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**Title: “Who could help me? There was nothing. I brought it on myself”: A qualitative study exploring UK university student experiences of sexual violence**

**Authors:** Nina Higson-Sweeney<sup>1</sup> & Jane Meyrick<sup>2</sup>

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Bath

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, University of the West of England

**Corresponding author:** Nina Higson-Sweeney, [nhs35@bath.ac.uk](mailto:nhs35@bath.ac.uk)

**[Trigger warning: Sexual violence]**

**Abstract**

Research suggests that university students are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and that most incidents remain unreported. Little qualitative research has been conducted to explore this further in the context of the UK. The current study used qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of 11 university students currently studying at UK institutions, with data analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three key themes were generated, which collectively narrate the decision-making process students navigate after experiencing sexual violence: (1) Making sense of sexual violence; (2) Barriers to disclosure; and (3) Navigating support. Three key take-home messages are outlined.

## **Introduction**

Sexual violence, referring to unwanted, forced or coerced sexual acts and behaviours committed or attempted without freely given consent (Basile et al., 2014), is a pervasive issue of international concern. Although anyone can be victim to sexual violence, women are disproportionately affected, with estimates that 1 in 3 will experience sexual and/or physical violence during their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2013). At the same time, we also know that incidences of sexual violence are significantly underreported, with approximately 85% of incidents not disclosed to authorities in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2013; Office for National Statistics, 2021). Similar findings have been reported worldwide (e.g., Sinha, 2015), collectively indicating that available statistics are significantly under-representative of incidence. There are numerous reasons why victim-survivors may not formally disclose, including structural barriers, societal attitudes, inequalities, and other contextual factors (Sable et al., 2006; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011). Low reporting rates are particularly concerning given the consequences of sexual violence, such as physical or mental health difficulties, which can be immediate or long-term, and can occur directly or indirectly as a result of assault (Jina & Thomas, 2013).

Despite the extent and severity of sexual violence in the general population, prevalence studies highlight that certain populations are more vulnerable, particularly female university students (Conley et al. 2017). Most research on this topic to-date has been conducted in the United States, which estimate that up to 44% of students will experience sexual violence whilst at university, and 15%-25% of students will experience it in their lifetime (Cantor et al., 2015; Conley et al., 2017). These findings are comparable to the limited research conducted in the UK, which suggests 68% of female students experience sexual harassment, 25% experience sexual assault, and only 2%-10% of incidents are formally reported to either institutions or the police (National Union of Students, 2011). Researchers have proposed that the increased coercive and non-consensual experiences reported by students may be due to the predominance of rape culture within universities, combined with factors

like being away from home for the first time, increased use of alcohol, and entering into regular sexual relationships (Adam-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). The fact that university demographics include large proportions of those most at risk of sexual violence (young women) and those most likely to perpetrate sexual violence (young men) compounds the issue (Towl & Walker, 2019).

In the UK, there is a gap in our knowledge regarding student sexual violence. We know its pervasive and that students are unlikely to formally disclose their experiences, but there is limited research from a student perspective as to why this might be. Understanding this is an important next step if we want to tackle and end violence against women and girls. The current study was conducted as a dissertation for a Masters in Health Psychology degree, and sought to qualitatively explore university students' lived experiences of sexual violence, with a focus on exploring how students understand sexual violence, seek help for it, and approach disclosure. For the purposes of this study, 'sexual violence' is used to describe all unwanted, forced or coerced sexual acts and behaviours committed or attempted by a person without the freely given consent of another (Basile et al., 2014; Universities UK, 2016). The term 'victim-survivor' is used to describe anyone who has experienced sexual violence as defined above.

## **Method**

Data was collected using qualitative semi-structured interviews, which were aided by a flexible topic guide and audio-recorded. The topic guide comprised a series of open-ended questions, developed with a focus on exploring participants' lived experience whilst allowing them to remain in control and share as little or as much as they wanted. Topics covered included their personal experiences of sexual violence (e.g., 'Tell me your story'), their understanding of report and support services (e.g. 'What was your knowledge about reporting and support services before this happened?'), and their experiences of disclosure (e.g., 'Can you talk me through your decision not to

tell anyone?'). Prompts (e.g. 'What was that like?') were included to follow-up on interesting areas and aid the collection of rich, in-depth data.

