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# A Force to Be Reckoned With: College Women's Experiences With the #MeToo Movement.

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## Abstract

The hashtag #MeToo was created for use on social media platforms to allow survivors of sexual violence to share their experiences. Our study describes a phenomenological analysis of college women's experiences with the #MeToo movement and its impact on their help-seeking behaviors. Participants had varied reactions to the movement and experiences with help-seeking, but broadly experienced the movement as a positive force in society. Implications for college counselors and recommendations for future research are provided.

## Keywords

sexual assault, #MeToo, social media, college counseling, survivors of sexual assault

Sexual violence can cause devastating effects on a college woman's mental, social, emotional, and physical state and necessitates much attention and action. Sexual violence has been linked with increased risk for depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicide, substance use disorders, self-harm, and sexually transmitted infections (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network [RAINN], n.d.). Furthermore, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, college-age women (18–24 years) are three times more likely to experience sexual violence than women in other age groups (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Given both the extensive psychological effects of sexual violence and the elevated risk of sexual violence among college women, college counselors should continuously explore and improve survivor services (Conley & Griffith, 2016), support counseling referrals for survivors, and be well trained and educated about sexual violence in order to encourage disclosure and promote improved coping and well-being among college women (Hassija & Turchik, 2016).

A significant obstacle in caring for survivors of sexual violence is the hesitancy to self-disclose to helping professionals on college and university campuses. Although universities and colleges are well positioned to care for survivors of sexual violence (e.g., counseling center, Title IX office, victim advocates; Artime & Buchholz, 2016), individuals who experience sexual violence do not use these services as often as expected (Holland & Cortina, 2017). In Holland and Cortina's (2017) study, college students reported several reasons for not disclosing their experience with sexual violence, such as a fear of consequences, being questioned about where the violence occurred, and others minimizing the effect of the experience. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the factors associated with disclosure among college women, especially when it relates to sexual violence, as this understanding may serve as a key factor in dismantling societal factors that encourage shame or rejection of sexual violence survivors (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

Recent allegations of sexual violence by public figures have placed attention on the processes that survivors use to share their experiences of sexual violence, especially on survivors' use of social media. Zaleski et al. (2016) found that when sexual violence survivors feel marginalized by other forms of disclosure or reporting, they may use social media to regain power over their story. Social media interactions such as posts, shares, comments, and likes may provide an alternative way of engaging with individuals or groups without the need to be physically present (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017). As a result of recent events, the hashtag #MeToo was created to encourage and empower individuals to share their stories about experiences with sexual violence on various social media platforms.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how college women experienced the #MeToo movement as well as the impact of the movement on their help-seeking behaviors after experiencing sexual violence. We also wanted to understand their experiences seeking counseling to process experiences with sexual violence, their perceived barriers to treatment, and their recommendations for college counselors supporting survivors of sexual violence. Our goal was to provide college counselors with a better understanding of supportive factors and barriers to accessing services. We also sought to provide some guidance to college counselors who are interested in using social media to encourage

and empower students to seek support. For the purpose of this study, the term "sexual violence" encompasses participant experiences with incidents of sexual harassment and assault as defined by RAINN (n.d.).

## Method

This is a preliminary investigation into the #MeToo movement's impact on college women, with consideration for the varied nature of sexual violence, the numerous ways that individuals process such experiences, and the newness of the #MeToo movement. We used Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of college students interacting with the #MeToo movement and their help-seeking behaviors after experiencing sexual violence. This phenomenological study involved three core processes of knowing—epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation—as articulated by Moustakas (1994) and described in the following sections.

Information about the purpose of this study and individual consent forms for participation were hosted in Qualtrics, an online survey provider (<https://qualtrics.com>). Qualitative data were gathered using in-depth, individual semistructured interviews with participants, each lasting between 30 and 120 minutes.

### Data Collection and Analysis

After receiving institutional review board approval, we recruited participants through multiple sources. We used social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and LinkedIn) to post the recruitment criteria and the Qualtrics link for participation. We also sent recruitment emails with the Qualtrics link for participation to randomly selected colleagues at universities across the United States to pass on to their students. College students who were interested in being part of the study submitted their contact information through Qualtrics and were subsequently contacted to schedule an individual interview.

