults. Such disclosures would have otherwise disqualified narrators to protect both their mental health (Wilson et al., 2019) as well as the findings from being subpoenaed.

Procedures

Narrators were recruited using social media, email listservs, word of mouth, and snowball recruitment. They communicated interest in the study via quick response (QR) codes and a link to a screening survey that was posted on social media and email listservs. Many narrators also emailed the researcher after learning about the study through the aforementioned procedures.

Per NI guidelines, narrators were asked open ended questions as part of a semi-structured interview protocol included in Appendix B (Daiute, 2013). These interviews varied in length, with a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three hours. After the interview, narrators were contacted a second time by the researcher to initiate a member check to both enrich their stories and confirm the researcher was appropriately understanding the meaning of their stories. Due to varying schedules among the narrators, the additional contact between the narrator and the researcher was often done via email or text messages. Each interview was conducted via the HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform and transcribed using Otter.ai software, which the researcher checked an edited according to an audio and video recording of the interview.

To protect confidentiality and anonymity, each narrator self-selected a pseudonym by which they were referred. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, a HIPAA-compliant platform. Each interview was recorded, pass-word protected, and saved to an encrypted external hard drive, as were the interview transcripts – thus allowing for two levels of password protection. These recordings were used to ensure accuracy in transcribing the interview as well as noting any relevant body language or other visual cues.

Measures

The researcher used a screening survey to determine whether participants met criteria for the study. Data was obtained through interviews and member checks. The questions for the interview protocol (Appendix B) were formed in accordance with the research questions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Analysis

A time analysis and character mapping approach were used to create meaning of the narrator's stories. Per this approach, the writer uses a narrative voice to order events in what is called the "narrative context" which is the time in which narrators are interviewed (Daiute, 2013, p. 190). This method allows for meaning to be created through the narrator's use of past tense to describe events that occurred prior to the interview and are thus the narrator's memories. Per Daiute's (2013) guidelines, it is appropriate in a time analysis for the writer to create a contextual timeline to add meaning to the narrators' stories. Using this lens, the researcher understood the narrators' stories within the context of world and cultural events that each had unique impacts on the narrators. Given the persistence of COVID-19, the rise of Black Lives Matter, the introduction of anti-trans legislature, gun violence, and the increase in violence against Asian women throughout the interview process, each narrator had a unique contextual significance to their stories and answers to the interview questions. Therefore, to honor the individuality and unique consequences of the narrators' intersectional experiences, narrators were kept separate as they each had different characters and experiences that would have been lost if the stories were merged.

Reflexivity

Meaningful findings gleaned from NI are derived from the contexts in which individual stories occurred. Therefore, regardless of the researchers' salient contextual influences, the narrative weaved from the stories was in accordance with the participants' contextual influences as opposed to those of the researcher. However, a pillar of NI is the

notion that a researcher moves alongside narrators to co-construct meaning (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Therefore, with respect to current events that co-occurred with the study (i.e. the pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Asian hate crimes, and anti-trans legislature) the researcher's own experiences and privilege as a White, straight-passing, cisgender woman influenced meaning in not only the stories that were told, but those that were not as well.

For example, Aaron's interview was conducted on April 13, 2021. It would not be another 8 months before Emma would volunteer to share her story. While this may appear irrelevant, it denotes an important moment in medical and mental health history. Just as Aaron began his interview processing the events of 2020, the consequences of the pandemic, the researcher's Whiteness, and centuries of White people mistreating people of color under the guise of science, may have had a substantial difference in the amount of people willing to narrate their stories.

Historically, people of color have been systematically targeted and abused throughout mental health research (Strauss et al., 2021). Most notably, studies conducted by the Public Health Service (PHS), which preceded the CDC, not only deceived people of color and Guatemalans in to thinking they were receiving expert medical care, they intentionally infected them with syphilis and gonorrhea without consent and with no intention to treat the conditions (Tobin, 2022). While the abuse of the Guatemalan people is known to be throughout the 1940s, the PHS intentionally infected and withheld medical services to over 400 Black men over a 40-year span (Tobin, 2022). While there have since been several ethical guidelines that prevent such atrocities in medical and

mental health research today, there remains a disproportional lack of representation of people of color in mental health research (Michaels et al., 2018).

The atrocious history of abuse in mental and physical health research combined with the lack of representation of people of color in modern mental health research (Ghabrial & Ross, 2018), creates mistrust in the health system (Ojikutu et al., 2022). It is important to recognize larger historical and generational implications in asking a person of color to participate in research studies (Suite et al., 2007). Consequences of the abuse and neglect of people of color in medical and mental health research are evident in the disproportionate number of people of color impacted by the pandemic (Ojikutu et al., 2022; Tobin, 2022). As a result, the warranted mistrust in the healthcare system among people of color remains (Ojikutu et al., 2022). Therefore, it is arguable that the researcher would need to earn narrators' trust before agreeing to share deeply personal experiences as a part of a study.

Given this storied history and lingering mistrust in mental health research, the researcher attempted to clearly communicate the narrators' voices through block texts, italics, and quotation marks. These denote direct quotes from narrators as opposed to the researcher's reactions and interpretations.

In an effort to minimize biases in interpretation, the researcher had a peer reviewer to ensure an ethical interpretation of the data. Given the researcher's own survivor experiences, she continued to meet with her own therapist on a weekly basis to bracket personal interpretation of the data. Additionally, the researcher used existing measures and literature to guide the semi-structured interview protocol. Furthermore, per Patton's (2015) suggestion, the researcher actively practiced mindful reflections

throughout the study and noted these reflections in notes that corresponded with the interviews. The researcher then acknowledged these reflections during member checking conversations with narrators to aid in the researcher's understanding of her own biases interacting with the findings. Furthermore, the researcher also practiced mindfulness in between sessions to promote a continued awareness of personal biases (Kiken & Shook, 2011).

Despite these efforts, the meaning gleaned from the findings remains a result of the relational dynamic the researcher formed with each narrator (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore, it is imperative that the current events that corresponded with each narrator's motivation to share their stories is noted.

Ethical Considerations

Given the emotional and potentially traumatic nature of the study, critical attention to avoid retraumatizing narrators was given throughout the interviews and member checking conversations. One way this was accomplished was through the use of informed consent that reminded narrators they would not be asked to share anything they were not comfortable sharing. Additionally, studies on the neurobiology of trauma indicate that time after a traumatic event is needed to allow brain functioning to return to its typical baseline (Campbell, 2012). Therefore, each narrator was asked to confirm they had not experienced sexual violence within the six months prior to the interview as asking about such a recent trauma may have risked them to process a trauma without the ability to manage potential somatic responses (Wilson et al., 2019). Furthermore, to participants' emotional health was maintained throughout the interview via check ins.

The researcher was also prepared to complete a risk assessment, if necessary, but such measures were not needed.

Presentation of Results

The researcher journeyed with six narrators to learn their experiences as LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors of color, how they describe the reasons for their assault, as well as their mental health and recovery experiences thereafter. This exploration was completed accordance with graduation requirements, as it serves as the researcher's dissertation. Findings are intended to be used to inform future prevention and educational efforts regarding sexual violence.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

Aaron's Story

Aaron's interview took place on April 13, 2021. It has been over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic started and we as a society, are still in the throes of quarantine. According to the New York Times (2021), 983 people in the U.S. died from COVID-19 on this day. While it is difficult to assess the particular numbers, the Human Rights Campaign noted COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted trans people of color (McBride, 2020).

This was a reality that appeared especially salient for Aaron – a Latinx trans man. Unprompted, Aaron began the interview saying he was pleased to have the opportunity to advocate for others who might find comfort in his story. He noted George Floyd's murder, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the Kenosha, Wisconsin shooting that brought to the forefront, the crippling reality that life not only continues to be unsafe for BIPOC individuals, but for trans people of color as well.

Amidst these on-going, complex, traumas, Aaron met with me via Zoom to tell me about some of the most challenging experiences he has endured throughout his life. As a "*trans-racial adoptee*," Aaron was born in Columbia and raised by a White family in a small town in the Upper Midwest. Given that his only sibling was his adopted parents'

natural-born son, Aaron was the only person of color in his family. *“But fortunately,”* he said,

“my parents are incredible. They’re like, they taught me what social justice was like before I even knew, you know, pretty much how to tie my shoes and so they’re incredible. And they’re still white and will never understand my experience. But a lot of my extended family who, you know, was very like, very much, like ‘if you just listened to police and just did what they said, then, you know, there wouldn’t be an issue (in reference to BLM, George Floyd, and other people of color who have been killed at the hands of the police). But that’s definitely not because of race.’ And so yeah, like, you’re navigating those spaces.

Needing to navigate difficult spaces is not a new experience for him. Growing up in a small town in Michigan, Aaron learned to cultivate his own safety through metaphorical, emotional walls to protect himself from the emotional harm others may inflict. He said,

“I didn’t [have close friends] because of, you know, my LGBT identity, and because everyone was White, so I didn’t have anyone around me that looked like me, you know. I still always felt like an outsider. There was never really that space where it (forming friendships) could be authentic.”

He further said,

“I’ve had to work really hard with therapy over many years, with like, how to break down, kind of my own walls that I put up. Because that was

the only way I knew how to be safe and to navigate was to, to kind of create a lot of walls and to create distance between myself and, and other people and so, you know, I came out as lesbian when I was a freshman in college.”

Navigating relationships throughout his life had thus been challenging. He shared how having different identities from his parents meant that they could not understand the totality of Aaron’s experiences.

“I think because of navigating all of this, it was almost like...I raised myself in ways that my parents couldn’t do for me...And so I’ve always had relationships with people who are older than me. You know, I’ve always felt more comfortable around people who are older than I am. And I think a lot of that is because I had to grow up, you know, and mature differently and like, figure out how to navigate the world in a way that folks with...dominant identities don’t have to do.

Aaron’s first romantic relationship was with a woman who was also from a small town in Michigan. My own interpretation of this description, it seemed Aaron meant this to mean her family viewed the world similarly to his extended family – more conservative and ignorant to intersectional experiences.

“I never quite knew if the issue was around, like us being in a same sex couple, or if the issue was that, you know Jackie was an interracial relationship. And so that also was just, you know, always on the forefront of my mind and kind of feeling that discomfort...not from her, but from,

from her family and those who, you know, really saw us externally in that relationship.”

Aaron explained he did not date again for about three to four years. When he did date again, they were together for four and a half years and

“actually separated because of my decision to physically transition...We’re still like incredibly close and had a lot of really good conversations and...in each other’s lives daily. But, even then, like, with that relationship, it was much more about my queer and trans identity than my BIPOC identity...She identifies as very liberal politically and, and very Democratic, and you know her family is great. And still, there’s just that sense that, you know, not finding people really understand my experiences living in both groups.”

The theme of needing or wishing there was intentional space for LGBTQ+ people of color consistently came up throughout Aaron’s accounts. As I reflected on our conversation after its conclusion, the need for intentional places and spaces was evident. Even in 2021, my own beliefs about how we as a field and community need to be better cloud my ability to be grateful for the progress that has been made. Aaron’s outlook, however, was far more positive.

In his perspective, social conditions are improving because individuals are better understanding intersectionality. Currently, Aaron is a member of a group of friends who all identify as trans people of color.

“...you know, we can kind of come together and have, you know, support each other and have these, you know, really good kind of friendships and connections. So that’s helped a lot and that’s definitely something I’ve never really had.”

However, shifting to a mental headspace that can allow close, intimate friendships was a “*surreal*” experience for him. Being able to see he was not the only one who had been searching for a space with other trans people of color was, in his words, “*like holy shit!*” He could see firsthand he was not the only person who felt ‘lonely.’

“And, you know, it’s been, honestly, like within the last probably 10 years is the first time that I’ve felt like I’ve had a strong support system that, you know, supports me, loves me, is here for me unconditionally. And that’s also been something that I had to learn to be okay with...I had to work so hard at...breaking down my own barriers to, to allow people to get close to me. Because, again, that was my survival mode and mechanism and, you know, once I, you know, you had to learn to trust...”

This “*support system*” was his “chosen family.” Chosen family refers to the individuals with whom familial bonds are formed though not related by blood (Blair & Pukall, 2015). A chosen family is important because it denotes the individuals who are expected to emotionally support one another to either supplement or replace biological family (Weston, 1997; Blair & Pukall, 2015). This particular aspect of Aaron’s experiences resonated deeply with my own. While he was disclosing, I was reminded of the people I found later in life – those who helped me through my coming out

experiences, those who supported me through my own sexual assault, and those who have continued to be safe, not as an adjective, but through their daily actions and beliefs.

For Aaron, not only has his ‘chosen family’ facilitated positive relationship experiences in his life, his challenges in finding safe people were increased due to his intersecting identities (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Duran & Pérez, 2018).

“That was a really big shift, but it was also a lot of, you know, kind of this, the self-isolation as well as kind of like, you know, like, assuming that people aren’t going to understand. So why, why put in the time and work to a relationship or a friendship when I knew that I, like, I already decided that I wasn’t going to get what I needed to and so it was just easier to not engage in the kind of, you know, do my own thing. And then yeah, like, once it started to shift, it was almost like this, like this is really goofy, but like the image of the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy goes through (he and I both made the motion of Dorothy opening the doors in to Munchkin land when her world turns to color), like her world is in like black and white and it opens the doors and like it was kind of like this moment for me.”

On a systems level, Aaron again noted the impact politics can have on a sense of belonging and safety. Recalling the 2008 presidential election in which Obama was elected, he said it was

“feeling like this weight...being lifted and to be able to see other folks of color who are queer and trans, you know, living their best lives and doing some incredible things that you know and then, you know, that also gave me some permission to, like, be okay, finally, with who I was. And to, to

not, to not always see the world as a dangerous place to kind of let down my guard, to be able to engage.”

For Aaron, 2008 was a year of major change. This was when he moved to Wisconsin. He started seeing a therapist in an effort to address the ‘walls’ he used to protect himself. Prior to this painful and intentional work, he, like so many others, (Arlee et al., 2019), needed alcohol to cope with the loneliness and encountered real potential for interpersonal dynamics to turn harmful.

“I use alcohol to kind of ease and soothe like all of the kind of the conflicting feelings around kind of breaking all of that down because it gave me, you know, it felt like it gave me this [he paused], it gave me my guard down without me having to do the work...”

As important and powerful his self-improvement was, 2008 was only the beginning of what would be an exceptionally trying few years. Shortly after moving to Wisconsin, he was sexually assaulted. He said,

“I was in the space of, you know, feeling like okay, the women I’m attracted to aren’t attracted to me because I identify as a man. I don’t feel like I want to date men. And I don’t know what I like. I don’t know where to go, you know, like where what all this means. And so, and like this moment of figuring out self-discovery, I downloaded Grindr. And you, know, like, got romantic interest from people that I’ve never had before. And while it was wanted, it’s still like fulfills that part of me that’s like, ‘I’m attractive, and you know, people do want me.’ And so it felt good, you

know, kind of that euphoria kind of feeling. And, you know, I, [paused] somebody messaged me and asked if, you know, he could come over and, you know, and then, like, that's when the assault happened. But I, but like leading up to that, it was like, I don't know where else I fit in. And so it was almost like all this, if you're a queer man like this is what you do. So, there was almost that, like, even though nobody said it, like I felt the societal pressure of like, this is just how you meet people as a queer man. And even though, again, like, I wasn't attracted to men. But it was almost like looking for that affirmation, I guess, how I would put it."

He further explained the loneliness and impact of not knowing someone in Madison, WI, was a more powerful motivation to download the app than his lack of sexual attraction men. I seemed to me that Grindr served an important human need for Aaron – the need to feel wanted.

"I Was Also So Ashamed"

"I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety – and my anxiety manifests in pretty severe OCD. It's all been fairly, you know, well-managed, like for the most part. But, after my assault., I had the biggest kind of mental health, and a breakdown, that I've ever had."

I wish Aaron's disclosure surprised me. I wanted for him to be able to survive this crippling experience and not have his following days, weeks, months, even years be impacted by this one night. However, this is not the case. I would be hard pressed to find a survivor for whom this was 'the case.' Aaron's description of his mental health

experiences following his assault are devastatingly consistent with the extent literature. He noted having nightmares and feeling “*destroyed.*” He said, Unfortunately, this level of intensity with emotions following something as traumatic as sexual violence are all too common (Arlee et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2009).

“I was also so ashamed. And I didn’t want anyone to know. I actually kept it a secret for many months because I didn’t want to tell anybody what had happened and a lot of it was because, you know, people knew that I dated women. And I didn’t want to have to answer the questions that I thought were going to come up, you know, and I didn’t even tell my therapist for several months. Until, you know, my mental health go so bad. I mean, I was showering probably six to seven times a day. I became super paranoid. And now, looking back at some of the things about my OCD made me laugh and one of them is that like for like two months I can only eat prepackaged food because, I was convinced that everything else was tainted. So I lived on like hard boiled eggs and granola bars and if I never had to see a hard-boiled egg for the rest of my life I would be fine with that (he laughed). But like, that too, you know, like, it was just kind of completely destroyed. And it really wasn’t until I started to get really sick and didn’t know why I lost a lot of weight. And it turns out that that man had given me syphilis, which turned into neurosyphilis and started to attack my central nervous system. And it really wasn’t until that point that I knew that I, I couldn’t not tell anyone. But I had to, you know, figure out and start processing this as scary as that was, and even though, I mean,

honestly, just the other day I was thinking to myself, If I hadn't gotten that sick, I wonder how long it would have taken me to tell people."

"I'm Not To Blame"

"I have a phenomenal therapist."

After disclosing his assault to his therapist, Aaron said they tried Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) as a means to treat the mental health consequences he was experiencing since the assault.

"Through EMDR...I was able to say for the first time that, you know, I, I'm not to blame, you know, like, I never gave anybody permission – even if he was in my house – to assault and abuse me that way. And so, even just being at a place and point of my life where I can say that and actually believe it is huge. It's huge...I can talk about it and feel okay. I don't have the nightmares anymore."

In an effort to provide context for the difference EMDR made for his mental health, he explained that his neurosyphilis symptoms returned in January of 2021, bringing the realization that his first round of treatment did not work. As a result, he was in the hospital for three weeks getting intravenous (IV) treatments.

"Having to go through all of that again, which obviously, like, brought up everything, right. But it wasn't what it was. All anger. Like, 'you asshole' (referring to his thoughts), that you'd have like, you were probably out there living your best life and I'm hooked up to an IV for three weeks. You

know, but not to the point where it destroyed me mentally again. And so I actually feel really empowered by that in a weird kind of way.”

“Spaces, Visible Spaces”

What could have protected you? If things in society were different, or could change, what would need to be different to protect others from assault? A loaded question if there ever was one. I heard it come out of my mouth, worried he would hear it with an air of blame, as if I am filled with the notion he was to blame for any part of the assault. He was not. I know that. But I was worried he would hear me as such.

Instead, he answered the question as if he had been thinking about its answer for quite some time. He said,

“I think having spaces and having visible spaces that, you know, are, are not centered around like predatory behavior. Like what’s wrong in our society that told me that the only way for me to find acceptance as a trans man was to access an app that’s presented in the news all the time for being, you know, very harmful... We’re consistently sending the message of, you know you have, you know, to go to find support or community at a gay bar. Or, go find support at, you know, at Pride, which only happens once a year...and will be two years because of the pandemic. So, you know there are really no other outings that exist. And I think, in particular for BIPOC and LGBTQ identified folks.”

Visible spaces for LGBTQ+ BIPOC folks. Spaces that are intentionally made to welcome LGBTQ+ people of color to not only build community, but to allow for people with like identities to meet

“I’m Thriving”

It is April 13, 2021, 42 minutes and 56 seconds in to the interview and Aaron said, “I’m thriving.” He explained,

“for a long time it was surviving, you know? And I feel like it’s that day-to-day, I’m gonna take it, and, you know, whatever comes up in the moment I’m going to deal with it...But now I have, you know, really worked hard to like build that sense of community around myself and safety around myself and, you know, I feel like, like it’s a part of my story but it’s not all of my stories. It’s, you know, something I still feel and carry a lot of shame over. So, like, I haven’t told any of my family what happened and I don’t honestly know if I ever will. But, that actually matters less to me than having the folks that I have told that have been overwhelmingly supportive, and, you know, been through kind of all these health journeys with me...So, it’s been three years post-assault, and it gets, I don’t know if I’ll ever lose some of that anger when things kind of remind me, but I don’t feel that complete sense of despair that I felt, and that complete sense of like, darkness and hopelessness and like blaming myself. I think for the most part, I’ve really gotten past that, which is an incredible place for me to be.”