The research took an exploratory, experientialist approach, focusing on the lived experience of victim-survivors. Participant recruitment took place from January 2020 to April 2020, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling through social media and physical posters. Participants were eligible to take part if they were 18 years or older, were fluent in English, and had been a university student within the past 5 years. Interviews initially took place in-person but became remote during the COVID-19 pandemic and ranged in length from 20 minutes to two hours. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a method that focuses on the systematic identification, analysis and reporting of patterns in qualitative data in rich detail. Reflexivity refers to the process of a researcher critically reflecting on how their positionality may affect the research being conducted (Berger, 2015); this was done using a reflexive diary and supervision. Analysis was completed using NVivo and followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarisation; code generation; searching for themes; reviewing themes; consolidating and naming themes; and producing the report.

The research conducted adhered to ethical guidelines and received ethical approval from the University of the West of England's ethics committee. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, risk management and mitigation strategies were employed to protect participants and researchers. Examples of this include: developing a comprehensive risk management protocol involving counselling psychologists and sexual violence experts; compiling a resource list of local support services, which was provided to victim-survivors before and after the interview; and the lead author receiving a one-to-one training session with a local sexual violence support service about interviewing and working with victim-survivors, focused on language use, managing distress, and secondary trauma (Williamson et al., 2020).

## Results

### *Participant Characteristics*

Eleven participants took part, aged between 18 and 31 years ( $M = 24.20$  years,  $SD = 4.26$ ; one male). All participants had experienced some form of sexual violence, either before or during attending university (see Table 1 for participant characteristics).

**Table 1.**

### *Participant characteristics*

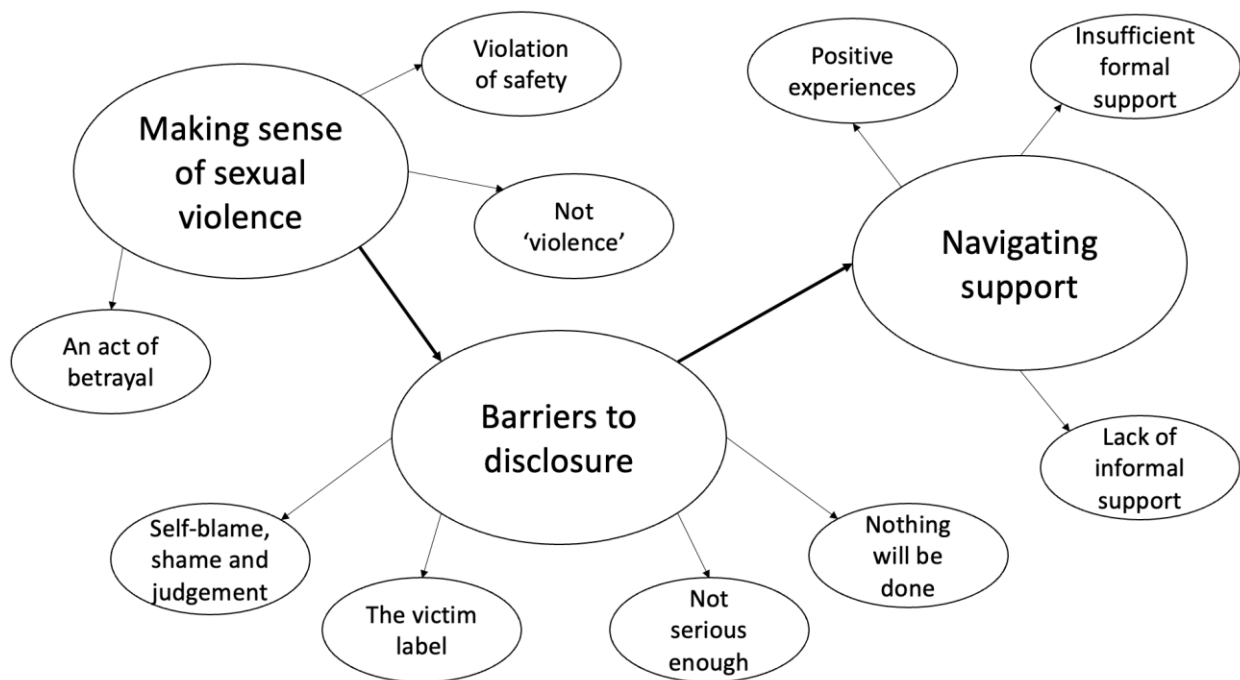
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Reported incident?</b>
Imogen	21	Female	White British	Undergraduate	Yes, to the police
Olivia	21	Female	White British	Undergraduate	No
Rosie	23	Female	White British	Postgraduate	No
Lucy	31	Female	White British	Undergraduate	No
Sophie	30	Female	White British	Postgraduate	No
Camila	26	Female	Mixed Mediterranean and Asian	Postgraduate	No
Jess	21	Female	White British	Undergraduate	No
Farah	21	Female	Pakistani	Undergraduate	No
Elena	28	Female	White European	Postgraduate	Yes, to the university
Paulina	26	Female	White British	Undergraduate	Yes, to the police
Aaron	18	Male	Mixed White and Asian	Undergraduate	No