Ten individuals consented to be contacted, and six participants completed semistructured phone interviews. Following each transcription, data were analyzed using the constant comparative process, wherein we continually coded meaningful statements by cyclically engaging with and disengaging from the data, both independently and in joint discussion. These processes worked to facilitate phenomenological reduction and horizontalization of the data, wherein each unit of meaning from every participant was treated with equal importance (Moustakas, 1994). Next, we worked to create a textural description by clustering the horizontalized data into preliminary themes and contexts which explained participants' experiences with sexual violence in the current cultural and sociopolitical #MeToo era. We then synthesized the themes to reflect the meaning associated with each aspect of the participants' lived experiences. This process was supported with thick, contextual descriptions derived from individual interview transcriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

### Participants

Despite the scope and duration of recruitment, a relatively small number of participants consented to be contacted for an interview, and even fewer ( $N = 6$ ) ultimately participated in the study. Participants who completed the interview were adult women attending undergraduate- and graduate-level

university programs in the United States. Because of the disenfranchising and disempowering nature of sexual violence, we allowed participants to control the narrative around their experiences by disclosing only those demographics they were comfortable sharing as related to their experiences with sexual violence. For this reason, participants are not linked with their specific ages, ethnicities, or programs of study. Participants chose the following pseudonyms: Brooke, Carol, Nicole, Noelle, Ruth, and Survivalist.

### Lens of the Researchers

The first author is an assistant professor of counselor education and a licensed professional counselor at a mid-size university with specialization in trauma and substance use. The second author is an assistant professor of counselor education at a small university and a licensed professional counselor who specializes in child and adolescent mental health, crisis and trauma work, gender issues, and disordered eating. Both authors have experience working with clients who have experienced sexual violence as well as personal experiences with sexual violence that inform their understanding of the impact of these issues on women across the life span.

### Trustworthiness

Throughout data analysis, we continually engaged in dialogue and individual reflection via journaling to bracket our experiences, preconceived notions, and personal histories with sexual violence to allow meaning to arise from participant narratives, honoring Moustakas's (1994) focus on epoché. We used member checking, prolonged and persistent engagement, and continuous consultation between researchers as additional strategies for ensuring trustworthiness of the data.

Participants were invited to review the transcripts of their individual interviews to provide them with the opportunity to correct, expand upon, or alter aspects of their stories. Although all participants acknowledged the receipt of their interview transcripts, only one participant (Survivalist) provided corrections. Next, prolonged and persistent engagement necessitated treating each aspect of the data as equally important and repeatedly reviewing the original data to ensure nothing was missed. We met multiple times to review individual units of meaning, subthemes, and themes, often reorganizing data points throughout this process and spending extensive time in dialogue when disparate understandings about units of meaning arose. Lastly, we engaged in frequent conversations about the impact of repeatedly engaging with narratives about sexual violence on our understanding and interpretation of the data, taking breaks from analysis to process personal reactions to participants' stories when needed.

## Results

We discuss five overarching themes: influence of the #MeToo movement, impact of sexual violence on self and others, disclosing and seeking help for sexual violence, the counseling process, and personal growth. Two themes contained subthemes.

### Influence of the #MeToo Movement

Participants reflected on their experiences with the #MeToo movement, including thoughts about the movement's purpose and impact, both on themselves as individuals and on society at a broader level. To begin, participants described the ways in which they had interacted with the movement, which

varied along a continuum from passive, to active, to observational. Brooke described her hesitation in using the hashtag, indicating it would require her to "be vulnerable in a social space by putting the hashtag, which lets people know this thing happened to me." Noelle stated that although she did not post using the hashtag, she wanted "to support girls who were speaking out for the first time and were... finally being heard." Nicole shared that she posted in order "to be part of that voice, because sometimes people don't have a voice," noting that if she could "have a voice and make a difference, then that could be one less victim." Carol and Survivalist described multiple postings to share their own experiences with sexual assault and harassment and to show solidarity with other survivors.

Not all participants found #MeToo and its prevalence on social media platforms to be positive. Ruth perceived the movement as inaccessible to "everyday" people, indicating it was easier for celebrities to engage with the movement, as they could "almost... go back to their lives again" after disclosing their experiences. Brooke described the movement as a "weird phenomenon," and although she "thought it was pretty brave for people to post," she was "sort of simultaneously... kind of angry about this... urge for people to... disclose something very personal... on social media, where I don't necessarily think it belongs." She wrestled with the perceived pressure to post using the hashtag, because it seemed like "everybody else was doing it," but ultimately decided that "social media is not the place where I need to put that out there."