According to Aaron, his therapist was especially helpful because she took the time to earn his trust. He said he “*really had to challenge [himself] to share things with her.*” Over the course of six months, Aaron moved from “*surface-level answers*” to “*drop[ing]*” things in to the conversation, to sharing information he used to share with his family. Throughout this process, he noticed she would defend him and validate his experiences by reminding him he “[didn’t] *deserve that*” which helped him feel as though he was not “*doing something wrong*” both in sessions and in his personal life.

Emma’s Story

It is January 27, 2022, around 1pm. Emma and I are meeting via Zoom and laughing at how the recent Zoom update announces when a recording is in progress. It throws us off for a second. I am surprised by the robotic announcement and Emma laughs at how she is still not used to hearing it, despite hearing it in all of her graduate classes.

We begin the interview smiling, laughing at these awkward moments via Zoom that have now become a regular occurrence. Emma appears both nervous about the interview and open to share her experiences.

As a 28-year-old, queer, Chinese American woman who works with the Asian community, Emma commented on how infrequently she is able to talk about her own identities and experiences. As a mental health counselor, she explained she has had the privilege of helping her clients come to terms with their own sexuality and guide them through coming out to their Asian families in a way that often parallels her own experiences.

“I’ve had referrals come in because the kid says that they are gay or something and then the family’s in huge distress. And so, I am having to learn how to talk about sex and sexuality and gender and everything with Asian families when, like, we never talked about it with my home family. Like we do not [talk about sex and sexuality] ever. It was always assumed we were straight.”

She clears her throat – as if to prepare herself for what she is about to say.

“And anything else was just like, against God or whatever.”

Emma’s own coming out experience while navigating Asian families co-occurred with her clients. Shifting focus to her own journey, she reflected that as a queer, Asian woman, her surrounding environment and contexts dictate what aspects of her identities she is able to acknowledge at any given time. She explained, as a graduate student in psychology, she would be able to lean in to her liberal, queer self. In fact, she felt as though it is so common to be a queer psychologist, that coming out to her peers was *“almost like, welcome to the club!”* However, when it came to embracing her full and authentic self at home, there were several barriers that prevented her from being able to explore her queer identity.

“Purity Culture”

This was an important point to Emma’s experiences I did not recognize at first. A moment that my Whiteness prevented me from initially understanding. She went on to describe her identity development as *“delayed.”* That her intersecting identities could not all be acknowledged or honored in any single space.

Emma grew up in a “*purity culture*” that was heavily influenced by her Christian religion and Chinese American heritage. At home, she received messages to embrace heteronormative monogamy. She explained her parents were immigrants and as a result, they especially did not have a conceptualization of queer or non-monogamous identities.

Furthermore, a language barrier between Emma and her extended family widened the cultural gap between them. As a result, she shared she was unable to have any “*deep conversations*” with her extended family, let alone one as vulnerable as sexuality.

In her neighborhood, navigating identity-based conversations were just as challenging. Emma shared,

“I was, like, so awkward and like...I grew up in White suburbia. So, I was never considered like, pretty. I didn’t date until the end of senior year (of high school) so, I was always, like, umm, I’m not like that in to guys but I’m not in to girls too. And like, I’m trying to figure it out. But I was just like, I don’t know, not that comfortable with the idea of kissing a girl. So, I was like, I guess I’m straight. But there wasn’t like a lot of language and it wasn’t like, you really see representation of queer women that weren’t masked, or women that knew they were gay.”

Emma’s experiences being unable to process her sexuality at home and unable to make sense of how she fit in to Whiteness made it difficult to accept her queer identity. In fact, she did not embrace this part of herself until last summer (summer of 2021) and even still continues to “*keep this private*” from her parents and grandparents.

The difficulties Emma faced while navigating personal identities, family expectations, and White power dynamics also impacted her brother's identity development. She shared,

“A couple of months ago, my brother came out to me as bisexual and I was like, oh my god! We're both queer, weird Asians, with, like, funny hair! And that was really weird because we had never, like, shared about that before. And I always thought he was, like, being facetious when he said that, like, men were coming after him. But no, I think it's just like the intersectionality meant that, like, it was pretty delayed. Like, he's older than me, significantly, and we're both now kind of like, exploring with our gender expression and clothing and both back dating for the first time in, like, a decade. And I was just like, “Oh! We're both on Tinder too.” And he's getting way more matches than me and it's really annoying!”

‘Dating for the first time in, like, a decade.’ A simple sentence with such powerful implications. Emma disclosed that was in a committed relationship with a cisgender man who she eventually married. However, the pandemic caused “a lot of changes” in Emma's personal life. It was not only time she was quarantined with her husband, but the free time finally forced her to acknowledge the questioning thoughts she had about her sexuality while also navigating intense racism towards Asian people in general, but especially Chinese individuals.

“The Pandemic”

“I think the pandemic kind of put an influence on my long-term relationship, for sure. Because, like, it was kind of like, “let’s get through the pandemic, like, it’s not like I want to date. But then it was also like, a huge time of identity formation and understanding and stuff on so many levels for me. Like, racially understanding the world and like, sex, sexuality, and gender as well. That it was, like, a time of intense refraction and formation, and eventually be like, to be true to myself. I cannot. She pauses, laughs a bit uncomfortably, takes a breath, and in a single exhales says, “I am not going to be happy in a monogamous relationship.”

Emma was married, living with her husband, and finally had to confront the thoughts she had about her sexuality, her body, and the way she can be happy in relationships because the pandemic almost forced it upon her.

“I never like felt social pressure to be anything but straight. Honestly, that was like a norm in the social circles. So, there’s probably more expectation to be heteronormative in all of my circles and then kind of being away from that and really kind of kind of thinking about like, how I want what my values are, and how I want to live and show up and be authentic. And how, like, I was willing to do that in spite of or with all the stigma or whatever because like, I did have a strong social network getting care and like still cared about me and wouldn’t like jock me, even if other students –“

She pauses for seven seconds. Attempting to make eye-contact through our computer screens, I gently finish her sentence, “like grad school finally gave you people who would welcome any part of you?”

“Yeah, they are so tolerant. Like, they usually say something like, “men are trash!” And like, yeah, men suck.” This immediately made both of us laugh. A shared moment of connection between us two women. She added, *“I’m still dating them but it’s not fun.”* She meant it light-heartedly. Not that dating men was literally not fun but that saying so was a demonstrated comfort in leaning in to her sexual attraction to women.

Unsure of how it would be received, she shared her realizations with her husband. *“It was like, not negative,”* she said, with surprise in her voice, but when asked if it was painful, she said, *“oh yeah, it like broke us apart for a while.”* She went on to describe her relationship as more akin to “friends with benefits,” seeing each other every couple of weeks, or so. Despite the fact that they had to figure out who stayed in their shared apartment and how to manage their combined assets, their non-monogamous relationship marked a shift towards *“something much healthier”* for them.

When talking about the pandemic and how it heavily influenced her identity development, she silently teared up without drawing attention to it. She so subtly reached for a tissue I did not initially notice she had started to cry. It was not until the second time she dapped her eyes that I realized she was crying.

It happened while she started to share about her discomfort with sex, as influenced by the *“purity culture”* in which she was raised, and how that influenced years of discomfort with her body not fitting in to White standards of beauty.

I stopped asking questions according to my protocol. “How are you doing right now sharing all of this with me?” I asked, trying to sound as empathetic as possible, given the natural distancing that comes with electronic conversations.

She smiled, dabbed her eyes, and let out a chuckle through her tears.

“Um, I mean I think I am doing okay. I think talking anything that holds a lot, um, I like always cry with these things. It’s like par for the course. I guess I haven’t really talked about my intersectionality out loud, well like the process that much.

“How is it right now to hear yourself say these words out loud?” I asked in response.

“Hmmm. It’s just like, peaceful, I guess. She pauses and looks up in thought. We pause for 10 seconds. “Peaceful,” I repeat. Yeah, ‘cause, I’m just like, I’m talking about myself. What’s been happening. But it also is like, I think it may be a little overwhelming how much the pandemic was involved in like every facet of myself. Like learning about Asian discrimination through history, doing my dissertation on it, and giving clinical work to both Asian families and racist people, and like, um, it’s been a lot. So, it’s just like, added ongoing other layers of my personal understanding of humanity, attachment, and bonds, and relationships, and sex and sexuality. And it’s been a lot.”

‘It has been a lot.’ Again, a simple sentence with so much significance. The pandemic made history and theoretical knowledge about racism come to reality. Of

course, not that it is a new phenomenon, but at this point, Emma had language to describe what was happening. She was able to identify racism in her work and community. This is especially important to consider given that the pandemic saw a significant increase in violence against Asian people (Gover et al., 2020).

“It”

Emma’s sexual assault, or “it” occurred several years ago while she was an undergraduate student. Although she requested that she not be asked about specific details, she reflected on how her socialization, understanding of herself, and lack of intentional conversations influenced her experiences.

“It’s interesting because after the past two years, who I am now is so utterly different than who I was then. And I think a lot about the culture was different then too – or I am just surrounding myself with more trauma-informed people now, which is possibly the case. But it does seem like the younger generations are way more mature and tolerant than we ever were. So, like, at that point, it was a lot of, like, purity culture stigma kind of attached to myself. And, like, my mom and I learned how to communicate with each other over the pandemic, but back then there was a great wall where you just compartmentalize all of my dating life with my parents. It wasn’t until I had a boyfriend that I would even talk about it and introduce them. So, I think, those things impacted the shaming stigma for who I spoke out to and peoples’ response back to me. Like, they didn’t know what to do or what to say so they ended up saying hurtful things by accident.”

When asked who she told, she disclosed,

“That’s the thing. Most of my friends at the time were guys. And I always had difficulty making friends because I was bullied heavily during elementary school and so, like, the acquaintances I had, didn’t know how to handle mental health issues as teenagers at all. So I definitely remember texting my guy friends afterwards when I was in the bathroom and later on when I was upset about it on a ski trip. Oh, she goes off topic to provide additional context, I think I was going to mention before, I was always socialized that “I can’t do this because I’m a girl” and “you gotta do this and this to protect yourself.” And so, it was always people thinking you didn’t minimize the risk. Like you opened yourself up to the risk. It was like “did you yell at him? Did you say no? Did you hit him? Why did you let him come over? Were you drunk? Was it x,y,z? It’s like an interrogation to the side where the blame lies, or something. It’s not necessarily malicious, but it’s victim blaming.”

Emma sought comfort but was met with victim blaming statements that suggested she was at fault for the assault. Upon reflection, Emma noted that she may have turned to the wrong people.

“I think talking to guys was off because they didn’t realize how shitty guys can be to women, like fully. I think they don’t realize how horrible men have been to women, and stuff. So, even like, it wasn’t sexual, but my college boyfriend at the time, when I told people he would, like, kick me and stuff, mutual friends would be like, “Oh I could never see him getting

that upset.” And that was really hurtful. So then I thought, maybe I shouldn’t make mutual friends choose, so I just decided to turn to non-mutual friends instead. Because it was kind of like, “you probably did something to incite it” was the kind of feeling that I got.”

Unfortunately, Emma’s impression that others insinuated she caused the assault furthered her internalized self-blame and belief that others cannot support her.

“Cultural Hypersexualization”

At this point in the interview, I was meant to ask Emma if there was anything she thought could have protected her from what happened. However, given the amount of people Emma heard blame her for the assault, I was especially aware of my words when I asked. Careful to acknowledge that there was absolutely nothing she could have done to ‘incite’ the sexual and physical assaults, I asked her if there was something that could have been different that might have protected her. She wiped more tears from her eyes and said,

“Better public education about it. Um, because I feel like there was some sort of mandatory thing, but I remember going in to [grad school] (the name of the institution has been removed to protect confidentiality) and getting a notification that we had to do sexual assault prevention education and being, like, annoyed, and then being happy with how the training was created, and lens and sort of how it goes in to laws and how to best respond to certain things, and being surprised by that. So I feel like the one at [my undergraduate institution] was like, not as good. And going

in to college counseling...last year and learning more about how prevalent these attacks were but how alone I felt in it. And knowing that it is so common is a failure of the system that we are so vulnerable. So, I feel like there are more systemic things that can be addressed.”

Once again, she grabs a tissue to dab her eyes. There were other places having more informed conversations regarding sexual assault. Emma mentioned the younger generations seem to have a better handle on how to talk about challenging topics, including sexual violence. As a result, the tears she has are not just about the painful traumas she experienced, but the reality that all of these traumas are preventable, that there are efforts to prevent them, and that none of it worked or helped her when she was most in need.

However, for Emma, this was also entangled in her racial identity. She shared, *“The stigma about, like, Asian women wanting to have a sexual identity and lives. We get told a lot to be very traditional with the Asian heritage. And then there’s also, like, over sexualization of us by men that can lead to their behaviors towards us too...I didn’t understand that it was a cultural hyper sexualization until I was in college, on the apps, and like getting all these weird messages. I’d be very confused and upset about it. I didn’t totally realize how much of it was because of how I present to the world. I was on OKCupid and this message said like, “I really love Asian women. I love your skin and your lips and I really want to take you out.” So, really interested in me because he saw me as, like, exotic.”*

I asked her if it felt fetishizing. She said,

“Yeah. I didn’t have the language for it then, so I was just like, “that was really rude. And gross.” Like it was weird because it was like sort of positive, so I was like, why am I so upset about this. But no. It’s like, super fucking gross. And it is still, like, a thing. Anything that’s based on the idea of a group and not me, myself, makes me uncomfortable.”

Emma said she felt confused by her emotional response to these comments. It took her years to come to terms with the fact that this was a racist interaction. Once this reality set in, she could not help but feel disgusted.

“I Changed My Safety Behaviors”

Even though it has been several years since her assault, Emma shared she is still not sure the extent it has had on her mental health. This is, in part, due to preexisting Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – with which she was diagnosed during her last semester of college.

However, Emma was able to identify key distinct reactions to ‘it.’

“Like, there was a lot of emotionality afterwards, like I remember feeling like I was just like, okay I processed it, like I’m safe, it could have been so much worse. It was more of the danger and feeling unsafe in my home part that people did not understand. So there was a fair amount of emotionality but everything was internalized and I didn’t attend to my emotions because I was so overwhelmed with trying to do premed and do okay with that with all of my cognitive weaknesses, that I didn’t do much than just

trying to survive to the next step some days. But I would have avoidance and when I saw him, I would have a really strong reaction and need to go.”

She further described internalized beliefs that she was the cause of the assault. She noted,

“I was the one that opened up that risk, so, you know, what else do you want? So it is settled and now I need to focus on organic chemistry.”

Emma appeared to have internalized the messages she received throughout her childhood and friends while simultaneously trying to find a way to distract her from thinking about what happened. However, no matter how hard she tried to convince herself that she *“dealt with it,”* her symptoms persisted.

“I think I changed my safety behaviors after and, like, became more conservative.

Fortunately, Emma noted this is not something that has continued through to today. She emphasized the power of language and her ability to forgive herself.

“Especially now that I have, like, the language and like, look back and like, I’m very strong and, like, that wasn’t right. It’s like I’m much more clear on that part, so it’s not as salient as an issue. And like, forgiving myself for freezing when I’m stressed. Because I think a lot of people were like, “why didn’t you get louder or fight harder or something.” I used to think freezing was, like a weakness, and now I realize that’s how I react to things I wasn’t expecting at all. Sometimes it’s non-functional, but it is what it is.”

Despite these traumas, despite the fact that she said she has not told her family about them, Emma was pleased to say that she has been able to grow as a person as a result of them.

“I feel like it’s made me understand a lot...Just being able to be open to and understanding the feelings and experiences and pain of so many different people. So, I can hear their stories and treat them and help them too. It’s only making me a better person. I have more of an understanding of how people’s responses and social support can really change how that experience is felt or impacted.”

She found a way to harness her story. Throughout her interview, Emma talked about how many people did not understand how to respond to her or help her. She shared that people would tell her she is “*too sensitive*” or that she was “*overreacting to something*.” However, as an adult, she has the insight to know this was not true. Now, she has the language to help others find their own. She harnesses the pain from her past so that she may help others heal.

Nina’s Story

It is February 12, 2022 and Nina has agreed to be interviewed from a friend’s house in Oklahoma. She lived with family and would prefer that they do not have the chance to overhear our conversation.

This was my first impression of Nina. She was incredibly nervous about the interview, unsure of what I would ask and worried about the possibility of our Zoom conversation being hacked. She mentioned that although she has survived more recent

sexual assaults, she was not ready to disclose them and will thus focus her responses on an experience that happened about 25 years ago.

Nina identified as a 56-year-old, cisgender, lesbian, Native woman from the Osage tribe in Oklahoma. She was born and raised on the reservation, which significantly impacted her identity development and understanding of what it meant to be a lesbian, Native woman. She shared navigating life in the continental United States versus life on the reservation was “*conflicting.*” She said,

“Traditionally in our tribe, LGBTQ people, known as two-spirit, we were, historically, it’s like you were a gift from the gods. You were closer to the gods because you had both. But that kind of got put by the wayside when White folk came along. Christianity came along and now we have to learn their way. But it didn’t become a bigger, big deal until here recently with politics and stuff. So, we have some people in our tribe who wanted to make laws against it, right? Against same sex marriage, etc. And that’s not our way. That’s traditionally not us as a tribe, but some people are trying to morph it into that. So, being an LGBTQ, being an individual of color, it’s, it’s conflicting. You want to, the people who know you, that you grew up with, would accept you. Now, they probably wouldn’t, if you had a wedding or something, they probably wouldn’t go to that. But they wouldn’t give you hell about it. But the larger, out side of that microcosm, the farther you step from that entity, the more pushback you get, the more you got to, at least for me, I have to pull it all back in. Hide, you know, blend to get in...to get along in the White world. You got to just be a

certain way to get along in the outside world. But if when you're at home, you can do both. If that makes any sense."

The effects colonization had on the Osage people were devastating and continue to this day (Edwards, 2010). Whiteness has infringed upon their history and uprooted them from their land, disconnecting them from their roots (Edwards, 2010). As a result, their traditional ways and history are lost, forever entangled with White, Christian, ideals. Nina was describing a tradition in which two spirit people were celebrated (Edwards, 2010).

As a result, Nina was left in a "conflicting" space in which she had to navigate safety due to her intersecting identities. She said the farther away she got from home, the more she was forced to pull back. She needed to blend in to heteronormative Whiteness to get along and survive.

"I Don't Feel Safe"

"It's a general feeling because I have spent time on the West Coast, even though, you know, it's more people who are more aware and evolved. There's still just never a sense of safety of where you and be you in the open. But the more you go to the central part of the United States that sense of safety, she laughed, not because it was funny, but because it was stressful, goes down substantially. You know, for good reason. For good reason. So, I mean here, (Oklahoma), whether or not you can believe it, there was a thing on the news where some of the senators were still trying to promote conversion therapy. Even though, you know, it's not an

evidence-based treatment and it's actually pretty detrimental. So, that's just kind of the attitude of people and their religion. Because their religion tells them you can't be that way."

However, Nina's daily experiences are not just shaped by her lesbian identity, she also faces discrimination for her Native roots.

"I didn't experience racism for being Native American 'til I left that hometown, the place where I grew up with, because I grew up on our reservation, and that was our place and everybody was the same and even though there were White people there, they were nice, you know. It was just accepting. And then once I left there, and I only went maybe 90 miles to the east to another town, people look at you like what kind of name is that? You know, what kind of name is that? Someone asked me what kind of brand of Indian or type of Indian are you. And I thought and he was being kind of silly trying to ask but it came out like that I kind of laughed. I thought that was rude. Type? Like we're a brand. So yeah, interesting questing because as I'm telling you this and I'm reflecting those identities, which are strong for me, right, being a homosexual identity and a minority, a Native American. And in both of those, the farther I get from where I was raised, where people know me and things are acceptable, the less sense of safety I have. Unfortunately."