**Analysis**

Thematic analysis generated three overarching themes (see Figure 1), which collectively highlight the journey student victim-survivors navigate after experiencing sexual violence. Each theme is summarised below, accompanied by pseudonymised illustrative quotes to support the analysis.

**Figure 1.**

*Thematic map*



*Theme 1: Making sense of sexual violence*

This theme encompasses how participants understood their experiences of sexual violence. The incidents were not experienced as clear-cut, and thus required the participants to actively make sense of what happened to them in order to process it. How these experiences were defined depended on the type of sexual violence experienced and who the perpetrator was.

In situations where the perpetrator was known, participants felt a strong sense of betrayal, which made the assault difficult to comprehend, and evoked mixed feelings of anger, shock, and

confusion. These feelings were directed externally towards the perpetrator, but also internally towards the victim-survivors.

*'I'm like how the hell can someone do that? Especially like he cared about me, I cared about him...it's insane how someone can inflict that amount of pain and harm.'* (Imogen)

In contrast, participants who were assaulted by acquaintances or strangers felt like their sense of safety had been violated. This often led to hypervigilant or avoidant behaviours, which affected their quality of life.

*'If someone felt confident enough to come at me during the day, how do I know that when I'm alone here something worse could happen?'* (Elena)

However, a common thread throughout most participant accounts were suggestions that terms like 'sexual violence' were "loaded" (Paulina), "very aggressive" and "polarising" (Sophie), and were associated with specific scenarios that did not match the participants' experiences. In particular, 'sexual violence' was understood to imply physical violence, and did not match experiences of harassment, coercion, and manipulation, which were common among participants.

*'Could I have consented? Could I have given the come on? Potentially. Is that rape? The lines are so murky...it's a difficult term to relate to.'*  
(Sophie)

## *Theme 2: Barriers to disclosure*

After participants tried to make sense of what had happened to them, they then had to consider whether they would disclose their experiences of sexual violence to others. At the core of this decision-making process were several overarching barriers.

A key barrier was the intense feelings of shame and embarrassment participants experienced, often stemming from self-blame. Participants were quite critical of themselves and their actions



leading up to the assault, and blamed themselves for being in a vulnerable position. This self-blame was intertwined with internalised rape myths regarding alcohol, women, and sex.

*'I had a history of being slightly promiscuous I guess you'd say, so I just kind of thought oh well, this is what you get.'* (Rosie)

Another barrier was the fear of the victim label, which was understood by participants as all-encompassing and inescapable once an assault was reported. Participants feared that disclosure would change others' perceptions of them, and that the label of the victim would outstrip the rest of their identity.

*'I don't wanna be denoted as a victim for fucking rest of my- 'cause that's hard to live down as well, like you're a victim, how do you get on from that?'* (Imogen)

For many participants, there was also the perception that their experience of sexual violence was not serious enough to be reported, particularly in cases of harassment. There seemed to be an unspoken boundary between behaviours that were uncomfortable but acceptable, and ones that were worthy of the police or university's time.