Participants shared their beliefs about the movement's perceived impact on themselves, their communities, and on society. Survivalist expressed remorse that "it had to come down to the #MeToo campaign" to give a voice to survivors of sexual assault and harassment, but still perceived the movement as "very necessary." This was echoed by Carol and Ruth, who described the movement as "empowering." Survivalist described the hashtag as a way to identify those in her circle who might need support, and she indicated that she used it to "encourage other people to seek help." On a more personal level, participants felt aligned with the #MeToo movement. Noelle and Ruth, respectively, shared that "there were people I could identify with," and "I honestly think it [the movement] was actually telling my story!"

In terms of societal impact, Carol noted that the movement made her realize "how ubiquitous [sexual assault] is throughout our culture" and that it was "all too common still." Survivalist expressed that "the laws need to be changed," and Carol said that "the constant sexual abuse that happened in our culture and in our society needs a voice." There was also a message of accountability with others. Ruth said that now, "it is very important for people to have this realization that [sexual assault] happens way more often than people think." Noelle expressed that since the movement opened up the conversation about sexual assault, "it made it easier to encourage people to seek help or just get counseling because [sexual assault] was just being talked about," a view echoed by Survivalist, who described the hashtag as something that "broadened and opened up the entire conversation" about assault. However, when it came to social action, she also admonished that "if you are not part of the solution then you are part of the problem." Noelle echoed these sentiments, noting that social media could be a powerful platform, but "it stops being powerful if it doesn't go anywhere from there."

### Impact of Sexual Violence on Self and Others

Participants explored the impact of their experiences with sexual violence on their functioning across various life dimensions. Nicole shared her experience of isolation and described feeling "out of touch"

with her community; she said she didn't believe that "anyone was going to validate" her experience and shared that "going through it alone was easier than bringing it to a community that wouldn't support me."

After an assault, isolation may lead to or exacerbate other issues. Survivalist shared that after the abuse, the isolation experienced by survivors may turn "into that pathology of depression or self-harm," and discussed her personal struggles with suicidality. Although Noelle was never directly told that it would be her fault if she was assaulted, she felt like she had "done something to deserve it... because I felt like I gained this reputation somehow, and it wasn't his fault because he thought I was that girl." Ruth, however, "had a lot of issues putting an emotion" to her experience, stating that it "kind of scared" her and she "just repressed it and avoided it." Brooke described a different experience, indicating that she "felt bad because I actually didn't feel that bad" after her assault; she worked to accept the experience as "part of my history and my dating history and just sort of was able to move on after that."

When individuals experience sexual violence, it can change the dynamic of their relationships with loved ones, friends, and colleagues. Survivalist reflected on the impact of sexual violence, indicating that such experiences may make individuals "susceptible to be abused by others" and at risk of being "taken over by narcissists and takers." She noted that her experiences with abuse "followed me through my adulthood, through marriages" and impacted the way in which she raised her daughter. She wanted to teach her daughter that sexual assault and harassment are "never acceptable." As a result of her experiences, Survivalist "sped into action to protect [her] sisters" as a way of safeguarding them from abusive situations. Like Survivalist, Carol also shared that in her marriage, she and her husband are "really aware of" and "work with" her past sexual trauma. Noelle shared the importance of counseling in helping her "[get] past [the assault]," noting that now she is "in a really good relationship." Ruth explained that after she was assaulted, her peers at school "assumed I just like, lost my virginity and it was cool," and when her mother found out about the assault, her mother "confronted [her] about it." When she tried to tell her mother "the actual truth," her mother "didn't believe" her. Ruth also talked about the difficulty of navigating mutual friendships with her perpetrator, stating that her friends at home were "still friends with him." Carol talked about how her experience affected other relationships in her life. In her professional life, she experiences "a somatic response" when working with sex offenders, and in her personal life, "it still rears its head," as she is "hyper aware" of her children.