The farther she got from home, the less safe she felt. Despite the White influences within her tribe, there is still a sense of acceptance among the people on the reservation. However, once she leaves, she is inured with racism, homophobia, and innocuous threats

to her basic safety. When I asked if there was anything that could make that different, a question that is completely influenced by my Whiteness, she shared,

“Just acceptance...It’s a system’s change, is what I’m thinking. Right? So the systems of your legal system, the community if that system changed, where people just live and let live, wonderful. Right? And then if something happens, they’re there to support you. You know? Another support to you anyway, so that things don’t happen. You know, just, I guess, acknowledgement or recognition or acceptance really is the key...Come as you are with all of your identities, but respect everybody else who is here...It needs to be mixed. But again, it’s just really seeing the person as a whole. If you want to go to a store, shop, or a restaurant where it’s more so gay friendly, or it’s really particularly not necessarily the hangout where everybody goes, but one where it’s just respectable, anybody can come and you’re not going to be harassed and you’re going to be treated well. More places like that. For example, I know Starbucks is LGBTQ friendly, so I spend my money at Starbucks. Target like LGBTQ people so I’ll spend my money at Target. You know? Try to support places that support me or at least recognize me. Those are the things that kind of create safety.”

In other words, places that welcome identities that are otherwise threatened by systemic power dynamics. *‘Those are the things that kind of create safety.’* The operative phrase being *‘kind of.’* Almost to say that a space that acknowledges one identity, in this case, LGBTQ+ individuals, is not enough to create a full sense of safety. There instead

needs to be spaces with intentional focus on intersectional experiences. And if there were such a place, this would still not be enough. Spaces only allow temporary safety. At some point, one would need to leave the intentional space and enter back in to the world where homophobia, sexism, and racism, systemically rule the norms.

“I Have Nothing Else Left To Lose”

Given Nina’s intersectional identities, being able to form genuine relationships with romantic and sexual partners was not always easy. Nina shared she has only been in relationships with non-Native individuals, which has created several challenges and barriers to her being completely understood by her partners. However, Nina’s difficulties in forming authentic relationships with her partners was something that stemmed from her experiences throughout her childhood.

“You know, same sex identities makes it difficult when you’re growing up, right? And everybody sees you as one way because they see you as who you are. And so, we’re trying to hide that part, you know, makes it difficult to get close to people. So, I tended not to, right? Because if you’re found out, then what’s going to happen? And then being a different race and culture than my partners who have always been non-Native, we butt heads a lot because our value system is very different. Very different. And I don’t know if there is a trick to make it better because we are who we are. We grow up at our family systems or what our values are.”

Nina hid her sexuality for others throughout her childhood. However, people would look at her and assume she was gay. This created barriers to being able to be close

with others. She was unable to be her authentic self with anyone in her life. Then, as she got older and entered in serious, sexual relationships, she was asked again to compromise on her identities for the longevity of the relationship. Only in these cases, it was her race.

Furthermore, given Nina's experiences on the West Coast, she was able to compare the differences in social pressures that also influenced her experiences in her relationships. When comparing the West Coast with Oklahoma, Nina shared,

“Attitudes on the West coast is a little more liberal, a little more open. For a lot more, let's put it that way. You could walk out with your partner and go sit somewhere without people giving you the side eye or staring at you, right? Or you can go to eat out here in Oklahoma with people and constantly be, you know, they're eating but they're like, (she imitates people doing a double-take). So, I started going and I look right at them and make eye contact. It's like, fuck you. And what do you, what do you want? Do you want to talk to me and get to understand me? So yeah, in the past, it would make me feel, like, you know, you're younger and you're like, “Oh my god.” So, you just keep your blinders on and look forward. And now, I'm just like, I have nothing else left to lose. You want to give me some shit, go for it. But I'm gonna stare back at you. Kind of have a bad attitude...But at least being on the West Coast opened my eyes to that, right? You don't know what you don't know until you experience something different. And so, seeing how people live it's better and it's a bit safer and easier and it's okay. Now I know what life can be like.”

While Nina was a bit nervous to talk about her experiences before, she seemed to ease in to talking about how much more accepting people on the West Coast were to LGBTQ+ individuals. It was empowering. She was able to go to restaurants on dates and hold her partner's hand in public while not having to worry about other people mistreating her. As a result, when people in Oklahoma give her a double-take or stare, she stares back. She does not shy away from them. However, she noted that her confidence in being able to stare back at people is something that she has only recently acquired. When talking about the sexual assault, she shared she was much younger and much less sure of how to navigate her intersecting identities.

“25 Years Ago”

Nina reiterated that although she has survived more than one sexual assault, she was willing to share her thoughts and mental health experiences about one that happened in the past. When asked if she thought systemic power dynamics regarding intersectional identities had an impact on her sexual assault, she thought for a minute. She noted that her most recent experience likely did have a more direct identity component to it, *“but the one in the past had [identity components] in an indirect way.”*

She shared,

“The only reason I was with this individual (the person who assaulted her) was to hide out. To hide my sexuality because I had a crush on a coworker, which was becoming very apparent. And this guy walks in, she's like, why don't you go out with him? I thought, “Oh okay.” So, I go out with this guy. And you know, not knowing, you know, not taking that

serious. Not like I'm interested in a relationship, and I don't think it's serious. And then being with somebody and trusting them, and not knowing this is how it's going to be. Not knowing what the expectations are in a male-female relationship. And yeah, and I didn't think that way, right. Like, from talking to my sisters and friends, it's like most women would have been like, "Oh, I would have expected that and this and that." And I'm like, "No," you know. If I say no, no is no, you know? Its not, I'm not trying to play hared to get, no, no, no, no is no. Yeah. So, indirectly, trying to find a sense of safety lead to sexual assault from a male partner.

For Nina, it was not just that she had to navigate safety for her identities, she also was forced to navigate how her job would be impacted if she did not appear straight. As a result, she said, *"trying to find a sense of safety let me to put myself in an unsafe situation."*

To make matters worse, Nina shared others did not seem to notice how unsafe the situation truly was. The woman from work who set them up thought they would be *"a good match."* So, how could she tell her that it was not? In fact, Nina said she did not tell anybody about what happened.

"I didn't tell anybody because it was humiliating and embarrassing. Given my age, given that we weren't dating, right? And, yeah, we were out late. And that was just me being naïve and trusting somebody. But yeah. No. I didn't tell anybody...Probably because I blamed myself. I blame myself. And then I didn't want my family and parents to be upset, because turns out that this guy wasn't really a good guy. He was a wolf in sheep's

clothing, kind of thing. And people had information about him, but nobody came to ask me about it. You know? So I didn't want them to feel awful. To know if they had just asked me, this might have been avoided. I wouldn't have been with this guy. But they did. And then I didn't want them to be hurt by it. But I'm sure, maybe they might have known something. You know?

After the assault, she learned others knew he had a history. When she shared that if others 'had asked her' she clarified that she meant, "if they had asked me if I really want to go out with this guy. Then, maybe, they would have told me what they'd heard. But they didn't." No one told Nina beforehand what she might expect from him, and afterwards, other women told her she should have known to expect sexually explicit behavior from men, as if that is an excuse for what happened.

"Who Knows?"

"Could anything have protected you?" I asked. "*Who knows,*" she said. She shook her head as if to say that it does not do well to dwell on what happened. That engaging in "what if" thoughts is too painful to consider because it will not change the pain from the past. However, she shared,

"I'll give you this, given my age, I'm in my 50s. Had coming out in same-sex relationships, etc. been as accepted as it was today, it might have been I wouldn't have been in that situation. I would at least, I wouldn't have been with him. And I have to put the responsibility on him because he chose to do what he did. And so, had it been more acceptable back then

and I had been in a different relationship, I guess I could say it wouldn't happen with him...I might have already been out in my own community."

Nina acknowledged how much has changed since her 20s when she survived her first sexual assault. She noted the number of celebrities who have come out since then, spear-heading conversations about sexuality that people might not have otherwise had. She emphasized the fact that famous people being "out" in the world, being in same-sex relationships and still successful, allowed for later generations to be more accepting and aware.

The increased representation naturally led to an increase in awareness. In time, this gave way to an increase in conversations and acceptance. Similarly, Nina shared, again, the need for more spaces and ways people can "come as they are and be respected."

"I Don't Let It Define Me"

In considering Nina's mental health experiences after the assault, she shared feeling an overwhelming sense of embarrassment, humiliation, and a need to protect others from the pain. As a result, she did not tell anyone what happened. Instead, she internalized the experience. Even still, when asked if she continues to blame herself, she shared,

"You know, yes and no. So, for the assault, that moment? No. That was him. But for not being honest with who I was, and getting in that relationship in the first place, that's where I take responsibility. So, it's kind of like, you're targeting something else. And that's what you get."

Because, I will tell you, I had brought this individual to meet my family because they know I was dating him and my sisters, I had two sisters, and my mom was kind of iffy about him, and they have pretty good judgement. But, again, they are all heterosexual females. And my two sisters did not like him. So yeah, I blame myself for putting myself in that situation.

Even though it has been 25 years, the fact that her mother and sisters did not like him and influenced a perpetual self-blame. Although she does not blame herself for the assault itself, she noted the difference her mom and sisters had in being able to “read” men. She attributed their judgement to their sexuality. That their genuine attraction towards men may have allowed them to anticipate their behaviors and identify warning signs that might have predicted the sexual assault. Logically, Nina knows this is not her fault. There were systems and stigmas in place that prevented her from being able to come out to her family and coworkers at the time. There was so much outside of her control, but she still takes responsibility for aspects of the violence.

Even still, Nina shared she thinks about it as something that happened. It is something that is a part of her past but that does not “define” her. However, this was not the case immediately after it happened.

“I don’t know if I would call it reaction-formation, but after it happened, it made me act more like his girlfriend. Because I thought, “Oh, I guess we’re serious now.” You know, not thinking that your partner could rape you.”

However, this response did not last long. Nina said he “*disappeared*” shortly after. When that happened, her mental health symptoms changed.

“I always dreaded if I thought I saw or heard him, you know? I would literally get sick to my stomach. My friend and I, one night, went out to eat and she mentioned his name and I suddenly stopped eating...So there were times that I would dread it, but if I think I saw him today, I wouldn’t. Because I’ve had that time to process it, to make my sense of it. And to be okay with it.”

The experiences Nina was noting are consistent with survivors of traumatic experiences. Mentioning of his name or the notion that she would see him and be reminded of the event was overwhelming. However, Nina shared that she has been able to grow from the experience. That time has allowed her to gain perspective on how she can make sense of something so illogical.

Christopher’s Story

Christopher and I met on Sunday, February 27, 2022 via Zoom. I immediately noticed their “they/them” pronouns at the bottom of their screen beside their name. When I asked if they were ready for me to start the recording, they laughed and admired the fact that we were meeting on a HIPAA-compliant platform. They shook their head and shared that they wished they knew of more recording options when they were interviewing for their own dissertation. They said they used a different platform that ultimately created more work for them, making it much harder for them to stay motivated and finish.

I laughed in my shared sentiment. “It really is hard sometimes” I said, agreeing with them.

Christopher laughed and shared that they were glad to be able to meet for the interview. As a graduate of a counseling psychology doctoral program, they remembered how difficult it was to find participants to interview and was thus pleased to have the opportunity to *“pay it forward.”*

As a 32-year-old, two-spirit, queer, Mochica (Indigenous Mexican), and Iranian male with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Christopher emphasized that while they were happy to help in my search for participants, their primary motivation for participating in the study was to have the opportunity to diversify the *“White, cis, and heteronormative studies that predominates the extent literature.”*

Austin, Texas

Christopher shared they were meeting with me from their new apartment in Austin, Texas. Before I could ask my first question, they reflected on how especially painful of a time it is to be two-spirit and queer in Texas. Without needing to ask, I knew they were talking about the state’s bill to classify gender-affirming care as child abuse.

Christopher shook their head. *“At least we don’t have to report parents who support their trans kids,”* they said. Christopher was referring to their work in a private practice. They explained the American Psychological Association (APA) was adamant that doing so would be the antithesis to evidence-based standards of care (APA, 2022). Even still, the anti-trans sentiment of the Texas government further motivated them to be interviewed.

“The Dumb Mexican Kid”

Throughout their childhood, Christopher navigated several identities that were not honored or processed both at home and/or at school. When I asked them about their experiences as a queer, two-spirit, Mochica and Iranian male, they were reminded of elementary school experiences that continue to impact them.

“Another salient identity, but it really became salient over the last couple of years, has been, like, my neurodiversity identity. So that has really intersected quite a lot with even my racial identity and just making sense of my own racial trauma. So that’s a big part of how I identify intersectionally, really...I was thinking about how growing up, right, people would really treat me like I’m stupid, particularly in elementary school. And, so, I remember specifically a time in fourth grade where they were, the teacher was a White teacher, she was very much not about teaching students that had other learning needs. She wanted to teach the magnet students. She wanted you out of her class and in special ed. And so, she was contented to say that I was learning disabled. She was convinced I was learning disabled and that I needed to be in a special education course. Right. I had another teacher who was an indigenous woman named Pilar Flores who was one of the special education teachers who was like, “C (name adjusted for confidentiality), this is not learning disabled. You give me an hour with them everyday, I will get the grades up. And do that’s what we did. And I was able to focus because I got that one-on-one attention. Now, they did test me for, like, learning disabilities.

But I wasn't learning disabled because I was autistic and ADHD. But here's the shitty thing is that they didn't test for that. They didn't test for ADHD. Right? And this was the 90's, mind you, keep in mind, like, we were handing out ADHD diagnoses like candy, right? Why didn't, why didn't you test me for that, right? Even, even then, who, who assess for a learning disability and not ADHD at the same time?...So I was able to get what I needed there, but they were still thinking I was neurotypical, right. And so, when I lost all that structure, things became hard to get right. But people were, like, just kind of used that as evidence that here's this, like, brown kid who's stupid, right? They use that as another reason to, like, justify those biases that they so clearly had. This is a dumb Mexican kid, right? And I wasn't dumb. I just had these neurodevelopmental disabilities that went on unnoticed."

Christopher emphasized the importance the one-on-one time with the special education teacher had on them. For the first, and they would later disclose, only time in the public education school system in Austin, Texas, someone took a vested interest in them. Without her, they shared, they would not have had the confidence to pursue higher education. However, their fourth-grade year with one-on-one attention was an isolated event. Christopher was treated noticeably differently from their classmates throughout their childhood and high school years.

In a way, however, Christopher was lucky. They were high functioning and able to develop ways to cope, despite the lack of support.

“I developed all of these compensatory strategies. And, as I look back on it, so much of what was hard for me in school, right, was so connected to that, like neurodiversity disability and the struggles and the fact that I never got the support I needed. And just looking at how people were racist to me, right, in school, particularly was that they thought I was too stupid, right, I was too stupid to ever produce any kind of good work in seventh grade... There was this one time where I was in an English course. It was a poetry section, make this written poem, right. I was super excited about it. I was really inspired and it was one of the things that I ended up hyper focusing on because I’m super interested in it. And I came up with this poem, I submitted it to this competition...and the competition was they would select a group of poems from people who submitted across grades like first through 12th. Right. And I made it! I got accepted into the seventh grade division, right. But my teacher was so convinced that, “Christopher (name changed for confidentiality) could not possibly have written something of quality,” right. And therefore, believed that it was plagiarized. No evidence of that. No evidence of me having stolen any of my work because I didn’t write, but just was so convinced that I was too stupid to ever have written something of quality, based on the way I struggled. And it has nothing to do with my intelligence and everything to do with this missed neurodiversity. But because of that, that was enough for her to, like, reinforce these ideas of, like, my intelligence.”

Christopher's teacher assumed they were cheating. It is worth noting Christopher has a doctoral degree from a competitive psychology program. They asked that I not disclose the name of the program to protect their confidentiality. Regardless of the program, it is arguable to any objective viewer that they are not 'stupid.'

“Colonized Space Of Being”

Not only was Christopher forced to navigate the invalidating, racist, and ableist environment as a neurodiverse individual at school, but their neurodiversity also impacted their ability to understand their sexual orientation and gender identity. When describing their sexual development in retrospect, they were unable to differentiate how much of their experiences were due to their gender and sexual identities versus his neuro-atypical identity.

“It’s so intertwined at this point that it’s hard to detangle, but I remember for so long thinking, like, “Oh, this is what relationships are supposed to look like. This is what sexuality is supposed to look like.” And, like, every other kind of box that I had been, people are trying to force me in to...like a monogamy box. Into this box of, like, “oh, this is what romance is supposed to look like, right?” Because this is what heterosexual people do. This is even what other queer people do. And I don’t think it wasn’t until I really started diving in to my neurodiverse identity that I realized, this isn’t weird. This isn’t an inappropriate way of thinking. And there are other people that don’t fit the script. And the script doesn’t work for the big part of, like, the script that, you know, I was trying to make work for me was that, like, “oh, I have to meet every single one of your needs, and

you have to meet every single one of mine. Right? And that's what love is, right? That's what do you do when you get married, right?" And that wasn't the case. And, like, I think a part that might be part of my neurodiversity identity was that...certain people meet very specific needs that I have, and they fulfill them in a very robust, rich way. But I need so many people to be able to do that. And I think that's just something that I began to accept about myself as I kind of understood, like, this isn't, this isn't odd. This is just how it works. And it's not unreasonable. And there's other people who I met that were neurodiverse that experience things in a really similar way where the scripts don't make sense. So, I think that is a big part of how it didn't make it hard to come into, like, sexual identity. I was trying really hard to fit myself into established queer scripts, which was really quite, quite normative in and of itself."

Christopher's ability to process their sexual and gender identities was impacted by the examples they had from the heterosexual and queer communities. However, this was not helpful for them. They explained, to genuinely understand how they navigated their experiences throughout their life leading up to, and after their sexual assault, it was important to recognize their way of processing is likely not typical.

This was especially complicated for them growing up at home. Having to navigate their indigenous identity with their Iranian identity as well as their two-spirit and queer identities was challenging. They explained their mother is Indigenous Mexican and their father is Iranian. While their father was closely connected to his Iranian roots, their mother was less aware of how to communicate the impact of colonization on their family

history. Instead, Christopher shared, they were continuously forced in to stereotypical “boxes” that did not allow for them to explore their sexual and gender identities.

“I think growing up, right, it was from this really colonized space of being. So, that indigenous part of my identity wasn't something that I came to until grad school when people were telling me, like, you understand what that means, right? What being Mexican means, like, you being Mexican is your native. That's when I really started to deconstruct the way that colonization had even colonized that indigenous understanding of gender and sexuality. But growing up, it was very much from that colonized mind space, it was very much that, you know, that this was something to be hidden or to be shamed, right. And I grew up with a lot of that shame and fear, right, particularly, Dad was very homophobic, right...My mother, so, my uncle from my Mexican side of the family was queer, right, but he died in the early 90's from AIDS. So, a lot of my mom's approach was not that she didn't want me to be who I was but that she had a lot of fear of being rejected and really focused on placating my father, you know, throughout life. So that's what it was, it was really grounded in quite a bit of confusion and shame and fear that I would, like, if, if people found out who I was that I would lose everything. And I wasn't even sure if my family would accept me. Right. And so, I think that's, like, very much that colonized part was what was with me in my formative years.”

Christopher was worried they would *'lose everything.'* Including their family. They did not have the support they needed to process their intersecting identities. They continued to share,

"Growing up, I was not, like, you know, did not perform my gender in a way that I was supposed to. That I was assigned at birth, right. It always performing more female roles in pretend play, playing with traditionally, or colonially rather, um, female coded toys, right, and dress and roles, right. And that was shame. So, so young, shamed, shamed in me."

Christopher navigated a world of shame. Their intersectional identities resulted in them being shamed at school and at home. Not surprisingly, this had an adverse effect on their ability to enter safe, consensual relationships.

"It is so dangerous for me to just assume someone is queer, right? And then to, like, date with the confidence, like, a heterosexual person might, right. Where people talk about, "I met so and so at the store!" We laughed together. I would never presume to flirt with someone at the store!