*'If it was something worth reporting, I'd report it.'* (Aaron)  
*'[Reporting] has not been a consideration, 'cause it doesn't feel bad enough for that. It feels uncomfortable, but I don't feel like I'm in danger.'* (Jess)

Finally, participants were not confident that reporting would result in demonstrable action from the police or their institution. In the context of the criminal justice system, it was understood that convictions require objective evidence:

*"[The police are] all very like black and white...either it happened or it didn't happen."* (Imogen)

As many of the participants' experiences were "murky" (Sophie), it was presumed that "nothing will be done" (Paulina) and cases would be dismissed. This led to participants feeling like disclosure "seems like it's more hassle than it's worth" (Farah).

### *Theme 3: Navigating support*

After considering some of the potential drawbacks to disclosure, the next stage for several participants – but not all – was to seek support, either formally or informally. Unfortunately, many experiences were not positive.

Some participants described a lack of support from friends, family, and partners, with reactions such as dismissal and victim-blaming. This reinforced the participants' self-blame and prevented further disclosures and help-seeking behaviours.

*'What really you would hope in that situation is that they would hug you and they would console you but he literally got out of the bed and lay on the floor and said I cannot be near you. And I'd never felt so awful in my life...I just felt like I can't trust anybody, I can't trust anybody with this information.'* (Paulina)

Formal support was also lacking for many. This came from the police, from healthcare professionals, and also from academics, who were described as "ill-equipped" (Paulina) to appropriately deal with disclosures.

*'I held back a ton of information, I didn't say about any of the injuries and then that specific police officer ignored me for two months, and I left about eight or ten voicemails, I rang 101 constantly every day, I was like where the fuck is this police officer?'* (Imogen)

*'It sounded like he didn't really want to know...nothing came about from it, I just got the extension and that was it really, it was never brought up again.'* (Camila)

However, some participants did have positive reactions to disclosure, which was experienced as validating and as a relief. These had the potential to mitigate damage caused by previous unhelpful responses, and also prompted further disclosures.

*'It all just kind of came out, so obviously I did want to tell somebody...I probably would have not told anybody had she not noticed.'* (Rosie)

## **Discussion**

The current study aimed to explore students' lived experience of sexual violence, with a focus on increasing our knowledge of how students make sense of it and seek help for it. The three themes demonstrate the journey that student victim-survivors go through after an assault, ranging from sense-making through to seeking support. From this research, there are three key take-home messages from this research.

1. Students may struggle to recognise their experiences as sexual violence, and part of this may be due to the language used, which evokes imagery of physical violence rather than harassment or coercive control. This lack of recognition may delay acknowledgement of their assault, leading to further delays in help-seeking and disclosure (Ahrens et al., 2010). During this period, the potential consequences of sexual violence, such as physical or mental health issues, remain unaddressed and may get worse (Ruggiero et al., 2004).

2. Student victim-survivors often perceive disclosure as something with negative consequences, and there was limited discussion as to the benefits. This fits with Schwarz et al.'s (2017) description of how victim-survivors calculate a cost-benefit analysis of disclosure, based on factors such as 'Will I be believed?', 'Is this my fault?', and 'Will I remember enough facts to report

effectively?', which relate to internalised rape myths. This model is reflected throughout the second theme.

3. If students do decide to disclose, either formally or informally, the support is often poor and can reinforce feelings of self-blame and stigma (Bonnar-White et al., 2018; Orchowksi & Gidycz, 2015). In turn, this can detract from future attempts to disclose. However, positive reactions to disclosure may have the potential to mitigate the consequences of former negative disclosures, aid recovery, and encourage further help-seeking (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014).

In conclusion, the current study has explored students' experiences of sexual violence and adds to our understanding of how victim-survivors conceptualise sexual violence, consider disclosure, and navigate support. It gives insight into the decision-making process behind disclosure, and highlights barriers presented through internalised rape myths, victim-blaming and inadequate support, which is supported by the wider literature (Ahrens et al., 2010; Sable et al., 2006; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011). There is a need for institution-wide change, both practically and culturally, and more research is required to understand how this can be done in the context of the UK. Findings from the current study indicate that potential avenues of interest may include adaptations to language used in reporting and support services, disclosure training for academics, and comprehensive sex education at a university level, addressing topics such as consent, healthy relationships, and being an active bystander.

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