In addition to these personal narratives, participants also shared their thoughts about societal messages surrounding sexual violence. Survivalist shared her thoughts about occupational culture and thought that women who work "in a male-dominated industry" are "more prepared to go ahead and accept the consequences" of naming their perpetrators. Carol expanded on this, noting that while "it's not even limited to female assault... women are getting a voice and these behaviors are not OK." Noelle expressed her frustration with the "victim blaming" that survivors may experience in their relationships following sexual violence. She talked about the broader societal impact of "the way we raise our children," as "it perpetuates the culture of like, girls need to be careful, and boys will be boys."

## Disclosing and Seeking Help for Sexual Violence

Our participants experienced a wide range of responses after disclosing their experiences with sexual violence. For some participants, disclosure or help-seeking did not happen immediately after the assault. Brooke shared that she "waited several months before seeing a therapist." Survivalist was 4 years old when she remembered her first assault and stated, "The first time I went to my mother [about the assaults], I was 15 years old." Carol shared that her first experience with assault happened when she was 8 and continued until she was 12. She described trying to "come in sideways and tell an adult about what was going on," but was "completely shut down" by the person she trusted. Feeling "deflated and shamed," she did not seek further help for her experiences until adulthood. The next time she experienced an assault was as an adult, when she "was touched by a coworker inappropriately in the workplace" and "went to exactly the right person and that person shut [her] perpetrator down very quickly and harshly."

Brooke indicated that she told her friends "immediately after it happened, but nobody made a big deal out of it." Ruth talked about her experience disclosing to her mother, noting that her mother "denied" her experience, and, rather than assisting her in seeking help following sexual violence, "confronted" her about it and "didn't believe" her story. For Survivalist, she shared that when she "did try telling her [mother], she believed me about the uncle but she didn't believe me about... my dad," who her mother had witnessed assaulting her in childhood. Carol shared that when she tried to disclose, she "was told that, that kind of stuff was in my imagination, that kind of stuff doesn't happen."

Participants shared various ways and people they turned to for help or to cope with the effects of sexual violence. Although Nicole said that she was "almost ready to just quit," she was able to rely on her best friend for support when memories of the event began to "eat [her] up inside." Noelle discussed the impact of her faith and religious community on her attempts to effectively cope with her assault: "I don't need your prayer, I need your hugs and I need your ear... like I need these things and I need support." Ruth indicated that her help-seeking behaviors evolved as she grew older. When she first experienced sexual assault in high school, she sought help indirectly from her school counselor, and when other events happened later in life, she was able to find support in both individual and group therapy.

Nicole shared that she started counseling for other issues: "I was already in counseling when some of the other things happened, and so we talked about it [assault], but I don't know if I would've sought counseling if I wasn't in it already. Like, the reason that I got counseling for it is because I was there for other things first." Ruth sought counseling for other issues and shared that she would "go to her with like, certain things, but it helped with dealing with the event [sexual violence] without me having to talk about the event."

Participants shared multiple factors that contributed to challenges with help-seeking and, in some cases, led to them never receiving the support they needed following their experience. Nicole described her attempts to seek help as a "a long, drawn-out process" and lamented that she "wasn't able to get the help [she] needed very easily." Noelle talked about the impact of shame and self-doubt on her ability to reach out for help: "When something happened to me, I didn't report anything to anybody, because of those thoughts that went through my own head about myself," including concerns that she had "done something to make [her perpetrator] think that was OK." When it came to



seeking help from within her community, Noelle expressed that she "felt like they were not going to be supportive," as her Christian community had a culture where "a lot of things happened that... at that time, you don't think of as being a problem, but then later, you're like... Wow! That was so inappropriate." Brooke expressed concern that others might push survivors into seeking help before they were ready, ultimately further stigmatizing the experience; she felt it was important that people "decide for themselves whether they're going to seek that support."

Sometimes, not knowing who to trust or where to go can be a barrier to seeking help. Carol expressed that "the first time that I had experienced sexual assault was when I was 8 years old, and so at that point I was a child and had no clue what was happening," ultimately leaving her childhood sexual assault "untreated for a very long time." Noelle shared that rather than actively coping with her trauma, her "immediate reaction is just to like, shove it down inside myself and... not think about it." Others, like Survivalist, may perceive seeking help as dangerous. She shared that when she was 4, she "did not seek help because the perpetrator had threatened [her]."

### The Counseling Process

The counseling process theme highlights participants' beliefs about the counseling process and encompasses characteristics they desired in their counselors as well as ways in which they wanted to be therapeutically supported through their recovery from sexual violence.