We continued laughing, sharing our fear of flirting with someone who might not be safe.

"Like that's terrifying, not just from a, like a, social anxiety kind of place, but from, like, a safety place. What if I flirt with a guys who's profoundly homophobic and he wants to beat my ass?! No!"

Their tone was playful, their words were powerful. It is true. As they shared, I was reminded of my own experiences at mundane places, whether it was the store or

another common place, where I wanted to approach a woman but was unable to out of profound concern for my safety. However, I am White and straight passing. I have privileges that protect my safety that Christopher does not. They continued,

“So, what we have are like our spaces, right, which, in 2022 have really culminated in these digital spaces where we meet each other. Right? And the difficulty that I've experienced at least is that apps are so disconnected from the person, right? I find that when I meet people in person, right, I just have this receptiveness to who they are beyond, like, these socialized norms of what's beautiful, right? And then, and that, like, I experienced beauty of another person in so many different, in such a different way, when I'm able to, like, touch that person, like live, live and in the flesh, right? And, and absolutely. It boils down to like, the easiest heuristic that we can that we can come to and that's like, what do you look like? And what are we socialized to White beauty standards and to the extent you deviate from that, right? You're not beautiful? Right? And that's the kind of thing I'm trying to uncover in myself when I'm using apps and trying to be critical about why I think this person is beautiful. Why do I not think this person is beautiful? What's that about? And it doesn't necessarily get me anywhere. I don't know. But it's the thing that I try to do and recognize comes becomes a barrier for myself or other people for that, for the relational connection, but I'm saying is such an important part of an indigenous way of moving.”

Christopher commented on how colonized beauty standards are not only White beauty standards, but they are pervasive and the defaulted expectation for beauty. To them, Christopher was not only navigating these standards internally, finding their own authentic self-concept, but they were also navigating how they interact with others in virtual and physical spaces.

According to Christopher, dating apps provide opportunities for users to safely meet potential romantic or sexual partners. However, the need to use apps to meet others further presents inequities the LGBTQ+ population endures. They noted the significance of physically being with another person. The increased ability to learn who they are and how safe one would feel with them is not something that can generally be transmitted virtually. As a result, not only are White beauty standards reinforced as users tend to make rapid decisions based on profile pictures, but they also remove ability to genuinely consent to an interaction.

“I Was Not Feeling Safe”

Christopher shared they met their perpetrator on Tinder, a dating app with a reputation that users typically use it for “hookups” or “one-night stands.” They met in person before the night of the assault and had consensual sex several times prior. However, this did not last.

I went over to his place one day and I had smoked a little bit of weed in my car before I went up. And I had like made a plan for myself that like okay, like I'm gonna get high and like, I love having sex high. It's great! Good old fun! And...it usually would last like a couple of hours for me, and my

plan was like, “we're going to go (leave at the end of the night), but we'll have that amount of fun for that amount of time. Then when I come down, that's when I go home. And so, we were, like, getting into it. We were having a fun time. And then, like, I just kept getting higher and higher to the point where I was a little disoriented and, like, kind of dizzy. And I was just, like, “Oh, I just need I need to pause for a second.” So...I was like, “I just need to lay down,” like, we can like completely have sex after I was done, you know, getting my bearings back. But I needed, like, to just lay down for a second. And then he just tried to touch me, right, trying to grab my dick, kept trying to, like, put his genitals in my hand. Right? And I would be like, “no, like, I'm like, I can't right now, I can't even like see straight.” And then he just, like, kept trying to grab me, like, I would pull, I would grab his hand and, like, push it away. He kept just, like, “no, yes you do. Yes you do. You do want this” and I was like, “no, like, I can't.” And like to the point where I would, like, get up and walk to the other side of the room. And at this point I was freaking out a little bit because I was, like, “I'm high as shit. I cannot drive high, like, this guy's trying to rape me. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to leave? And so, I thought, like, okay, like, “let me just make it clear, like, get up and walk out of the room.” So, then he just, like, came up behind me and put his genitals, like, in my hand. And I was like, “I can't, like, in a minute. Like, I will tell you when I'm ready.” And so, he just kept doing that the whole time and leave me for, like, a second, but then try and pick it up again and

just wouldn't take no for an answer. To the point where you're like, "Okay, I guess I'm just gonna have to put the clothes back on for you to get the hint." So, I did, and just kind of, like, laid there for a second to hide to do anything. And then he tried putting his hands in my pants again when I completely put my clothes on, right. I was like, "no stop" and then he was just kind of like, "well, like, why are you here?" Right? And I'm like, "I thought we could have fun together. And then if I needed to pause, we could just, like, hang out and that that would be okay until I was ready to do it again" ...And at that point, I was just like, "you know what, fuck it." Like, I don't, I remember at a certain point I was kind of talking about leaving. He was like, "oh, no, you can't leave. You're too high. You can't leave." That freaked me out...I was not feeling safe. It was like, "if you try and stand between me and that door, it's gonna get ugly." And so at that point, I just like, I'd already put my clothes on. I buckled left and I ran to my car...And it (their high) calmed down enough that I made it back home. Thank God. And I think the only reason why that wasn't as traumatizing as it could have been was because I felt like if I had to fight this fucker, like, I would, you know? I felt like I, I was in fight or flight. And I was, like, I'm trying to take the flight route and leave but if you stand in my way, fucking beat you up. So, I was ready to fight.

Christopher was thankfully able to leave. They hypothesized this is likely why they are not as 'traumatized' by it as others might have been.

Why Did This Happen?

After the assault, Christopher could not help but reflect on the night in an attempt to figure out why this happened. Their training in psychology allowed them to consistently remind themselves that this happened because their perpetrator made a series of terrible choices. However, they needed more of an explanation. They shared that in times of great distress, they find comfort in intellectualizing the situation. Rather than to “lean in” to the emotion, they will think about it, apply psychological and sociological theories to it, and find how systemic power dynamics created the situation. In this case, Christopher landed on misogyny.

“First off, like, yeah, like, he just thought that he was entitled to my body in that moment, because I was there and my clothes were off...So I think for me, like, rather than just gaslighting myself into, like, “oh, I did something dumb” or, like, it was my fault, like, he was just trying to make me think it was my fault. It was like, bitch, no. No. And I think that was potentially a protective factor in that for me. At least in that moment was recognizing, like, no, what you did was assault. That is fucked up. That is fucked up. And that, like, whatever you thought was going to happen, or however you thought this was going to happen, doesn’t change that I was telling you “no.””

Christopher identified the fact that while there was an expectation for the night, they said “no” – a reminder they need to reiterate to themselves often.

“Nuanced Consent”

I asked Christopher if they thought of social and systemic factors that might prevent future assaults from occurring. Without needing to think about it, they said, “*consent, obviously.*” They continued,

“I think we don’t talk about it enough. And we don’t understand what it looks like, right? Particularly, you know, like, partying and substance use is so ubiquitous in the queer community, you know what I mean. Particularly, what it looks like, because, like, there was a point where I was, like, high enough to have fun and with the intent to have fun, right? And then it got to the point where I was just like, “Oh, I’m too high. I need to withdraw consent from it until, like, I get back to a place where I’m a little bit more stable.” So, like, I don’t know what that looks like.”

Christopher identified a way in which they enjoy sexual interactions, a way that is shared among the queer community, but noted the complexities drugs and alcohol have on giving and receiving consent. Furthermore, they shared that consent conversations need to include the roles same-sex partners play in sexual scenarios. For example, Christopher shared experiences in which he would share with potential partners that he prefers to be on top during sex as opposed to “bottoming,” which refers to the person who is penetrated. Despite their clear communication of their preferences, Christopher said people will still attempt to convince them to “bottom” without understanding they are being coercive.

“Posttraumatic Growth”

I asked Christopher if they felt as though they were able to heal from their sexual assault or if they were able to grow from the experience in any way. They shared that as a result of their assault, they are more able to listen to their “red flags.”

“I don’t know if posttraumatic growth is the word. Maybe it is. But I do feel, like, I mean, a sense of empowerment. Like, I know what I want. You know what I mean? It’s easier for me to, like, spot the shitty things about people, so this is kind of what it did. I was noticing the other day, like, things that I just took for granted as, like, ok, that’s like sexy things that people say to me, which were actually, like, really shitty things people said to me on apps. But, like, I don’t really like to bottom. Why? Because I’ve tried it and it’s not fun and I don’t get pleasure from it...And [people on the apps] are like, “oh you just haven’t had, like, me do it to you, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And I’m just like, “that’s not the sexy thing you think it is, right? You’re telling me you, that you think you know my body better than me? No, you don’t. You don’t have the magic dick that’s gonna make it feel good”...So I think that, that I kind of just recognized how much I would let men do that and it’s not sexy. And now I feel like I shut it down a lot more...So, maybe in that sense, that’s protective. It’s allowed me to be like, “if you can’t listen to me tell you what feels good right now, then how am I going to trust you to do that when we meet up?” Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

In a sense, Christopher was more empowered to advocate for themselves. To trust what they know to be true about what they need and want from sex.

Nadia's Story

Nadia and I met in the afternoon on March 17, 2022. She was nervous. Not only did she disclose as much, but she asked several questions about my confidentiality procedures to ensure no one would know her identities. She noted that even though it has been several years since her sexual assault, the notion of anyone who knows her finding out about her experiences is too overwhelming to tolerate.

However, Nadia shared her thoughts that this area of research is exceptionally important. As a queer, Indian, cisgender, woman, she noted that despite her concerns regarding confidentiality, her experiences feeling as though she did not quite fit in to any given environment due to her identities motivated her to agree to be interviewed.

“I think the reason that I like, wanted to do this interview is because I think that a lot of that was, like, overlapping and contributing to the situation (her sexual assault).

“I Needed Support”

“Yeah. So, I would say the intersections of being queer and Indian, like at the time I was 18. So, like, it was my first year in college.” She rolled her eyes. “Shocker. And I was not out as bisexual with really many people at all. I think I had told like my dormmate at the time. I'd grown up with her and she's like, super accepting. But like, I didn't mean for her to find out I think a lot of that was like, what? Those few months that year was like, not

wanting to be out. I'm going to have to tell people but because it was so hard and I needed support, like, sometimes people will find out. So, like, my two closest friends knew. And I think that caused a lot of, like, hypersexuality." Her eyes widened, "Like a lot." And I think that was what contributed to me, like, changing my boundaries. Or, I don't want to say, like, putting myself in bad situations, because that's obviously really shitty, but yeah, like, I think I just wanted to kind of like escape. And that's why I was with men so often like that I probably didn't even like, but yeah, and I think the Indian component is like, my mom is definitely not like a safe person to talk to about my sexuality. She wasn't and still has a really hard time with it. So, like, when I was living in her house, I mean, there's other components like I have, like, a divorced family and, like, a lot of chaotic, like, I mean, a lot of my family's in India...So, I didn't have a lot of family support. But the one person I did have was very, like, this disciplinary authoritarian, like has very high expectations. And, like, didn't even, couldn't even swallow the fact that I was dating boys at the time. So yeah, yeah. Did not have conversations about like sex, sexuality. I mean, I literally kissed a boy once and she bawled. Like, she was crying, and she was like, really worried for me."

I stopped her for a moment, not just to collect my own thoughts, but to allow her a moment to breathe after disclosing so much in a short period of time. We were about 4 minutes in to the interview, and I already felt as though there was so much she wanted to share. So many nuances to her experiences that deserve acknowledgement and respect.

“Shocker.”

“...it was my first year in college. Shocker.” One word with substantial weight. Nadia, trusting my background knowledge in sexual violence. Prior to the interview, she shared she was also interested in learning more about sexual violence and has also written several research papers about perpetration. Therefore, when she said, ‘shocker,’ I knew she was referring to the fact that women in their first years of college are the most at risk to be sexually assaulted (Carey et al., 2018). In fact, it is especially likely a woman will be sexually assaulted within her first semester of her first year (Carey et al., 2018).

In a moment, she was not describing herself as a person with an important story. Rather, she was a statistic. She was someone, like many of us, who endure the horrifying experience of sexual assault only to later learn that colleges and universities are well-aware of this issue and were still unable to do prevent what they knew would happen.

“I Was Not Who Men Wanted”

Having been raised in a predominantly White suburban town in Oregon, Nadia reflected on navigating several explicit and implied messages throughout her childhood that made it difficult for her to process all of her identities.

“I’m a femme, and growing up, I like, really fit a lot of, like, cisgender norms or expectations. And in high school, I think the expectation, I mean, even before that, in middle school, there was this expectation to start dating and things like that. But I didn’t especially, based on my Indian culture, I think, but then, and not even just based on that. So, I should say, in two ways, I think the first is that I didn’t know how to date. I didn’t feel

comfortable around men. Because of, like, this, like more strict upbringing or like, being afraid of men is really normal. And also, just my mom like being super overprotective about like sexual things. So, that's one, but two, I grew up in a town that was like predominantly White, like, not super diverse. And I also, like, because of my class, because of the privilege of my class, went to a school that was like, predominantly White and higher, middle class. Like, people who there was just not a lot of racial diversity at our school compared to others. So yeah, so that means that I was not, like, who men wanted. Like, that's really sad. But, like, it's very true. And I can tell that with a lot of men because like, I would see myself as probably, you know, like, a somewhat attractive person. I think that like, it's kind of tough for me to see these jock men kind of wanting to break the barriers with me but also not doing it because, like, not understanding my culture and not feeling comfortable being with the Indian girl. And three, because I was like, so uncomfortable. Just like having people flirt with me or having people try to be with me. I don't know if that's because of like, my sexuality or if it's because of mostly just how I perceived men, but I really don't know what I think that's hard."

Nadia was confronted of reasons why she was different from her peers throughout her childhood. She shared that as a femme – an effeminate cisgender woman in the LGBTQ+ community – she fit many expected norms (Gunn et al., 2021). However, she did not fit in to White beauty standards, severely impacting the way her peers would treat her.

These social interactions at school complicated Nadia's understanding of how to create safe foundations to romantic and sexual relationships. When she would attempt to date or to meet people, she was often met with microaggressions and insults. Assuming it was because of where in Oregon she was located, she said,

“I got a lot of comments, a lot of anger and comments. And it's like, it's really sad because I know that they were flirting, but it's like really shitty things. I don't, I can't say them. I really hate saying these things (that men said to her). I hate think them, I mean, just like, the feelings that it brings up in me. It's not like sadness or bitterness. It's like I'm disgusted like, genuinely with like, all of these experiences. But, the microaggression that comes to mind, and I have a lot, but I'm only going to say one because I don't think I can, like, say more. It was like, “You're the prettiest Indian girl that I've ever met” and like, it's a guy who was sexually intimate with me as well. And it's like, that's how much I felt like I had to look past certain things and take this, like, lowest standards in order for my status, or even think well of myself, because it was like another high-status guy. So, I was like, “okay, at least he thinks I'm pretty.””

‘You're the prettiest Indian girl I've ever met.’ I shook my head. In that moment, I was unsure of how much of the disgust I was feeling was coming from Nadia or myself. “It is disgusting,” I said, agreeing with her, knowing that my White privilege has protected me from such degrading statements.

For Nadia to learn that she would have to settle for such degradation did not occur over night. Rather, it was engrained in the way in which people would interact with her

throughout her life. Nadia began the interview sharing that not having intentional spaces for to process her queer and Indian identities has influenced the traumas she has endured, and in one microaggressive comment, that all made sense.

Except, this was not one experience. This was the experience she felt the most comfortable sharing. I could tell Nadia was having a visceral reaction when thinking about the messages she received over the years. Almost as if she were reading them in a catalog in front of me. Her body got tense, her eyes widened, and her hand gestures became more animated. She started to talk faster as if she could speed through the time it would take her to relive the experience.

“The Situation”

Even though Nadia disclosed her sexual assault occurred when she was in college, it was heavily influenced by her high school experiences. She said,

“I knew him from high school. And he was a year older than me...The really the sad part is that like a big reason I spent time with him was because, like, of making this girl jealous...So I had kind of a relationship (with a woman) when I was 17. And that went on for a few years. But when I was 18, it was really hard because she was like, I don't, I can't be alone with you. I can't do this. I'm gonna date a guy because, I like, to just not do this. And everything was so coded. And she knew him and he's really smart. He really, like, you know, people respected him. And I think that it made her mad that I was spending time with him. And that was like a big reason I was there (the night of the assault). It's not, it's not good.”

But yeah, coercion. I would say I obviously, I don't know. It's like there were, there were issues and poor reasoning and/or judgment and like, isolation, lack of like, being able to think through things with people, like not even having role models for like, what I should do in this situation. Like, I think I know. I know for one thing, that it's really common for people to, like, have closeted relationships basically in high school that then just like get really complicated. So, yeah, I think there was a lot there with him actually. He had already had sex and he had already been with, I don't know, girlfriends for a really long time. And that was my first time and it was like I like was very, very, like, explicit saying that I didn't want to have sex. And then, like, I feel like in the moment, it was coercion. I think, like, the entire thing. I mean, he knew he had power over me. He knew that he didn't have to say anything to coerce me. Basically, it wasn't verbal. It was like all like, bringing me to his room, saying like, hey, like I'd like you to come over and like, kind of building that trust. And then, like, his house was like far enough away that like I really had to stay the night if I was gonna be there. And then all the rest was, like, physical coercion. I would say, like, in the moment, it's hard to, like, make decisions or even recognize the difference between not having sex and having sex when, like, clothes are off and like you're in the moment.”

Nadia paused for about 5 seconds and immediately started to cry. She put her hands over her face to block my view of her tears. I asked, “what are you feeling right now.” To which she said,

“I think I like no didn't want to like make it unsexy when it happened to and I was like, very scared, very, like very much so like freezing.”

Her tears were thick and full. She tried to talk but could not get the words out.

“I want to pause here to make sure you’re ok,” I said.

“I’m okay.”

“Do you want to keep talking about this?”

“Yes, I’m okay.”

“Take your time. It’s a hard thing to talk about.”

“I think like, two seconds pass, if I’m like, that’s what’s so, like, stupid I think. Because, 5 seconds pass, I like, like really don’t typically, like, call it sexual assault, or like, I didn’t for a really long time. So, yeah, I don’t really talk about it that much. And, I’m like, not even sad. I think it’s just like, like embarrassing, like, I just don’t like him very much.

“What about it feels embarrassing?” I asked.

“I think there is a lot of shame for me. A lot of it is, she pauses for almost 10 seconds, uniquely because, because of, like, the like, queer experience. I think there was already so much like shame and stress around that and then too, to be dealing with that. Like, I remember the next day, like, still feeling in shock. And, like, really, like, I didn't want to talk to him. I, like, just needed to get back to my dorm. And when I did, I like, just feel like I was super, super depressed. And, like, confused. But, like, I remember the

girl called me and she was really mad and, like, I remember I didn't tell her anything, but she was, like, really mad...It was just, like, so many layers of just, like, getting treated like shit. Like, in just days. And I think, I think the shame is that it's like, from where I am now. And even from where I was then, like, I just think it's a really pathetic situation. And like, I just, I just feel a lot for people who are in that situation now, like where it's just like early sexual experiences and having your reputation so tangled up in it. For me, I felt like my reputation was boosted if I was with like a higher status person, or if I was having sex, like, at the time as the friend group I was in...But, like, the fact that she was with another guy, like, I felt like I had to be seen as, like, desirable. And I just think that's really, but yeah, pathetic of me. And so many of us I mean, there's nothing we can do about it. I just think it's, like, I just didn't have any power in that situation. And he was a White man, of course, like a classically, like, White man, kind of in the law area. We were both kind of in the law area. And, like, I know that, like, one of our coaches, or, like, teachers at the time, like, really liked him. He was definitely someone that, like, authority really liked and so I thought, of course (she said sarcastically). I thought that even though I didn't like him as a person, and I knew that he was kind of like an asshole, that people thought assholes were great and confident and cool. Yeah, I was like, "Well, this is what society wants." So, yeah.

I thanked her for sharing. By now, she had stopped crying and her demeanor returned to how it had been in the beginning of the interview. Nadia had been

exceptionally vulnerable with me and I could not have been more grateful she shared – especially when she disclosed freezing and being in shock. At this moment, I wanted nothing more than to remove the virtual barrier between us so that she could feel supported in a shared physical space. I felt so limited in my ability to provide comfort to her through the screen, knowing she could only see me from the chest up.