*Counselor characteristics.* Participants talked extensively about the characteristics they would like to see in college counselors who work with survivors of sexual violence. In terms of concrete recommendations, Ruth described her preferences for a female counselor, indicating she preferred "seeing a woman" to process through her experiences with sexual assault. Other participants explored competencies needed for working effectively with survivors. Survivalist conceptualized the counselor as more than a mental health practitioner, seeing effective counselors as liaisons with campus resource officers and policy advocates; she recommended that counselors be "knowledgeable about the other services offered on campus" and involved in "establishing policies making it easier on the victims" to seek needed help. Carol talked about the importance of the counselor's relational connection with their clients and the need to make explicit statements of support for the survivor's journey, noting that the counselor should convey that they "care about you" and will "support whatever you need." She also discussed the willingness to allow clients to process sexual violence at their own pace, noting they must show "acceptance of whatever [clients] bring in: believing it, allowing it, then support as they process it." In keeping with this relational discussion, Brooke noted the importance of "being open and being available and making sure... the student is aware that they're not going to be judged."

Moreover, some participants discussed the requisite knowledge base and skill set that college counselors should possess when working with survivors. Carol contended that counselors must understand that survivors may present differently than other clients due to an "added little facet of shame and feeling unworthy," a statement supported by Noelle, who noted she had "sought counseling for other things," but had never dealt with her experiences with sexual violence because "for so long I had felt like when it came to this thing, it was my fault when something happened." Ruth talked about the importance of the counselor's attention to their own internal processes, including "self-awareness of biases" they may hold about survivors and attention to "counselor self-care," as the

practitioner must have the "capacity to hold" pain, because "it isn't going to be just the client processing this."

*Ways of doing counseling.* Participants had recommendations for college counselors in terms of how to structure the counseling process from assessment through intervention. They also discussed the importance of working with other treatment providers to create a holistic support system for recovery.

Survivalist noted that counselors must be aware that survivors of sexual violence may come to counseling for other presenting concerns and only disclose their experiences after trust and rapport have been built. She recommended a "slow-going, ongoing assessment for those things," an assertion expanded by Carol, who indicated that counselors should "ask questions and probe and unpack in a safe way." Nicole noted the importance of a comprehensive assessment, cautioning counselors against simply "focusing on one part of the problem," because "if the client isn't comfortable sharing everything, then they're not necessarily going to reach out" for support around issues of sexual violence. She noted this may keep counselors from "getting to the root of the issue" and lead to "superficially solving the problem" and "not helping the client to really heal."

Nicole described the importance of attending to the physical needs of clients by inquiring about how survivors' "health care has been... since [their] sexual assault" as well as being willing to collaborate with other treatment providers, such as the client's primary care physician or psychiatrist, to "be on the same page" because "all different professions take a different approach" and a lack of communication between providers "may be harmful to the client." In terms of specific treatment strategies, participants discussed the importance of the counselor providing particular coping strategies, as "survivors kind of cope maybe maladaptively" after experiencing sexual assault and harassment. Specific approaches mentioned by participants as helpful to their recovery included taking a "holistic approach," helping the client develop mindfulness skills, using the Seeking Safety curriculum (Najavits, 2002), attending to the pain clients may feel "emotionally and spiritually," and recommending group therapy with other survivors. Beyond these therapeutic strategies, Brooke wanted to remind counselors that the therapeutic process "depends on what the person needs," as "there is not a one-size-fits-all answer."

## Personal Growth

The theme of personal growth reflects participant narratives related to becoming aware of and taking ownership of their stories and their bodies, finding empowerment after their experiences with sexual violence, and being an advocate for themselves and others.

*Awareness of the experience.* Noelle shared that it was not until coming to college that she became aware of the extent of her victimization; she noted it was "shocking" to realize "how long and how many times [she] had been a victim" and had not known until participating in her university's mandatory Title IX training for all incoming students. Carol shared that although her first assault happened when she was 8, it was not until she "grew into adulthood" that she "understood sexual assault." Survivalist shared that she first went to her mother when she was 15 years old, but knew earlier that something was wrong. She shared that she remembers her "first rape being at the age of 4 by a nonfamily member." As a child, she didn't "want to get into trouble, so I didn't say a word, and things kept happening throughout my life."

*Ownership and self-empowerment.* The subtheme of ownership and self-empowerment reflects the process of participants reclaiming the narrative around sexual violence and growing into themselves as survivors. The process of becoming empowered and taking ownership of their experiences with sexual violence came from several different avenues for our participants. Survivalist noted that "during all the years of treatment, I finally found my voice," and that her motivation to move forward came from her daughter, who was her "courage to seek help and, as hard as it was, to struggle through every single day, sometimes every single second." Ruth described her journey toward self-empowerment as "a work in progress" that necessitated allowing herself to be uncomfortable in the service of personal growth, because "part of growth is being uncomfortable." Carol talked about the importance of education in the service of self-empowerment, indicating that through her experiences in the military, she became a "force to be reckoned with." She noted that she became "really aware of what's not appropriate" and her personal boundaries became "crystal clear," so that when she experienced other victimizing situations she was able to "shut down" her perpetrators, because she "had adult wisdom and... knew what to do with it." She also noted, "As I grew into adulthood, I understood sexual assault and personal space, and I don't know that anybody would have had the courage to sexually assault me." Beyond her own growth, Survivalist had a particularly powerful message for survivors, imploring them to take ownership of their story: "Don't allow anyone to take your story from you. It is yours and yours alone. Whether they believe you or not, don't let anyone take your story. You keep going out there and you keep telling it."

*Advocacy for self and others.* Engaging in advocacy for themselves and others was an important component of recovery for some participants. For example, Nicole described engaging in the #MeToo movement and participating in the present study as "very beneficial to bringing awareness and changing the dynamics to the response to these situations." She described her participation as a way to "bring clarity to my own journey, because like, how far I've been able to come," as well as to potentially "help somebody else in their journey, too." She indicated that using her voice to "make a difference" could ultimately lead to "one less victim" of sexual assault. Carol echoed these sentiments; she felt empowered to advocate for others who "didn't have their own voice" and framed herself as someone who was "willing to step forward and hold their hand and speak with them" when they experienced similar situations. A few participants also talked about advocating to create a better world for their current and future children. Survivalist described the importance of empowering her daughter "even at an early age" to use her voice, because she "would never want my daughter to go through the things that I went through and experienced." Noelle indicated that in the future, she wanted to "raise [her] children [to be]... very aware of these kinds of things."

In terms of broader societal change, some participants talked about directing advocacy efforts toward legislative change and modifying the ways in which first responders treat survivors of sexual assault. Nicole described the importance of having "law enforcement be more aware of victims' and survivors' struggles, because they may not understand well," and recommended directed training to help them become "more compassionate." Survivalist believed that the "laws need to be changed" regarding the statute of limitations for the prosecution of sexual assault, as survivors deserve the opportunity to have their voices heard for traumas that occurred in early childhood as well. Survivalist also noted the importance of "making men more conscious" about the realities of sexual violence, both to hold them accountable for their behavior and to ensure they are part of the conversation around consent.

## Discussion

Our results reflect a sample of undergraduate- and graduate-level women's lived experiences with the #MeToo movement. On the basis of the data, units of meaning analyzed, and themes observed, we found that our participants broadly experienced the movement as a supportive force in society, a safe place to connect with others who have survived sexual violence, and a catalyst for encouraging others to seek help following sexual violence. The women also shared their own experiences with sexual violence, highlighting the barriers to seeking help they experienced in their lives, including a lack of knowledge of the supportive resources available to them, fear of retribution from their perpetrators, and anxiety about having others deny or minimize their experiences.

Filipas and Ullman (2001) described the importance of positive, supportive reactions from others on sexual violence survivors' recovery, noting that survivors who experience disbelief, shaming, and victim blame from informal (i.e., friends) or formal (i.e., counselors) support systems following a disclosure demonstrate poorer psychological adjustment over time. Our results, taken in context with previous studies (Conley & Griffith, 2016; Hassija & Turchik, 2016), reflect the importance of college counselors being trained to respond to assault survivors in a supportive manner that does not further stigmatize the person or the event.