“Pathetic.”

“I definitely, like, yeah, hate using the word pathetic. I just think it's like very, very much so why I don't, like, I, like, blocked him on everything. But it's just like, I just feel like I don't, I don't like to be like a very desperate person or a very needy person or whatever. And I think he made, like, I think, like, that was the position I was in... I tried to make it my choice after that. Like, I tried, like, I think two years later, to, like, choose to have sex with him. And you know, he's a really shitty person. And he, like, did not see me as someone, I don't know, I don't really think he respected me. So, I think that even though it was consensual, it's like there's just this constant, like, shitty feeling attached to it.”

Nadia felt as though the reason why she was in the situation in the first place was ‘pathetic.’ That her desire to be wanted and sexually validated was pathetic. To this day, she has not been able to release herself of that feeling. Of feeling ‘pathetic.’ Despite her own research, her own disclosure that she “feels” for people in similar situations, she looks back on this time in her life with judgement and contempt for herself.

“Do More And Try Harder”

Nadia noted feeling depressed, embarrassed, and ashamed. She shared how ‘*pathetic*’ the situation continues to seem to her and how much she attempted to take her control back by having consensual sex with her perpetrator years later. However, this was only the beginning of her on-going mental health journey following the assault.

“I think a huge part of the trauma is I was in love with this girl who was treating me like shit and it was a lot of like, gaslighting a lot of like, like super emotionally abusive. Like, all this stuff was going on behind the scenes.”

Nadia was referring to the woman she attempted to make jealous, the woman who broke up with her by sharing that she did not want to be seen in public with her anymore. As a result of her complicated trauma, Nadia looked to gain more knowledge to make sense of what was happening.

“I always felt like I just had to do more research. I just had to like, do more and try harder. I had to be more well. I don't think I told you this part, but like, I was going to therapy at the time that the sexual assault happened and like, Oh, my fucking god, I literally could not catch a break. Because guess what? So, I, like, went to therapy. I was like, “I'm going to be a good person.” ...And I tried. I asked for a woman. I did not get a woman. And it's like, they really tried. They were, like, so he specifically had this conversation with me and was like, “It's okay, like, you can tell me right now that, like, you don't want to work with me. And, like, I will

get you set up with someone else.” And...I was like, surely, you know, it's, surely it's me that needs to try harder. If I'm uncomfortable with men, then maybe this is like my chance. This is, like, the time where I need to overcome it, like, I need to meet everyone else where they're at. So, I didn't tell him about my sexuality or, like, what was going on with that girl which is, like, a huge, I think we both know, like, that's a huge part of life. I was there for my family issues. But then I, I told him about the sexual assault. Because it happened during our time together. And like, I like this therapist. I think he's a good person. But, like, he was, like, immediately going into just like giving me all these, like, services, and, like, you know, sexual assault related services. And I swear to you, like, I did not even consider it sexual assault at all, like, I just told him like generally when it happened and that I felt shitty about it. I don't know, I just think that that's why that's really important to me now is, like, not defining something for someone else because that was probably more, that was really traumatizing for me for sure.”

Years later, she gave mental health counseling another chance.

“I don't know. She kind of did the same thing. And I just think, again, like, therapy's really ruined for me, because of, like, that experience and because of my experience discussing, like, my sexuality that, like, literally those are the reasons. Because I'm, like, even recently, like, I've tried. Because I believe in therapy, I went to therapy again, and it's, like, didn't ask me anything about like my sexual experiences, maybe, like, why I

might be dealing with things today that I'm dealing with. Even if I brought up, like, certain things because I'm currently with a woman. And like, it's very serious and that's very, like, that was scary for me, like, at one point in this relationship. Like, healthy relationships are really hard when you've been, like, you know, boundaries have been crossed...So, I think, like, therapists also don't understand sexuality. Like it's just like, I feel like she really didn't understand dynamics within like a queer relationship. And even when I tried to express, like, I, it was my therapy. I don't need to, like, make everything, like, politically correct. You know, and I don't think I wasn't, like, I just think I needed to be honest about the, the roles that we take in sex and like, how I feel about those things, and where I want to be in them, and like, understanding there's gender stereotypes, understanding after like sexual assault, all of that is like totally was not taken into consideration. I feel like she kind of erased my sexuality in that she was kind of like, "well, I feel like that can happen in like any relationship like yours." Yeah, I'm like, "I don't think you understand." Like, and I'm not even, I don't even know exactly what I was talking about. But it was just weird. I don't think that I can, like, I think that's the layered intersectional experience of being like a queer woman of color, who, like, wants to talk about ways that, like, people have, like, abused their power over me, like, whether sexually or otherwise. I think like people really can't understand. And that's so sad to me.

'She erased my sexuality.' Nadia sought comfort, support, and help, to be met with yet another person who did not acknowledge all of her identities. This is especially disappointing given the fact that she went to therapy to process her sexual experiences and traumas.

For Nadia, this ignorance was detrimental. She sought help and was retraumatized. This is why it is important for mental health professionals to increase their understanding of intersectional identities. To process how these identities play out in session and to validate the complex experiences unique to the person.

Qu's Story

My interview with Qu occurred on Friday, March 18, 2022. We began by sharing how relieved we were that it was the end of the week. As a doctoral candidate in a clinical psychology program in Boston, Massachusetts, Qu shared her exhaustion working full-time in a university counseling center while still needing to complete the requirements for her dissertation.

"That's why I agreed to do this interview," Qu said. "This is such an important topic and I understand how difficult it is to find people to interview. But I really want you to get as much information as possible because your topic is so needed."

This was so indicative of Qu. Despite knowing she was about to have a conversation with me about an exceptionally difficult topic, she was smiling and upbeat. She even appeared excited to meet. Throughout the interview she complimented me on

my dedication to sexual violence prevention and awareness and kept noting how important it is to talk about more survivors than straight, White, cisgender women.

She was so exceptionally kind, I was not entirely sure how to receive her praise. I thanked her for agreeing to share her story. She noted how woefully ignorant mental health professionals are to meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ people of color, especially after they have survived sexual violence. But I firmly believed then, and I continue to believe now, that the true praise belongs to my narrators – to Qu who agreed to share their stories. To the people who trusted me with intimate details of their lives despite concerns their identities may be become known. They are the reason why any mental health professional could learn from this text.

I shared these thoughts with Qu. She smiled and swiped her hand in the air as if to deflect the words I had just said. *“Let’s agree it’s both of us!”* she said. And with that, she nodded, indicating she was ready for the first question.

Qu shared that it is generally difficult for her to have deeper, more emotionally challenging conversations. She noted that it takes time for her to get comfortable with the notion. Before I could ask her my first question, she raised her hand in a “wait, please stop” gesture and suddenly looked serious.

“You won’t actually ask me direct questions about my assault, right?”

“No,” I reassured her. “You are welcome to share anything you would like, to share with me, but I will not ask you to disclose anything specific about the assault.” In an effort to better explain what she could expect from our conversation, I shared, “there have been some folks who have decided to share intimate details about their assault

experiences, but that is not in response to any of my specific questions. You can tell me as much or as little about it as you would like.”

“Okay, good,” she said. “Then, in that case, I would prefer not to talk about it, if that’s okay. I just don’t know, if, if I could find the words for it. I’ve never talked about it with anyone before. I think it would just be best if I didn’t. That’s ok, right?”

“Absolutely!” I said. I explained that my hope would be to learn about her experiences with her intersecting identities and how these experiences may inform her thoughts regarding what needs to be different, both socially and within the mental health community. She returned to her smiling, upbeat demeanor and agreed to continue.

“I Am In Different Worlds”

Qu shared she is a 26-year-old, Vietnamese-American, queer or bisexual, cisgender woman. Having been born in Vietnam and moved to Massachusetts when she was 12 years old, she shared that she often felt as though her intersecting identities prevented her from being able to “fit in” completely within a given group of people. She explained that in any given day, different parts of herself feel more salient depending on who she is around at a particular time.

“I think, in one hand, is a view, I’m actually really proud of my cultural identity. I think that, I think it’s, like, depending on what space, then I tend to think that the saliency of things, depending on what space, like, and I feel like, it’s so interesting, is like when, like, within my family, or surrounded by only people within my culture, and I just notice myself, like,

trying to ignore the fact that I'm not straight. It's very interesting. But then, when I'm, like, only with White folks, that, like, I can talk about being queer, like, I try to, like, even unconsciously, you know, push away that, like, racial minority."

Qu continued to share she has an easier time disclosing her queer identity to her White friends than she does with her Asian friends due to cultural messages and a lack of education around LGBTQ+ identities. She specified that her parents do not understand what bisexual means and they would certainly not understand what it means to be queer. And in her straight-passing relationship with a straight Asian man, he would express his confusion about why Qu would "still" identify as queer when they were in a hetero relationship, as if the passing identity make her personal identities disappear.

"My partner didn't really understand why, understood that it (sexual orientation) is not based off of your relationship, basically. And then, of course, like, I didn't have hetero privilege, so, like, I want to make sure they were aware of that privilege. But also, I want to bring my partner to, like, Pride stuff, but I feel like I can't do that. Like, "why am I here given my het relationship?" Like I missed that. Like, invisibility of it, thinking, "you're not one of us." Like, I knew that I could be at Pride because I was in a gay relationship before I got in to this het relationship, but that's invisible. Like, I know that there's this stigma, right? Like, you not really know what it's like to be one of us."

Qu wanted to share her queer identity with her partner, but he did not embrace it. This was further complicated when she would enter the real world, and navigate a hidden

identity from others. She talked about having to grapple with the fact that her relationship made her appear straight, and thus gave her privilege. However, it also made her feel as though she was not welcomed within the LGBTQ+ community.

When I asked her if she thought White queer or bisexual people would have an easier time feeling as though they belonged at Pride, it appeared as though a light bulb went off in her head. “*Yes!*” She said, enthusiastically.

“It really does seem like White bi people have an easier time fitting in to the queer community, even when they pass as straight or are in a heterosexual relationship.”

Following this revelation, she continued to talk about how she only recently came out to her Asian friends because she was not sure how they would “*take it.*” She reported an ease with talking about her identities with her White friends because there was a trust and expectation that they would understand and be “*okay*” with it. She noted this is also because many of her close White friends are people she met in her psychology graduate program while her Asian friends were more from her undergraduate experiences. The shared educational aspect of her relationships with her White friends is a substantial protective factor that allowed her to disclose. But, in general, Qu noted it is much more difficult to predict how Asian people will react to queerness or members of the LGBTQ+ population because of a lack of cultural conversations about it.

Qu reflected on constantly feeling as though she is a member of “*different worlds*” with no single world entirely overlapping, including with her Asian or queer friends.

“I would say like 90% of my friends from undergrad are Asian Americans from Vietnam, or Korea, or Japan. But they were all born here. So I would say that I’m kind of, like, half. In the middle. Like, one, I’m not first gen completely [because of my relatives who moved to the Boston area years before I was born], and I’m not second gen completely. I relate more to Vietnamese Americans, but for them to have been born in the U.S. and not spent half of their life in Vietnam, is different. But this is where I more, I relate more, I think, like, culturally.”

Qu paused for a moment and smiled. *“Thank you for asking!”* she said.

“I don’t get to think about that very often. I feel like I am in different worlds, like, I can’t show all of me at one time because, like, there aren’t people who will understand completely.”

I took a second to comprehend what she had just shared. *‘Different worlds.’*

Constantly navigating which parts of her were understood in any given space and which parts she needed to hide.

“A Gray Middle Space”

Without talking about her specific sexual violence experiences, Qu reflected on how racism likely increased the chances that she would experience sexual assault. How the way in which White people talk about Asian people is not only isolating and devastating to the Asian community, it also results in a loss of culture, community, and self.

“It’s like a positive stereotype, but it’s actually really damaging because it’s like a strategy, like separating Asians apart from other minority communities. Like, using the Asian community as like, “oh, look, these people make it.” But that’s not really the case because if you’re looking at like the ethnic groups, there’s, like, income gaps, right. And then, so then, this also shields this community from, like, receiving help and resources. She sarcastically added, “Oh, great, so educated and nice.” And things like that. And, like, for Asian women, you know, it further worsens, like, the sexualization and this stereotype of like, submissive.

Qu disclosed how hurtful it is to not actually have a place within White communities and to also grapple with a completely different kind of discrimination than Black and Brown people experience. *‘These people make it,’* she said, noting the attitude White people have towards Asian individuals. She later explained she brought that up because it also maintains a complacency regarding racial change and a resistance to anti-racist work. On one hand, Asian individuals are separated from other people of color stereotypes, but they are then used as examples for why anti-racist work is unnecessary because they *‘make it.’*

Qu shook her head. It was only days after the one-year anniversary of the spa shooting in Atlanta, Georgia – a shooting that killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women.

“Asian women are, like, very much sexualizing exotic, like, with, like, media. Like, Asian women are hypersexualized and, like, fetishized by especially White men. And I’m just like, very certain that there’s not really

enough, like, awareness. I think, like, gender-wise, I'm Asian and, like, that comes with it this whole other layer. Like, the Atlanta shooting was devastating. Like, it's heartbreaking. I also haven't seen much about the murders of Asian women in New York. They, there was, like, a bunch for like 24 hours. It is, like, a comment [on the news]. But even, like, looking for more perspectives, the hate crime against Asian women, Asian American communities overall, it's just been skyrocketing like crazy. So, it's, like, a gray middle space. You're not like other minority communities, but, like, you're not considered fully for us to take a majority. Like, you're not one of us no matter where you go."

Qu noted how White rhetoric suggests Asian people have '*made it*' because of racist stereotypes. However, when terrible hate crimes occur, people are either hesitant to admit it was a hate crime or they do not report it at all. Even at a time where violence against Asian people has increased substantially (Gover et al., 2020).

Qu paused for a moment. While her sexual assault did not occur during the pandemic, the increased violence against Asian people remains a constant reminder of how unsafe it truly is to be a queer, Asian, woman.

"Step Back"

"Incorporate context to teach you about consent, you know, like, intersectionally. Like, race, gender, sexuality, like, all that comes in to the issue because I feel like that could look really different. For consent...I

feel like most of the conversation is about stereotypes. But it's not like, asking, how did [identities] play a role?"

How do identities play a role in consent? Qu was right, this is rarely, if at all, a part of the conversation. Consent is often referred to as something that is important but not practiced in real-life scenarios. Education efforts do not do well enough to incorporate real-world, contextual information (e.g. identity-based power dynamics and cultural gender roles) that would impact one's ability to freely offer their consent.

"I feel like consent mostly talks about hetero couples, White hetero couples. Which is that White men assault White women, And it really looks like all different things. I think we need to, like, step back because I think sexual assault happens regardless of like, still, like you have a lot of people that are not being included. So, we need to do a better job at that...And take a step further to think about who is teaching people. Like, people teach about what they know. So, we need diverse teachers to teach consent so more perspectives can, like, be included."

Qu shared that in her experience, sex educators were White, heterosexual people. As a result, they could not inherently offer a different angle because their lived experiences cannot authentically shed light on different ways people need to ask for and offer consent. According to Qu, this calls for race and ethnicity to be a part of the consent conversations. There need to be conversations about how Asian women are hypersexualized and fetishized and how that would influence the way a sexual partner would need to approach consent. There needs to be intentional conversations about queer Asian people and queer Asian women, particularly, so there is representation in the way

that people can communicate their desires and needs. What it means to be White and straight consenting to sex means something different than what it means to be queer and Asian. There are cultural values, inherent messages, ways and openness of being able to talk about sex and to practice talking about sex with their partners that did not exist for Qu.

“There Was Anger”

Qu emphasized the significance of having a supportive group of friends had on her mental health. Although she did not disclose her experiences with anyone, she noted that having safe people around aided in her ability to “*move on.*”

“I mean, there was anger. And I’m not typically an angry person. But that’s not really serving me. I was an undergrad. I was bust and I had no time, right? And emotionally, yeah, I guess, like, went through a period of anger, and I guess it just went away. But it of course shaped my perspective, like, it informed the narrative we need to be teaching.”

Qu explained that while she had anger, channeling it in to her work with clients and goals for preventing future assaults is how she was able to cope with it. Through this approach, she has been able to view her assault as a part of her story, but not the title of her book.

Consistencies Across Stories

Even though each narrator had their own unique experiences and reasons to participate in the study, there were several shared experiences throughout their stories that are important to illuminate.

A Lack of Support

Whether it was from cultural messages, victim blaming from peers, or a lack of people to turn to before and after their assaults, each narrator shared they did not feel supported in some capacity. Aaron noted that not only was he the only person of color in his family and the only adopted child, he was also especially lonely upon moving to Madison. Due to his loneliness and lack of knowledge of queer-friendly spaces in a new city, he went on Grindr to meet people. This, as he shared, is what ultimately led to his assault.

Influenced by Aaron's story, my interview with Emma was undoubtedly shaped by the knowledge I now possessed. Even still, Emma shared growing up in a predominantly White neighborhood made it difficult for her to genuinely connect with her peers. She further noted as a result of her parents being Chinese immigrants, they would likely not understand what it would mean to be non-monogamous and queer. Furthermore, after her assault, she experienced victim blaming from her friends and peers, adding to her well-developed perception that she is not supported.

As I transitioned from Emma's story to prepare myself to learn about Nina's experiences, I was especially aware of a potentially emerging pattern when it comes to social supports. However, given Nina's Native identity, her experiences of support was uniquely different from Aaron and Emma.

Nina shared that two-spirit individuals were traditionally welcomed and celebrated among Native people. She noted how much colonial and Christian values have erased Native traditions, including the spiritual significance of gender and sexual identities. As a result, Nina shared that while she felt a bit more accepted on her reservation, the farther away she got from home, the less safe she felt – especially in Oklahoma. At home, Nina is among other Native people who still have traces of their traditional cultural practices. But once she leaves the reservation, she is faced with homophobic and racist rhetoric on a daily basis.

As a result, Nina shared she did not feel comfortable coming out to her coworkers. This led to a coworker setting her up on a date with someone who ultimately sexually assaulted her. After the assault, Nina was told by others that she should have anticipated a man behaving in such a manner. That men are sexually aggressive and she should have been prepared for it. As Nina did not feel supported by her family or peers, she had to navigate a new understanding of gender roles and sexual expectations that her sexuality prevented her from learning. She was thus left to process her identities and experiences on her own.

After now having three separate people describe the complexities of feeling generally unsupported with their intersecting identities, I admittedly started to assume this would be the case for my subsequent narrators. However, while this bias may have influenced the meaning I ultimately derived from my narrators' stories, it does not change the fact that each person was not supported.

Even still, the fact that my interview with Christopher followed my interview with Nina, I may have been primed to listen for specific commonalities among their stories

due to their shared Native identities and difficulty navigating the lasting effects of colonialism. Although Christopher's neurodiversity was a fundamentally different experience from the other narrators, they shared the effects of racism on their ability to get their needs met. As a result, they were not diagnosed with their neurodiverse condition until after graduate school. Instead, their teachers and peers perceived them as "*stupid*," failing to consider additional resources they may have needed to be successful.

Furthermore, Christopher noted how challenging it has been to find spaces in which others understand their two-spirit identity and their mixed-race background. While they were able to find supportive spaces after their assault, they were not able to understand their identities until leaving home – a direct result of a lack of support throughout their childhood.

When I sat down with Nadia, one of the first things she shared was her continuous sense of loneliness. Whether it was because she was an only child to a single mom or because her White peers made it exceedingly difficult for her to fit in, Nadia shared that she did not have support or space to process her identities at home or at school. Specifically, she emphasized the impact of her Indian heritage on her ability to talk to her mother about her sexuality. Furthermore, her White friends, while they may have had a greater understanding for queer identities, could not inherently understand how it felt to be an Indian woman with intersecting identities.

Furthermore, after her assault, Nadia was met with a plethora of victim blaming sentiments and gaslighting from her assailant and peers. When she sought therapy, she had to sit through several microaggressions as well as retraumatizing interventions before she was able to find someone who could support her.

Similarly, Qu shared how challenging it has been, especially amongst the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes, navigating the world as a queer Asian woman. Qu noted that her family in Vietnam does not understand what it means to be queer while her peers do not understand what it means to be Vietnamese. Even her Asian friends do not share her confusion regarding her first-generation identity as they were all born in the U.S. Furthermore, Qu noted she is largely only able to talk about her queer identity with her friends from graduate school.

For all narrators, it would not be until they left home for work or school were they able to genuinely explore their sexuality. Even though Nadia shared that she began to date women in high school, she also shared that she, like the others, were not surrounded by supportive peers until later in life.

As a result of this lack of support, all of the narrators shared they have not told their families about their sexual assaults. Furthermore, it took time for Aaron, Emma, Nina, Nadia, and Qu to disclose anything about their assault experiences to anyone. This is substantial. No one has been able to tell their families about one of the worst experiences in their lives. They each mentioned a degree of embarrassment, shame, or concern about upsetting their families as barriers to disclosing their experiences.

Furthermore, the narrators all noted the importance of their cultural backgrounds in their ability to come out to their families. While A noted that his progressive parents allowed him to come out as trans to his family with little concern and Nina shared that her Native identity allowed her to lean in to her traditional ways more easily on the reservation, cultural influences were not so positive for the others.

While Christopher shared their Native roots and identity as a two-spirit individual, they noted that their father is an Iranian immigrant. As a result, he was raised with homophobic messages that ultimately prevented Christopher from coming out to their father. Even still, they noted that his father essentially knows they exclusively dates men, they do not talk about it nor their two-spirit identity. Additionally, Emma, Nadia, and Qu all shared how their Asian heritage, although different in ethnicity, has made it substantially more difficult to come out to their parents. In each case, their parents do not understand the fluidity of sexuality – a limitation that has prevented Emma and Qu from coming out to their parents entirely.

White Beauty Standards and Fetishization

Another notable commonality among the narrators was the fact that Emma, Nadia, and Qu all talked about their difficulty navigating White beauty standards. Despite the fact that they are each from different ethnic backgrounds, they are all cisgender, Asian, queer women. Each of them have had relationships with men and women, and each of them noted how challenging it was, and continues to be, believing they are attractive.

Emma, Nadia, and Qu all attended high school in predominantly White schools and neighborhoods. As a result, they were acutely aware of how much more beautiful their White peers were considered to be. Instead, each noted how they experienced discrimination and fetishization in some capacity. While Emma and Qu both noted how Eastern Asian people are hypersexualized and objectified, Nadia noted how she was classified as attractive ‘for an Indian woman.’

Emma and Qu both emphasized how the hypersexualization and objectification of Eastern Asian women increases the likelihood they will be treated like objects and ultimately sexually assaulted. Furthermore, Nadia shared her experiences being objectified on dating apps that resulted in a sense of being fetishized.

This is significant. Three individual women who survived sexual violence all called on the historical and ongoing hypersexualization and fetishization of Asian women as contributing social factors to their sexual assaults.

Commonalities Among the Assaults

While Aaron, Christopher, and Nadia were the only narrators who went in depth about their sexual assaults, there are notable similarities worth identifying. The first is, Aaron and Christopher both met their perpetrators on a dating app. As a result, they emphasized the need for dating apps to find safe people, but that it is not enough for obvious reasons. Each of them noted in their own ways that if they knew of places to go where their intersectional identities would be welcomed and celebrated, they would not have needed to use the apps. Additionally, Nadia noted experiencing distinct objectification and degrading messages from men on dating apps. It is therefore arguable that the use of dating apps to find safe spaces and people is flawed.

However, finding safe spaces in the real world is especially challenging as well. Emma, Nadia, and Qu all noted their assaults occurred while they were undergraduate students in college. While there were only 4 cisgender female narrators, there is something to be said about the fact that 3 of them experienced their assaults during what is statistically the most vulnerable time for college-aged women (RAINN, 2022).

Mental Health After the Assault

Even though Christopher noted he was not significantly impacted by his sexual assault experiences, Aaron, Emma, Nina, Nadia, and Qu admitted they were. Specifically, they noted how confused, embarrassed, and ashamed of themselves they felt. In each case, they disclosed blaming themselves in some capacity for the event, even when they logically understand that sexual assault is never the survivor's fault.

Furthermore, those who shared having attended therapy additionally noted it was difficult finding someone with whom they felt safe enough disclosing. They were forced to endure microaggressions and, for Nadia, retraumatizing interventions, before they were able to find someone who genuinely helped them process.

Intentional Spaces and Updated Education

Despite the fact that each narrator had their own unique experiences, their views on necessary social changes to prevent future assaults were eerily similar. Aaron, Emma, Nina, Nadia, Christopher, and Qu all said there is a need for intentionality. Specifically, there needs to be intentional spaces, not virtual but actual places where LGBTQ+ people of color can go to meet other LGBTQ+ people of color. They each noted how such a space would allow them to not only meet others with similar experiences, they would also be able to embrace the totality of their intersectional identities.

Additionally, they each noted the importance of consent education throughout school. Not only is there a greater need for individuals to understand consent, but there is a need for nuanced education that includes how social power dynamics influence one's ability to consent. Noting the hypersexualization of Asian women, Qu shared that it would be important to acknowledge this sexual racism and discuss its implications.

Furthermore, Christopher noted that it is also important to teach individuals about consent while intoxicated, noting the frequency of LGBTQ+ men to use drugs to enhance sexual experiences.

Admittedly, Aaron emphasized the need for intentional spaces so much throughout his interview, I was primed to hear this theme throughout my subsequent interviews. In some cases, such as with Nina and Nadia, I asked them specifically what they thought about this notion. They each responded with an overwhelming agreement with Aaron's initial premise: intentional spaces where LGBTQ+ people of color would have made a substantial difference in their experiences and is thus something that is imminently needed today.

Notable Grief

Even though narrators varied in the amount they were able to share about their assaults, there were was notable grief in their deliveries. Even for Christopher and Qu who, among the narrators, disclosed having the least detrimental mental health experiences following the assault, still had a gravity to their voice when referring to the trauma. Despite moments of levity throughout the interviews, each narrator dropped their voices and slowed their pace. Without explicitly saying so, the grief they emanated was almost tangible. I understood this to mean they were not only aware of the gravity of what happened to them, but they were aware of the daunting social forces that set them up to be harmed.

Resilience and Strength

Despite the palpable grief among the narrators, there remained a powerful sense of resilience and strength among all of them. Each, in their own ways, shared what they

have accomplished since their assaults. Whether it is earning a graduate degree, seeking employment to help other people of color, engaging in advocacy, and taking efforts to educate others to better understand LGBTQ+ people of color, each narrator noted their ability to find meaning in their lives separate from their traumas. Furthermore, their individual experiences and drive to help improve future mental health treatment as well as to prevent future assaults were among the powerful motivators that encouraged them to be interviewed. Despite their grief and changes to their safety behaviors, they agreed to share their stories with a stranger in pursuit of a graduate degree – thus knowing several other people they do not know would learn about it. Their ability to reflect on what they have experienced, give it language, and identify ways to cope indicates a substantial amount of growth that cannot be undone.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to learn the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors of color, how LGBTQ+ survivors of color describe the reasons for their assault, as well as the mental health and recovery experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color after the assault. Through an NI guided by an intersectional lens, six narrators of various identities shared their assault and mental health experiences. Although each individual had unique experiences that suggested their stories are most appropriately told separately there were several notable consistencies across the findings. While these consistencies are not generalizable, they inform the experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors of color experiences as well as their mental health experiences. However, despite the findings learned from the study, limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

Aaron's Story

The theme of needing or wishing there was intentional space for LGBTQ+ people of color consistently came up throughout Aaron's accounts. As I reflected on our conversation after its conclusion, the need for intentional places and spaces was evident. Even in 2021, my own beliefs about how we as a field and community need to be better cloud my ability to be grateful for the progress that has been made. Aaron's outlook, however, was far more positive.

This was, in part, due to his ability to find a chosen family. Aaron noted how beneficial it has been for his sense of belonging, his ability to heal, and his ability to embrace his true self in community with others. These experiences are also consistent with extant literature. Not only has his ‘chosen family’ facilitated positive relationship experiences in his life, his challenges in finding safe people were increased due to his intersecting identities (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Duran & Pérez, 2018). As a result, the fact that he has found individuals who accept and affirm him, is especially meaningful.

Aaron’s experiences with a chosen family were not the only ones consistent with extant literature. After his assault, he disclosed feeling “*destroyed.*” Unfortunately, this level of intensity with emotions following something as traumatic as sexual violence are all too common (Arlee et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2009). Sexual violence is a traumatic experience from which there is no linear process to heal (Sinko et al., 2020). There are daily reminders – events on the news, changes in political policies, and public rhetoric – that loom as constant reminders of the many places that are not safe for LGBTQ+ people of color (Hughto et al., 2021). Even still, Aaron has been able to find a mental health professional who helped him – an experience that would theoretically primarily exist for people who possess more privileged identities (Arlee et al., 2019).

Therefore, Aaron’s acknowledgment that there is a need for intentional spaces for LGBTQ+ people of color is essential. There are few social movements, or in his case, spaces, that affirm the multiple aspects of an individual’s identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020). At the moment, he needed to find a chosen family with whom he can create this space. However, this is also an example of the continued inequities that LGBTQ+ people of color endure (Armstrong et al., 2018). Intentional spaces in which there is

acknowledgement of the power dynamics associated with these inequities would allow for LGBTQ+ people of color to embrace their authentic selves without threat.

Emma's Story

For Emma, the need for intentional spaces was not as explicit but rather implied through her experiences navigating her peers and family. Given the fact that her parents are immigrants, they did not have a conceptualization of queer or non-monogamous identities. According to a study by Shi and colleagues (2020) the familial and cultural expectation for individuals to marry, have children and ultimately care for their parents contributes to internalized homophobia. This especially becomes evident when children first come out to their parents (Shi et al, 2020). This was true for Emma as well.

Emma's experiences being unable to process her sexuality at home and unable to make sense of how she fit in to Whiteness with her peers is consistent with the concept of sexual racism (Silvestrini, 2020). This refers to racialized beauty standards that result from racial stereotypes and media representations (Silvestrini, 2020). In a study examining the effects of sexual racism on college students, Silvestrini (2020) found that students of color were more likely to experience a low self-esteem, internalized racism, and negative sexual experiences.

For Emma, her inability to explore her intersectional experiences as an LGBTQ+ person of color meant that she was not able to truly embrace her sexuality until the pandemic. Even though Emma appeared surprised by this, it was actually a common experience (Bowling et al., 2021). According to a study examining the effects of the pandemic on sexuality, Bowling and colleagues (2021) found that people who identified

as sexual minorities were more likely to reflect on their sexuality. Although they hypothesized this was influenced by systematic discrimination that resulted in decreased social supports and healthcare, they were unable to note a reason for this phenomenon. Even still, the fact remains that members of the LGBTQ+ community, polyamorous individuals, and members of the kink community were more likely than monogamous heterosexual individuals to reflect on their sexuality (Bowling et al., 2021).

For Emma, this was especially empowering due to the ongoing fetishization of Asian women. As a function of sexual racism, Asian women are hypersexualized in the media and greater U.S. culture (Park, 2022). This became especially true during the Korean and Vietnam Wars when U.S. soldiers would perceive Asian women as prostitutes and as objects of pleasure during the war (Park, 2022). Despite the several decades since the wars, the objectification of Asian women, increasing the likelihood they will be sexually assaulted (Park, 2022).

Even though Emma was well aware of this history, her knowledge of sexual racism was not enough to protect her from internalizing the blame for the assault. This is a common example of rape myth acceptance and victim blaming (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019; Ryan, 2019). According to Rollero & Tartaglia (2019), victim blaming is a result of sexism influencing rape myths. Consistent with Rollero and Tartaglia (2019), Ryan (2019) found that not only are such widely-held beliefs about rape myths a result of sexism, they make seeking justice substantially more difficult.

When she endured victim blaming after disclosing the assault to her friends, they suggested that she was partially at fault to the event. This inherently implied that what occurred was not a traumatizing sexual assault when it indeed was (Ryan, 2019). Instead

of hearing what Emma had to say, they accepted the myth that she must have incited the assault, that this would not have happened unless there was a signal that she wanted sex (Ryan, 2019). This furthered her internalized self-blame and belief that others cannot support her.

As a result, she attempted to distract herself and will the trauma away. Instead of leaning in to the emotional pain, a common reaction to trauma is to attempt to rationalize the event to the point of it no longer being traumatic (Herman, 1992). However, it is not efficient or effective, and will eventually need to be addressed (Herman, 1992). This is potentially why Emma sought to accept that she was not overreacting to her pain and is committed to helping others do so as well.

Nina's Story

A foundational aspect to Nina's experiences is rooted in the fact that she is Native and was raised on a reservation in Oklahoma. According to Native tradition, gender and sexuality were fluid constructs deeply rooted in spiritual practices (Fieland et al., 2007). One's gender identity was not determined by their sex or social opinion but rather their ceremonial roles and responsibilities within the community were more indicative of an individual's gender (Fieland et al., 2007). Two-spirit people were individuals who would have sex with men and women, dressed without a particular gender construct, and engaged in relationships that ranged in duration and number of partners (Fieland et al., 2007). Given their fluid gender identities and sexuality, two-spirit individuals were thought to have ceremonial significance and perceived to be spiritual healers (Fieland et al., 2007; Ansloos et al., 2021). Therefore, there is not an appropriate Western or colonial equivalent to sexuality and gender expression. However, when settlers arrived on Native

lands, they forced them to conform to Western, Christian values through genocidal force. So, when Nina noted that two spirit people “had both,” she meant that they had both the masculine and feminine spirits (Fieland et al., 2007; Ansloos et al., 2021).

Therefore, Nina had an understandably difficult time navigating White, heteronormative society. However, her need to do so is imperative to her literal and sense of safety. Due to the cultural genocide Native people have endured, it is not surprising that Nina’s difficulty navigating her identities is not a unique experience (Hardy, 2022; Fieland et al., 2007).

Even still, Nina noted that it is easier to be “out” in 2022 than it was 25 years ago largely due to the increase in media representation. These observations in shifts in conversations about sexuality is consistent with the extent literature. In fact, the media has been influential in the evolution of commonly used terms to describe LGBTQ+ individuals and stereotypical behaviors among members of the community (Bell & Keer, 2021). This shift notably began when comedian Ellen Degeneres came out on her sitcom in 1990 (Waggoner, 2018). Afterwards, there was an increasing amount of representation in the media, which is now heavily influenced by social media users, thus continuing to increase LGBTQ+ representation (Waggoner, 2018).

While this increase in representation is vital to creating social awareness about intersecting identities, this did not exist 25 years ago when Nina was assaulted. In fact, following her assault, she was unable to feel safe in any capacity. She mentioned that the concern she might see her perpetrator in public or merely hearing his name spoken was enough to increase her emotional distress. According to studies on the neurological response to traumatic events, these symptoms can occur as a result of a primal response

to ensure one survives another attack (Campbell, 2012). In Nina's case, the notion of seeing him or hearing his name triggered her nervous system to believe that the assault could, or was, happening again. As a result, the body acts in defense to ensure such a life-threatening experience does not happen again (Campbell, 2012).

For Nina, her ability to embrace her sexuality grew over time. Despite the fact that there is more conversation and representation of LGBTQ+ individual in the media, her ongoing need to navigate Whiteness as a Native woman continues to impact her relationships to this day.

Christopher's Story

Christopher shared they were especially motivated to be interviewed because of the new precedent for professionals to report gender affirming care as child abuse in Texas. They correctly identified this practice as dangerously absurd. Several studies have shown the increased likelihood that transgender and gender non-binary individuals experience low self-esteem, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicidality, to name a few (Newcomb et al., 2020). In fact, trans and gender non-binary individuals are significantly more likely to die by suicide than any other population within the LGBTQ+ community (Newcomb et al., 2020). Needless to say, failing to offer gender-affirming care for trans and gender-non-binary can have dire consequences.

For Christopher, this rhetoric existed as a constant reminder that they are not accepted as a two-spirit, queer, Native, and Iranian man. Not only is this true for them now, but it has been true throughout their childhood. Unfortunately, Christopher's experiences being treated differently by their teachers and peers and ultimately failing to

be diagnosed with ASD is not unique. In fact, White students are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than people of color (Angell et al., 2018). As a result, students of color are less likely to receive resources, care, and services needed for them to be successful not only in school but throughout their lifetimes (Angell et al., 2018).

Instead of receiving the support they needed, Christopher was labeled as “*stupid*” and was accused of cheating when they performed well. This is also a common experience that is noted in the extent literature. Students of color are more likely to be thought of as ‘stupid’ than their White peers (Riel, 2018). However, Christopher’s eventual academic success is uncommon as students of color often do not get the support they need and are consequently unable to make it as far in their education as Christopher (Trent et al., 2021).

In an effort to further note the inequities in education, Christopher additionally acknowledged the lack of appropriate consent education for LGBTQ+ individuals – especially when substances are involved. Gay men are significantly more likely than heterosexual men to use drugs to enhance a sexual experience – cannabis being the most common (Abdulrahim et al., 2016). Furthermore, a study examining the effects of sexualized drug use among LGBT individuals found that drug use during sex is especially common among men who have sex with other men (Hibbert et al., 2021). While Christopher is not a man in terms of his gender identity, his observations and personal experiences suggest they are more common than anecdotal evidence.

Therefore, it is arguable that if there was more nuanced consent education that acknowledged the spectrum of sexual identities and commonalities among these identities, there may not be as much of a need to use dating apps to find safe people with

whom to form romantic or sexual relationships. Apps have not only become increasingly popular with generation Z, but especially so within the queer, or LGBTQ+ community (Sriram, 2020). This is because they allow LGBTQ+ individuals to remove the ambiguity regarding a person's sexual identity. As a result, there is a greater sense of safety when approaching a potential partner (Zytka et al., 2021).

However, they are clearly flawed as Christopher met his perpetrator on an app. Perhaps due to the notion that apps are often meant for “hookups” there is an implied consent. However, true consent is freely and enthusiastically given and can be withdrawn at any time (Gilbert, 2018). Unfortunately, their perpetrator did not respect this. In reflecting on their mental health following the night, Christopher hypothesized their ability to remove themselves from the situation is likely why they are not as *‘traumatized’* by it as others might have been. There is merit to this hypothesis. As previously stated, when a traumatic experience occurs, the nervous and limbic systems attempt to keep the body safe (Campbell, 2012). In a perfect world, the moment the danger is gone, the parasympathetic nervous system would be activated, leveling out the physiological responses (i.e. deactivating the stress hormones that have been secreted; Campbell, 2012). In a study examining symptom severity and HPA axis alterations, there was a significant correlation between symptom severity and activation of the HPA axis (D’Elia et al., 2021). Therefore, given Christopher’s ability to leave, their HPA axis may not have been as activated as others and may thus provide a possible explanation for their decrease in symptom severity (D’Elia et al., 2021).

Nadia's Story

One of the first points Nadia made in her interview was the fact that college-aged women are more likely to be sexually assaulted, especially within their first semester of their first year (Carey et al., 2018). This is an increasingly frustrating statistic, and one that deserves a moment of reflection. It is horrifying and yet, is known because research on White college-aged women is readily available. However, if one were to shift their perspectives and view this issue through an intersectional lens, knowing that 26.4 percent of women on campus are assaulted would also suggest that LGBTQ+ people of color are being assaulted at an alarmingly higher rate (RAINN, 2022; Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020). This was further impacted by her ongoing struggle to navigate the pervasive nature of White beauty standards (Silvestrini, 2020).

Not only was the timing of Nadia's assault common, so too was her experience of embarrassment afterwards. In fact, embarrassment is one of the most common reactions to surviving a sexual assault (Carson et al., 2019). This may be due to being a part of a society that reinforces power dynamics that reward the people with the most power, leaving those at the bottom of the power structure to feel embarrassed – unconsciously knowing a lack of power by social standards is dangerous (Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

The fact that survivors often feel embarrassed is illogical. Perpetrators make active choices to harm others (Lisak, 2011). While Nadia was disclosing, I was reminded of studies examining the coercive strategies perpetrators often use to commit sexual violence. For example, a 2011 study by David Lisak identified seven systematic steps convicted rapists took to sexually overpower others. Nadia described knowing her

perpetrator, experiencing moments of connection with him prior to the assault, being removed from her friends when he invited her back to his house, and isolating her by bringing her to a location he knew she would not be able to leave. While there is not a consensus regarding sexual violence perpetration behaviors, this pattern is consistent with Lisak's (2011) theory (McDaniel & Rodriguez, 2021).