Many of our participants found a supportive community with the #MeToo movement that spurred within them personal growth and a desire to advocate for themselves and others. In her investigation of the experiences of posttraumatic growth in adult sexual violence victims, Ullman (2014) found positive social reactions from others, perceived control over recovery, and adaptive individual coping to be predictors of growth following an assault. Our participants described the importance of the #MeToo movement in creating a safe place where they could connect with and be supported by other survivors, as well as an avenue in which to encourage themselves and others to seek counseling and other supportive services following sexual violence. Accordingly, the #MeToo movement's impact on broader society may be its ability to facilitate posttraumatic growth in survivors by providing support that is continuously accessible through social media platforms. Feelings of empowerment, stronger relationships, and access to emotional and social support contribute to posttraumatic growth (Mohr & Rosen, 2017). Given the popularity and easy access of social media sites, it may be that college counselors need to explore innovative ways, outside of face-to-face meetings and groups in the counseling center, to create this sense of community and support among college women through social media (e.g., private support groups on Facebook, consistent inspirational messages on any social media platform).

### Implications for College Counselors

We highlight the importance of comprehensive, ongoing assessment that includes focused questions about clients' experiences with sexual violence. Many participants indicated they reached out to counselors with other concerns while their experiences with sexual violence remained unaddressed. During the assessment process, college counselors should be skilled in facilitating conversations around sexual violence in a way that does not inadvertently shame or stigmatize the client, as participants highlighted the pain they felt when their experiences were minimized or denied by those they had reached out to for help. In terms of the structure of treatment, participants mentioned several ways they would like to be supported by college counselors, giving recommendations about

preferred modalities (i.e., group therapy, integrated care with other treatment providers) as well as helpful interventions (e.g., grounding exercises, mindfulness strategies, the Seeking Safety curriculum [Najavits, 2002]).

These results have implications beyond individual and group counseling relationships as well. College counselors can consider using social media to start campus-wide conversations and reduce the stigma that sexual violence survivors experience. Several participants shared how empowering it was for them to engage with #MeToo online and its potential impact on survivors' willingness to reach out for help personally and professionally. University counseling centers should consider strengthening their social media presence and using platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to encourage college students to take advantage of the therapeutic services offered. They might also use these platforms to create or share content in support of survivors of sexual violence by amplifying the stories of individuals within the #MeToo movement or posting safety and prevention tips created by organizations such as RAINN. Other recommendations for university counseling centers include creating counselor-led support groups for survivors of sexual assault, given that those who participated in group therapy described the group's role in providing shared understanding and giving them the courage to tell their stories after experiencing denial and shame for many years.

Although this section has focused specifically on recommendations for college counselors, the entire university community should be involved in the process of supporting survivors of sexual violence. For more information on creating campus communities of care that support survivors, see Monahan-Kreishman and Ingarfield (2008).

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

We obtained limited knowledge about participant backgrounds, asking individuals to volunteer only the information they felt necessary to provide context to their experiences with sexual violence and the #MeToo movement. A lack of demographic information limits the transferability of the results and may also inadvertently decentralize minority experiences, as we cannot know about the specific multicultural factors at play. Furthermore, because people of color and gender and sexual minorities experience higher rates of sexual violence, specifically targeting diverse participants would add richness to the results and attend to issues of intersectionality that surround sexual violence (Monahan-Kreishman & Ingarfield, 2008). Moreover, although we perceived both richness and thickness in our data, as evidenced by no new data and no new themes arising throughout the data horizontalization and analysis process, we recognize and agree that replication of this study with (a) more participants and (b) a more ethnic- and gender-diverse sample will be beneficial.

Although this is speculative, participants may have been hesitant to engage in this study due to its scope and aims. Reliving one's experience with sexual violence is difficult, and we are grateful to those participants who elected to make themselves vulnerable so that we might understand their lived experiences in the context of the #MeToo era. Finally, another limitation to this study could be associated with the types of questions asked. Participants might not have talked about certain aspects of their experiences with sexual violence and the #MeToo movement unless asked directly about them through the semistructured interview protocol, and it could be that different kinds of questions would have yielded different responses or outcomes.

Because no men volunteered to participate in this study, our recommendations for future research include specifically soliciting male participants to understand their lived experiences with sexual violence in the #MeToo era. Such research might help to combat the stigmatization felt by male survivors by giving a voice to their stories and highlighting the importance of seeking support following sexual violence. Finally, our participants had varied experiences with sexual violence throughout their lifetimes, with experiences occurring while in college and at other ages. Future research could specifically investigate violence that occurred during college, on a college campus, or both, to further understand the help-seeking behaviors of college students immediately following such an event.

## Footnotes

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