Another common response to being sexually assaulted is the tendency to 'freeze (Campbell, 2012).' For Nadia, her nervous system's response to freeze rather than fight or flee was complicated by the ever-present power dynamics in her relationships. She shared that she was with her perpetrator at the time because the woman she was in love with shared she did not want to be seen with her in public. Unfortunately, this is a common form of relationship violence in the LGBTQ+ community (Townsend & Bailey, 2020).

Power dynamics in LGBTQ+ relationships are affected by the degree to which both or all partners in the relationship are "out" about their sexual or gender identities (Townsend & Bailey, 2020). In situations in which one or more partners are not out, the way outsiders may view the relationship becomes a serious concern (Townsend & Bailey, 2020). As a result, the opportunity to abuse or misuse someone through treats of outing the other or refusing to be seen in public with their partner can become a form of emotional abuse (Townsend & Bailey, 2020).

When Nadia attempted to disclose these experiences in therapy, she left feeling retraumatized rather than helped. This may be a result of her therapist having labeled her experiences as an assault before Nadia could come to terms with the reality of the situation. Labeling something as a sexual assault before the client is ready can have

adverse effects in therapy (Butler et al., 2011). It is an understandable mistake. College mental health professionals are trained to provide sexual assault survivors with resources, especially those associated with the school (Bedera, 2021). This is an attempt to imply that the survivor has choices despite the trauma. However, he jumped t offering choices without processing her interpretation of the event. Without allowing her to come to terms with what happened in her own time. A common mistake, and a vital one (Butler et al., 2011). He attempted to offer choices but without allowing for Nadia to process her experiences with him, he took away the first moment of choice – the ability to find her own words to describe the situation (Butler et al., 2011). To allow her to come to terms with what happened in her own time (Butler et al., 2011).

Qu's Story

A major theme across Qu's experiences was the fact that she is a "model minority" as an Asian woman. She talked about how challenging it is to be truly understood when White individuals see Asian individuals as people "*who make it.*" These notions are consistent with the extent literature. In a study examining the effects of internalizing the model minority myth, Atkin and colleagues (2018) found that those who internalize facets of being a model minority were more likely to experience depression and anxiety. Not only are individuals impacted by the model minority myth, but families and communities are also impacted as it asserts racism is no longer an issue (Shih et al., 2019).

However, despite the 'model minority' myth, there remains pervasive hypersexualization of Asian women that leads to violence and mistreatment (Park, 2022). The compounded pain from this sexual racism as well as her own assault, tasked her with

identifying a way to heal from these traumas. For Qu, as well as many others, this was through advocacy. Survivors often find a feeling of universality and purpose in prevention efforts (Delker, 2019). This in turn can help survivors cope with their adverse mental health experiences (Delker, 2019).

Even though Aaron, Emma, Nina, Christopher, Nadia, and Qu have had their own unique experiences, there are several aspects of their stories that are consistent with the extent literature. Therefore, implications can be made regarding the findings.

Implications

Given the consistencies across the narrators' stories, there are several implications to this study. For example, each narrator noted the challenges navigating White, heterosexual, and cisgender cultural norms as an LGBTQ+ person of color. Considering the study's aim to better understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors of color, these identity development experiences were shaped not only by their immediate surroundings but the overall approach to socialization and education. For example, several narrators noted the importance of intentional education initiatives to include the complexities of consent, particularly if drugs or alcohol are involved. Furthermore, they noted an overall lack of diversity in their sex education both in the fact that many of their teachers were White, heterosexual individuals, but that the content was predominantly most appropriate for heterosexual interactions. Therefore, an important implication for this study is the need to expand education initiatives to allow for individuals to better understand consent as well as same-sex dynamics.

As the narrators noted in their stories, they often felt as though they needed to hide their LGBTQ+ identities at home while also having difficulty being accepted as a

person of color in their school and greater communities. According to a study by Salerno and colleagues (2022), LGBTQ+ youth of color are not only likely to have a fear of rejection from their families due to their sexual orientation or gender identities, they are also tasked with navigating racism outside their homes. As a result, they are more likely to conceal their identities rather than processing them to allow for a more robust understanding of their intersectional identity development (Salerno et al., 2022).

Therefore, it may be notable that the narrators' experiences were consistent, not only with each other in that they were unable to embrace their intersectionality, but it is consistent with extent literature as well.

Despite their need to suppress their own identity development to navigate their homes and communities, the narrators shared their need for connection. However, their identities often made it exceedingly more difficult to find safe people. Consistent with the extent literature, they thus noted the impact of homophobia, racism, and cissexism as factors that reduced their ability to form meaningful connections (Salerno et al., 2022; Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). However, it appeared to increase their vulnerability to sexual violence (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Therefore, an important implication may be in the use of spaces when considering the sociocultural reasons for their respective sexual assaults. The majority of the extent literature on sexual violence lends its voice to cisgender, heterosexual, White women who survived cisgender, heterosexual, White men (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). As a result, legal, prevention, and intervention modalities for mental health treatment are most appropriate for White, cisgender, heterosexual women (McCauley et al., 2019).

Therefore, in considering the implications for future prevention methods, attention to the

unique experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color is needed in legal definitions, prevention education programs, and mental health treatment (McCauley et al, 2019; Armstrong et al., 2018).

Additionally, this study aimed to better understand the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ sexual violence survivors of color. While the narrators had varying mental health experiences, a notable consistency among them as well as the extent literature was the experience of self-blame, guilt, anger, embarrassment, and trauma symptoms (Street et al., 2005; Brady et al., 2000; Draucker et al., 2009). Furthermore, narrators noted differences in their interpersonal behaviors for some time following the assaults.

According to Tummala-Narra (2011) and Kuster and colleagues (2015), changes in interpersonal behaviors – either through traumatic bonds or having difficulty forming safe relationships with others is a common response to sexual violence. However, LGBTQ+ people of color are less likely to have meaningful social supports that acknowledge their intersectional experiences (Solerio et al., 2022). Therefore, there are implications for mental health professionals in considering the amount of social support LGBTQ+ survivors of color have regarding their assaults. Additionally, mental health providers would likely benefit from considering the degree to which LGBTQ+ survivors of color experience anger, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and trauma symptoms.

Given these potential mental health consequences and shortcomings in society's resources for LGBTQ+ people of color, there exist opportunities for mental health professionals to better advocate for their LGBTQ+ clients of color. For example, mental health professionals may benefit from furthering their education regarding intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color as well as how their identities may have

influenced their traumas (McCauley et al, 2019; Armstrong et al, 2018). They may also benefit from intentional messaging and representation in brochures, pictures, or other ways they may choose to represent their office.

Limitations

NI does not require the researcher to be a member of the population of interest (Patton, 2015). Therefore, as a cisgender, White, bisexual survivor of sexual assault, the researcher cannot completely understand the complexities associated with being an LGBTQ+ person of color. However, the extent literature fails to include this population. Therefore, the decision to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color is both values and safety driven. As previously mentioned, LGBTQ+ people of color are at a significantly higher risk for experiencing sexual violence (Arlee et al., 2019).

Consequently, there is a limitation in the reduced power of the researcher to understand the nuances of LGBTQ+ people of color. The researcher acknowledged her privilege and differences in positionality early on in the interview. She also communicated her intention of empowering participants and rectifying the gap in the literature. Additionally, the researcher communicated her understanding that her appearances may affect their ability to disclose and that given her positionality, she will be grateful to learn anything they choose to share. However, reservations in disclosing their experiences to the researcher may present a limitation in information gleaned from the study.

Additionally, the subjectivity of the study's approach to analysis limits its integrity. Information gleaned from interviews was coded using in vivo coding, time analysis, and character mapping. While this is a respected methodological approach, it

leaves room for differences in interpretation (Daiute, 2013; Patton, 2015). Consequently, important information may be overlooked while emphasis may be placed on details that may be realistically insignificant. This also meant there is no way to verify the information gleaned from the study.

Another limitation is the fact that these findings are not generalizable across all people of color or the cultures from which the narrators hailed. While this study was successful in learning the unique stories shared by the narrators, these experiences are just that – unique to the narrator. The fact that it was inappropriate to merge stories due to their contextual significance also indicates the further limitation in generalizing these unique experiences across multiple people or even populations.

Finally, while the aim of this study was to illuminate survivor stories missing from the extent literature (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). The fact that there were only 6 narrators provides a limited example of the plethora of survivor experiences. Therefore, the stories shared in this study should not be viewed as an exhaustive representation of the sociocultural and mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color who have survived sexual assault.

Directions for Future Research

Given the limitations of the study and the small number of narrators, there needs to be additional studies that aim to understand how intersecting identities impact a survivor's sociocultural and mental health experiences. Future studies may also do well to study additional identities that were not a consideration as variables in this study (e.g., ability status, socioeconomic status, class, education level, religiosity, etc.). Furthermore, this study did not differentiate the significant difference between gender identity and

sexual orientation as it relates to the LGBTQ+ community, nor did it aim to learn about narrator experiences from a specific racial or ethnic background. Therefore, future studies should aim to more specifically understand individuals' experiences with particular intersecting identities.

Conclusion

An intersectional framework was used to better understand the experiences of six narrators who identified as LGBTQ+ sexual assault survivors of color. Despite the fact that each narrator had their own unique motivations to share their stories, experiences due to their intersectional identities, and mental health journeys, similarities across their stories exist. Each narrator noted feeling a lack of support throughout their childhoods and were thus unable to embrace their sexual or racial identities depending on their surroundings. As a result, they were forced to delay their development and awareness of their sexuality until later in life. Furthermore, each narrator noted specific challenges navigating White beauty standards and the tendency for them to be fetishized. Despite their differing identities, this experience of being “othered” contributed to the events that would ultimately lead to their assaults. Additionally, while each narrator’s mental health journeys differed, there was a shared grief and embarrassment following their traumas. However, despite these experiences, they were able to demonstrate resilience and strength in their personal and professional lives. They each further emphasized the need to create intentional spaces, conversations, and educational efforts to include more dynamic and nuanced information pertaining to LGBTQ+ people of color as a means to prevent future sexual assaults.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Extended Literature Review

Sexual assault is a pervasive epidemic in the United States (U.S.). According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), a person in the U.S. is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds (RAINN, 2020). 73 seconds. How can something so concrete be associated with something so unimaginable.

Count the seconds.

One second down.

“What just happened? Did I want this? I trust him. At least, I think I do.

We had a nice time tonight. The semester is finally over. We were entitled to celebrate, right?”

10 seconds past.

“He told Rachel he would take care of me. She said she trusted him. Did he take care of me? I think I am overreacting. We just had a lot to drink so he probably forgot that I wanted to wait.”

15 seconds

“What are you doing,” I’d said. I guess that wasn’t a “no.” Should I have been more direct? But what if he got mad? What if I am misunderstanding? I do love him. Is it so bad this happened?”

20 seconds past.

“Have I moved? No. I am stuck. My legs are still. My arms feel heavy. Why can’t I get myself to speak?”

30 seconds.

“Do I know where I am? Yes. This is my room. This is my bed.” The blue tint from the moonlight outside creeps in through the window at my head. The blue tint from the moonlight outside creeps in through the window at my head. Its quiet light makes my room look gray – a monochromatic reflection of the confusion I feel inside.

40 seconds.

“I like my bed.” I feel my jersey knit sheets on my back. Usually, their soft texture brings me comfort. They invite me in and make it hard for me to get up in the morning. But right now, my bed feels different. Right now, I feel cold.

50 seconds.

I am sweating. “How can I be cold and sweating at the same time?” The incriminating wet spot our sweat has left on my sheets provides irrefutable evidence of what has occurred. “How long has it been since I moved?”

55 seconds.

“We’ve been dating for 2 years. I know I want to marry him. So, maybe it’s okay this happened. I mean, it was going to happen anyways, right?”

60 seconds.

He kisses me on the forehead. “What should I say? Did I want this? Did I give him the wrong idea?”

68 seconds.

“What happens now?”

Sexual assault remains a pervasive, personal, and complicated issue. The story shared above is common and well represented in literature (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). It exemplifies how gender dynamics and substances create power differentials that result in sexual violence (Groth & Birnbaum, 2013; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006). However, while the literature agrees with the notion that ‘sexual violence’ is a broad term used to refer to various acts, the narrative most represented involves college-aged men assaulting college-aged women (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017).

This heteronormative depiction reinforces a common misconception about sexual violence: men perpetrate due to pent up sexual urges and attraction to their future survivors (Groth & Birnbaum, 2013). A common misconception is to believe the actions of the survivors caused their assaults (Grubb & Turner, 2012). However, this perspective fails to consider the generally accepted reality that sexual violence satiates needs for power and control (Groth & Birnbaum, 2013; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006).

Unfortunately, sexual frustration is not the only misnomer regarding sexual violence. According to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) report on health and

violence, sexual violence refers to all forms of abuse, rape, coercion, and behaviors that are used influence another person into a sexual act to which they did not explicitly consent (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). However, the narrative portrayed in the extent literature negates the various ways in which sexual violence can manifest, to whom it can manifest, and the communities in which it can manifest (Hackman et al., 2017).

Intersectionality

Stemming from Black feminism, intersectionality refers to the interlocking, oppressive systems that interact to create unique social experiences (Grzanka, Santos, & Moradi, 2017; Meyer, 2008). Even though there have been anti-racist movements throughout history, each neglected to meet the needs of Black women in unique ways (Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, the civil rights movement was focused on race, but neglected to consider gender; feminism focused on gender, but neglected to consider how race would influence a person's gendered experiences; unionization addressed class-based inequalities but failed to consider both race and gender (Collins & Bilge, 2020). As a result, the intersectional framework was created to describe the intersecting and simultaneous forms of oppression (Grzanka et al., 2017).

This framework allows for the conceptualization of how self-reinforcing systems create power structures that benefit few and disproportionately oppress others (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Meyer, 2008). This is achieved through broader social forces that dictate how race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ability, ethnicity, and age collectively influence an individual's experience of social agency and systemic advancement (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Meyer, 2008).

In other words, intersectionality suggests that social power dynamics are persistent, pervasive, and rooted in racism, classism, heteronormativity, sexism, and ableism, to name a few (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Meyer, 2008). According to Collins and Bilge, (2020), intersecting identities are not a product of “othering” individuals to accentuate their differences from the masses, or ranking identities to assume that a person is first their race, next their gender, then their class, etcetera. It is instead, it is a lived experience of how a person develops a sense of self within social contexts (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Such contexts refer to individuals’ combined demographics that are shaped and made meaningful through intersecting power relations (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Meyer, 2008). These demographics, such as race, age, ability status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, among others, each individually carry social meanings, but are combined to create a unique degree of social agency for each individual (Meyer, 2008). For example, despite laws hindering the explicit practice, there is a significant difference in the salaries for men and women in the same positions (Collins & Bilge, 2020). This difference is simultaneously racialized and gendered in that while White women earn less than White men, women of color earn less than White women (Collins & Bilge, 2020). In this situation, women of color have the intersectional experience of being both a woman as well as a person of color (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Therefore, the systems influencing this power structure are racism as well as sexism (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Just as the women in this scenario have little control over the overarching systems that influence their wages, individuals have little influence in counteracting systems of power (Collins & Bilge, 2020). This is in part due to the self-reinforcing nature of these

systems (Meyer, 2008). With the rise of far-right populism, xenophobia, and nativism, for example, the notion that a true democracy is rooted in a just meritocracy is especially misconstrued (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These ideologies assert that social inequities and inequalities are the result of differences in motivation, work ethic, and intelligence (Collins & Bilge, 2020). As seen in the wage-gap, the inequality in the pay is a result of the inequitable treatment among people at disadvantaged ends of the power structures (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Therefore, the notion that the democracy and consequent social systems in the U.S. are just is fundamentally incorrect (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Instead, there is a misallocation of power and agency a person may have over their own circumstances (Meyer, 2010).

Important Contextual Considerations

While these pervasive and self-reinforcing systems function broadly across society, they also influence not only the way individuals experience current events, but the events themselves (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Meyer, 2008). For example, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of sexism, racism, and classism remained evident through individuals' ability to access care (Laster Pirtle, 2020). As a result, there was a disproportionate number of people of color impacted by the pandemic (McBride, 2020). In fact, when adjusting for age in the number of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native populations were almost twice as likely to die than White individuals (Hill & Artiga, 2022). Given an individual's age having natural adverse consequences to illnesses, Hill and Artiga (2022) noted that the age adjustment not only shows that while people of color were more likely to die from COVID-19, they

were also predominantly younger than White individuals who died, thus demonstrating the interaction between COVID-19 deaths and race.

Furthermore, since the start of the pandemic in 2020, there has been a substantial rise in violence against Asian people (Sims et al., 2022). A study by Choi and Lee (2021) found that not only rhetoric regarding the pandemic influenced anti-Asian hate crimes, but the need for a vaccine and mask-wearing itself spurred anti-Asian sentiment as they acted as continuous reminders of COVID-19. While anti-Asian crimes and racist sentiment is not new, its increase in severity and prevalence has also had detrimental effects on Asian Americans' mental health (Man, 2020; Wu et al, 2020).

Additionally, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer further demonstrated the existence of institutional racism and its systemic power structures that maintain it (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). The resulting surge in the Black Lives Matter movement attempted to illuminate the fatal consequences of these power structures, including the medical mistreatment of Black patients (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). For example, an article in the Boston Globe dated May 1, 2020 reported an instance in which a Black woman asked twice to be tested for COVID-19, was denied each time, and later died from the virus (Arnett, 2020). While this is one notable experience, it is a symptom to a larger issue that remains – an individual's intersecting identities will influence their ability to enjoy basic human rights as well as the way they are treated by others (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Laurencin & Walker, 2020).

Racial Oppression and Sexual Violence

In addition to intersectionality providing a framework for understanding interlocking systemic power structures (Meyer, 2008), it offers an explanation for the

way in which society addresses sexual violence among people of color (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). When considering the role of culture and race in sexual violence manifestation, there is often a difference in the way in which different races are perceived (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). For example, when a White person sexually assaults another, the perception is that the individual has committed a heinous crime (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). However, when a person of color perpetrates, they are often perceived as a member of a larger group – the entirety of which is consequently stereotyped (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). As a result, unlike the White person being perceived as an individual outside of a racial culture, people of color become a prototypical representation of their entire racial community in the U.S. (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Consequently, the overarching system inadvertently reinforces vulnerabilities for people of color to experience sexual violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Instead of conceptualizing sexual violence within the context of White supremacy and its consequent systems of power, these crimes are instead justified by their perpetrators' races (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). For example, in the case of *People v. Dong Lu Chen*, a homicide in which a Chinese immigrant was charged with manslaughter after brutally abusing and eventually killing his wife (Gallin, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). His attorney argued his actions were in response to his recent discovery of his wife's infidelity, thus excusing his behavior (Gallin, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). He then reasoned, in China, other community members would have intervened before a husband can abuse his wife to the point of murder (Gallin, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Given that he recently immigrated to the U.S., his attorney suggested he would not have known about the lack of bystanders and would thus not have realized the fatality of

his behavior (Gallin, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). In the end, he was sentenced to probation as opposed to manslaughter (Gallin, 1994; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

As evident by this case, “othering” people as a result of their racial and cultural differences provided an excuse for interpersonal violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). This practice not only allows for sexual violence to prevail over justice, but it also in advertently perpetuates the absurd notion that only privileged people can be heard when they are harmed (Armstrong et al., 2018).

According to RAINN (2022), Native people are two times more likely to experience sexual violence than a member of any other race in the U.S. Furthermore, Armstrong and colleagues (2018) noted Black women experience sexual violence at alarmingly higher rates than White women. Therefore, even though the case of *People v. Dong Lu Chen* (Gallin, 1994) is one example of misused cultural and racial attributes, it is a symptom of a larger issue (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Even though people of color are more likely to experience sexual violence, their stories are vastly underrepresented in the extent literature (Navarro & Clevenger, 2017). This is a prime example of how intersectional power dynamics dictate narrative and suppress the voices that matter.

LGBTQ+ Oppression and Sexual Violence

Furthermore, systemic restrictions to agency and power are also seen through the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. In 2010, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey asked respondents to identify their sexual orientations (Walters et al., 2011). The results of this survey found that people who self-identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual were either as likely or more likely than those who identified as heterosexual to have experienced a sexual assault (Walters et al., 2011).

Social influences of LGBTQ+ sexual violence. A study by Langenderfer-Magruder and colleagues (2016) found that out of over a thousand participants, LGBTQ+ community members were more likely to experience a sexual assault than cisgender, heterosexual people. Their results further found that transgender individuals experience sexual violence two times more frequently than cisgender LGBTQ individuals (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016). These results further support the notion that sexism provides a greater vulnerability to experience sexual violence (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016).

These results are consistent with an earlier study by Langenderfer-Magruder and colleagues (2014) that not only were LGBTQ+ Individuals more likely to experience sexual assault, transgender people were more likely than the rest of the community do you have experienced any form of sexual trauma.

Additionally, a study examining community responses to LGBTQ+ survivors of sexual violence found there was little effort being put to intentionally address sexual assault among LGBTQ+ people. While there was general agreement that sexual violence was an issue that needed to be addressed, most participants were unaware of prevention or treatment efforts specific to the LGBTQ+ community (Todahl et al., 2009). Furthermore, there was little belief that participants' general communities and community mental health centers were capable of making a significant impact on the issue.

Todahl and colleagues (2009) noted the influence of heteronormativity guiding misconceptions about sexual violence. A study by Mortimer and colleagues (2019) found evidence of the heteronormative influence as well as the compounding effects of sexism

and cissexism. While there are many studies that examine misconceptions and rape myths regarding cisgender men and women, few examine myths regarding the LGBTQ+ community (Mortimer et al., 2019). The continuation of examining heteronormative assaults arguably perpetuates the compounding systemic forces that make LGBTQ+ individuals more susceptible to sexual violence (Easpaig & Fryer, 2011).

LGBTQ+ sexual violence manifestation. In terms of sexual abuse manifestation, a study by Heintz and Melendez (2006) found that there can be a variety of ways LGBTQ+ individuals experience sexual violence. One such way was by not being able to ask their partners to practice safe sex (Heintz & Melendez, 2006). Consequently, these survivors were at a higher risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as well as HIV (Heintz & Melendez, 2006).

Despite The LGBTQ+ community being more susceptible to sexual violence, a literature review by Calton and colleagues (2016) found there's still an overall limit to understanding the stigma and systemic inequities. Even though members of the LGBTQ+ community are in more danger of experiencing sexual assault than heterosexual people, the majority of the literature focuses on male perpetrators and female survivors (Navarro, & Clevenger, 2017).

The pervasive heteronormativity has had several disparaging impacts on the LGBTQ+ community (Nadal, 2018). Broadly, these consequences occur within two main categories: violence against LGBTQ+ individuals and violence within the LGBTQ+ community (Nadal, 2018; Balsam & Szymanski, 2005).

Transphobia in conjunction with homophobia and sexism create vulnerabilities for LGBTQ+ individuals to experience violence that rages in severity (Nadal, 2018).

Microaggressions are common indignities that invalidate, though unintentionally, the LGBTQ+ community (Sue et al., 2007; Nadal, 2108). However, in more severe cases, hate crimes, bullying, and sexual violence can occur as well (Nadal, 2018).

Additionally, sexual violence within the LGBTQ+ community is an important issue that is rooted in cultural stress (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005). For example, internalized homophobia as well as an individual's degree of outness create power dynamics that can lead to domestic violence (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005). Whether this is through threats to "out" their partners or through overt sexual violence, the interpersonal dynamic is reinforced through power differentials rooted in sociocultural systems (Mortimer et al., 2019)

LGBTQ+ People of Color

Given the aforementioned oppressive experiences, the intersectional framework presents an opportunity to fathom the increased vulnerability and likelihood that an LGBTQ+ person of color would experience sexual violence (Arlee et al., 2019). Not only are LGBTQ+ people of color more likely to experience mental health challenges, they are also more likely to experience various forms of violence – including sexual (Arlee et al., 2019). The interplay of sexism, racism, heteronormativity, religious and cultural norms influence a social disregard that allows for greater violence to ensue (Armstrong et al., 2018).

A study by Cahill (2009) showed that religious underpinnings to anti-gay movements disproportionately affected Black and Latino same-sex families. Noting fluctuations in legal policies, the invalidation of same-sex families resulted in insecure employment, housing, and food (Downing & Rosenthal, 2017). Furthermore, Black and

Latino same-sex couples were more likely, according to Cahill's study (2009) to adopt children than White same-sex couples. Naturally, the increased likelihood of inconsistent income, housing, and food, naturally had a greater impact on same-sex couples with children (Cahill, 2009).

Given the complex power dynamics that affect individual social experiences, there are many scholars who argue the importance of acknowledging the areas in which one is oppressed as well as the areas in which one contributes to oppression (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). This recognition of simultaneous experience and implementation of oppression can be noted throughout LGBTQ+ community history.

For example, the symbols that have historically represented the community have recently evolved to include people of color, as seen through the addition of a black and brown strip to the rainbow flag. However, prior to this iteration, LGBTQ+ community first united behind a pink triangle – the symbol used in Nazi Germany to label members of the community (Haeberle, 1981). Then, in 1978, the rainbow flag was created as a way to celebrate being “out” in a heteronormative society (Sanders, 2018). In each case, the symbols were meant to reclaim oppression and create visibility for the LGBTQ+ community. However, just as gendered movements neglect the unique influences of race, so too did the flag (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Klapeer et al., 2018). It was not until the black and brown stripe was added that there was an intentional acknowledgement LGBTQ+ people of colors' unique experiences (Klapeer et al., 2018).

Mental Health Consequences of Sexual Violence

A sexual assault is a heinous act of theft over another's body. Sexual violence is one of the most pervasive forms of interpersonal traumas (WHO, 2013). As such, it is

essential to not only consider its consequences on mental health but also the prognosis for its survivors.

Quite obviously, sexual violence is a traumatic experience that cannot be undone. Survivors are left managing emotions and memories in ways that affect their daily functioning (Draucker et al., 2009). Additionally, research in the neurobiology of sexual assault has shown that the same regions of the brain that encode near-death experiences are also used in processing sexual violence (Campbell, 2012). Therefore, survivors experience sexual assaults as fatally dangerous (Campbell, 2012). It is thus not a surprise that there are a multitude of mental health consequences to having experienced it (Wadsworth & Records, 2013).

While PTSD is common amongst sexual assault survivors, symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse may arise as well (Brady et al., 2000; Campbell et al., 2009). A study by Hakimi and colleagues (2018) found that women who survived sexual violence were significantly more likely than non-survivors to develop symptoms related to depressive disorders, anxiety, substance abuse, and PTSD. Furthermore, suicidality and other thoughts of self-harm were common among survivors as well (Campbell et al., 2009).

Given the interpersonal nature of the trauma, it is common for survivors to experience difficulties in forming meaningful relationships (Kuster et al., 2015). Kuster and colleagues (2015) reported that survivors of sexual traumas, especially those who experienced complex traumas in childhood, have a greater likelihood of learning maladaptive and negative ways of communicating with others. Over time, these negative communication patterns can lead to challenges in forming safe and healthy relationships

(Kuster et al., 2015). Consequently, survivors may leave one abusive relationship to enter another without knowing how they are recapitulating a maladaptive pattern learned from their abuser (Kuster et al., 2015).

The notion that survivors may recapitulate patterns that were born in abuse is further supported in Tummala-Narra's (2011) book on psychodynamic processes following sexual violence. Prolonged exposure to an abusive or unhealthy relationship can deter survivors' ability to differentiate their own emotional experiences from that of others. They begin to dissociate and, in an attempt to gain control over an uncontrollable circumstance, internalize the cause of the abuse (Tummala-Narra, 2011). Consequently, a traumatic bond forms in which the survivor not only begins to believe they caused their own abuse, but they often begin to believe they deserve to be treated this way (Tummala-Narra, 2011). It is thus not surprising future relationships can be affected by these bonds (Kuster et al., 2015; Tummala-Narra, 2011).

Internalizing the cause of the sexual violence often results in survivors experiencing overwhelming guilt (Street et al., 2005). According to Street and colleagues (2005), this was particularly true for survivors who developed PTSD. Unfortunately, the dissociation associated with internalizing the blame as well as PTSD, often lead to survivors employing avoidance strategies as a means of coping with their symptoms (Street et al., 2005). In an effort to avoid situations that elicited further PTSD-related symptoms, many survivors avoided intimacy or situations in which they would form relationships with new people (Kuster et al., 2015; Street et al., 2005).

While avoidant behavior is a common response for survivors of sexual violence, it is often maladaptive (Street et al., 2005). Avoiding symptoms can often reinforce

dissociation, which in turn, reinforces maladaptive relationship patterns (Tummala-Narra, 2011; Kuster et al., 2015; Street et al., 2005; Aakvaag et al., 2016).

Challenges forming meaningful relationships that can serve as corrective emotional experiences are furthered by the degree to which survivors reexperience their traumas through disclosing (Campbell & Renshaw, 2013). Studies have shown that unsupportive responses to disclosures of sexual violence can have devastating mental health consequences (Ullman et al., 2010). Additionally, a study by Campbell and colleagues (2009) noted that while the specifics of the assault and the survivors' prior experiences were important factors in their resulting symptomatology, the degree to which they were supported and able to receive help afterwards was an important contributor to symptom severity (Campbell et al., 2009; Ullman and Peter-Hagene, 2014). This was particularly true for symptoms related to PTSD (Ullman and Peter-Hagene, 2014). Furthermore, a study by Hakimi and colleagues (2018) found that Black women experience more severe symptoms than White women when they endured negative social reactions to their disclosures.

Given these general findings, it is important to better understand the way in which sexual affects the mental health of LGBTQ+ people of color.

LGBTQ+ People of Color

Arlee and colleagues (2019) noted LGBTQ+ people of color are far more likely to experience mental health disorders than White members of the LGBTQ+ community. According to their study, these disorders not only include life-threatening mental health conditions such as substance abuse, but they are also less likely to have access to healthcare resources. Additionally, a study by Sutter and colleagues (2016) found that

LGBTQ+ people of color have a high likelihood of experiencing suicide ideation. Specifically, they found that when a person of color experiences heteronormative microaggressions, they are especially more likely to experience symptoms related to poor mental health as well as suicide ideation (Sutter et al., 2016).

While suicide ideation is a major mental health concern, it is not the only one facing LGBTQ+ people of color. A study by Ramirez and Paz Galupo (2019), found LGBTQ+ people of color experienced more severe symptoms related to depression and anxiety than White LGBTQ+ people and straight people of color.

The interaction between racism and sexism creates a unique context for LGBTQ+ people of color (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Given that all behaviors exist within a social context, it is important to note that the pain of a sexual assault does not only occur in addition to microaggressions, but it has occurred within an invalidating system (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).

This is an important distinction because it distinguishes the difference between a survivor of an index trauma as opposed to complex traumas. Microaggressions are social and interpersonal in nature and are often met with ignorance, victim-blaming, and silence (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). In time, the pain of the microaggression in addition to the silencing messages from society, leave individuals feeling mistrustful (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). These experiences alone can lead to substance abuse, PTSD, anxiety, depression, and issues with their physical health (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). Therefore, when a sexual assault occurs, its mental health consequences are likely not an onset of symptoms, but rather a heightened intensity of preexisting challenges (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).

Therefore, the interaction of potential preexisting mental health concerns with the devastating consequences of a sexual assault suggests survivors who are LGBTQ+ people of color who have survived a sexual assault experience significant psychological distress (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2009). In fact, a study by Sigurvinsdottir and Ullman (2015) found that LGBTQ+ people of color experience more intense symptoms related to mental health following sexual assaults. Furthermore, they found that many of the survivors experienced their assault as a recapitulation of sexist racism (Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015).

Despite the significant need for accessible resources for LGBTQ+ people of color, studies show there are several barriers to accessible resources (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009).

Barriers to accessing resources. A study by McMahon and Seabrook (2019) found that LGBTQ+ individuals and women of color are less likely to report their sexual violence than other students on college campuses. This is in part due to a lifetime of racist and sexist microaggressions that have contributed to an understandable inability to trust that others will not recapitulate their interpersonal traumas (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009). It is also due to the lack of resources that are both affirming and culturally aware (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019). For example, a study by Schmitz and Tabler (2019) found that health care providers have primarily focused on racial dynamics in their training and neglected to learn how to provide affirming care for the LGBTQ+ community. As a result, many LGBTQ+ people of color experience ignorant health care professionals who are unable to meet their needs due to their unique positionality (Schmitz & Tabler, 2019). A lack of intentional research and intervention practices suggests a deficit of ethical treatment approaches in the mental health field, specifically

(Greene, 1994). Therefore, there exists a significant degree of uncertainty that disclosing and essentially reliving the traumas will be worth the emotional toll (Campbell, 2012; Bryant-Davis, 2009).

Consistent with these results, Calton and colleagues (2016) found there was a limited understanding of the stigma and systemic inequities the LGBTQ+ community faces. As a result, few Health care providers are able to accurately empathize with the significance of both their traumas as well as their decision to get help (Calton et al., 2016). Therefore, LGBTQ+ people of color would arguably not receive affirming care (Nadal et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the continual indignities experienced through microaggressions may contribute to underlying shame and guilt (Nadal et al., 2011). According to a survey on campus sexual violence, shame and embarrassment were common barriers to reporting assaults (Cantor et al., 2015). Therefore, it is arguable that if survivors had preexisting challenges with shame, the addition of a sexual assault would conceivably overwhelm them with shame and thus prevent them from being able to access resources (Nadal et al., 2011; Cantor et al., 2015).

Another common barrier to reporting sexual assaults was the belief that it was either not harmful enough to warrant a report and nothing would be done in response (Cantor et al., 2015). Many survivors feared they would not be believed due to their own confusion about the assault as well as their lack of ability to prove one occurred (Cantor et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies showed that when survivors were incapacitated at the time of the assault, they were more likely to blame themselves, thus reducing the chance they would report it or seek help (Sabina & Ho, 2014). Given the shame

microaggressions against LGBTQ+ people of color influence, barriers such as these would be arguably heightened (Spengler et al., 2016; Le et al., 2020; Sabina & Ho, 2014).

When considering the sociocultural influence of the assaults, many female survivors feared disclosing their experiences due to the systemic minimization of violence against women (Sabina & Ho, 2014). Therefore, the systemic messages, direct and indirect, influence the degree to which individual survivors will be able to disclose their traumas (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019; Sabina & Ho, 2014).

In an effort to better understand the way in which systemic socialization influences Survivor disclosure, McMahon and Seabrook (2019) found specific barriers varied among different cultural populations. For example, the Latino women who participated in their study reported they were most afraid of not being believed (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019). There Asian participants come on the other hand, disclose that reporting the assault would be an admission of failure (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019). Black and African American participants, however, reported they did not disclose their trauma is primarily because they were concerned it would reflect poorly on their racial and ethnic communities (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019). Given these results, it is fair to say there are several barriers to seeking resources following a sexual assault. While this study examined LGBTQ+ people and people of color, it is arguable that an LGBTQ+ person of color experiences these barriers more heavily due to their intersectional identities (Le et al., 2020; McMahon & Seabrook, 2019; Spengler et al., 2016).

Mental Health Recovery

When considering mental health consequences to sexual violence, it is also important to acknowledge the existing research on its recovery. While there are many studies that examine recovery experiences among LGBTQ+ people as well as people of color, there are few that examine the recovery from an intersectional experience.

For example, a narrative inquiry by Dym and colleagues (2019) found that LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced traumas – especially when coming out – were more likely to feel a reduction in mental health symptoms when they were able to find community support both in person and online. This study noted the importance of social validation and support outside of mental health counseling (Dym et al., 2019).

These results may be due to the degree to which LGBTQ+ individuals were found to withdraw from social interactions after experiencing traumas (Scheer & Poteat, 2018). While this is true for many trauma survivors, a study by Scheer and Poteat (2018) found that LGBTQ+ individuals were especially likely to experience shame that manifested in social withdrawal. In their study on the impact of trauma-informed care, they found that there was a greater chance at symptom reduction when member of the LGBTQ+ community perceived the mental health care they received was trauma-informed (Scheer & Poteat, 2018).

Furthermore, studies examining trauma recovery for people of color have found that the most effective interventions were those that were culturally informed and specific to the client (Leamy et al., 2011). Additionally, a study by Comas-Díaz and colleagues (2019) found that positive therapeutic outcomes were more likely when the therapist

intentionally addressed the underlying racial traumas that coincided with the index trauma.

Consistent with these results, Mosley and colleagues found that interventions that facilitate further resistance and prevention of racial trauma are essential. They noted that it is critical for counseling psychologists to actively engage in critical consciousness – the journey one takes from understanding the anti-Black racism that exists today to understanding how individuals benefit and reinforce this oppression (Mosley et al., 2020). The need for multiculturally aware treatment is essential for people of color (Leamy et al., 2011; Mosley et al., 2020). The specificity needed in understanding clients’ cultural experiences is essential to therapeutic outcomes and a psychologists’ ability to provide ethical care (Leamy et al., 2011; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Mosley et al., 2020).

Given the need for culturally specific and intentional care, it would be remiss for a therapist to fail to consider how the intersecting identities of being an LGBTQ+ person of color impact their experiences and necessary treatment. Therefore, while the information on LGBTQ+ individuals and people of color is invaluable, the current study will contribute to the literature in its aim to identify how LGBTQ+ people of color experience mental health and recovery.

Appendix B:
Interview Protocol

68 Seconds: A Narrative Inquiry of LGBTQ+ People of Color Who Survived Sexual
Violence

This is an interview protocol for a semi-structured interview. Due to COVID-19 health and safety concerns, this interview will be conducted online via Zoom – an encrypted transmission platform. Therefore, once participants log in to Zoom, the interviewer will welcome them, ask them about how they are doing, and then she will make sure to ask if they have sufficient privacy for the interview, for example, headphones, in an area where they cannot be heard, or a room where no one would disturb them during the interview. If the participant is comfortable with someone who is around them, we will move to the next part.

The interviewer will then explain the steps she has taken to ensure privacy on her side of the video call (e.g. earphones, a private room, noise machine, and HIPAA-compliant platform). The interviewer will then ask if the participant has any questions or concerns. If so, these will be answered. The interviewer will then reiterate that the interview will be recorded both via otter.ai and via Zoom. She will explain these recordings will be used for accuracy in transcribing the interview and will be securely stored in a password-protected external hard drive which will be kept behind two locked doors.

Consent for the interview will be given and recorded prior to the start of the interview. Once consent is obtained, the interviewer will begin with warm-up questions that will lead in to the interview.

Warm-Up Questions:

1. Do you feel ready to start the interview?
2. Tell me about what made you interested in this study?

Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe to me what it's like to live life as a person of color who is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
 - a. What was it like to live life as a person of color?
 - b. What was it like to live life as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
 - c. Could you describe some experiences you've had where these two identities intersect?
2. Were there any intersectionalities or sociocultural contexts that may have contributed or made you vulnerable to sexual assault?
 - a. Add examples of what comprises sociocultural contexts – family, peers, religion, education...etc.
3. Can you describe some of the experiences that might have affected your mental health or wellness after the assault?
4. Do you feel like you have recovered or grown from this experience in any way? If you have, what was that like and could you give me some examples of how those realizations came about?

5. Is there anything else you think would be important for me to know regarding your experiences now that we've been talking about this for some time?

The interviewer will check in with the participant to see how they are doing both physically and emotionally. If needed, the participant will be given mental health resources via email prior to ending the video call. When the participant has acknowledged they have received the email, they will be asked if they would like to be entered in a draw for a gift card. If so, the interviewer will record their contact information. If not, the interviewer will thank them for their time and stop the recording. At this point, the interview will end, and the video call will be ended.

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