The Culture of Nondisclosure of Sexual Abuse

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THE CULTURE OF NONDISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Upper Montclair, NJ

2018

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Katia Paz Goldfarb
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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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THE CULTURE OF NONDISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

THE CULTURE OF NONDISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

by Veronica R. Barrios

The existing understanding of the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse is almost entirely absent. It lacks a theoretical framework, an empirical exploration into how it occurs in family relationships, and little is known about disclosure barriers in practice. This dissertation will address these three areas through three separate but related papers. First, the researcher will present a new cohesive theoretical framework that integrates and expands on existing theories for nondisclosure and that incorporates how individual decision-making is nested within social and familial contexts. Second, the researcher will report on an exploratory research study about sibling relationships regarding sexual abuse disclosure. Finally, the researcher will present an interview guide for practitioners that aims to transform survivors’ consciousness around barriers to disclosure. This dissertation seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of nondisclosure of sexual abuse that addresses theory, research, and practice, in three separate but related papers. The culmination of these items elucidates the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse.

Key words: Sexual abuse disclosure, intersectionality, transformative interviewing, sibling relationships, violence
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DEDICATION

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The Culture of Nondisclosure of Sexual Abuse

CHAPTER I

Introduction

As this dissertation was written, the #MeToo, Time’s Up, and women’s movement have gained a large following. The #MeToo and Time’s Up movements have centered on women’s fight against sexual abuse and harassment. Of particular salience to this dissertation is the #MeToo movement since the following three papers, which culminate into the dissertation, focus on the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. We finally are seeing in our society millions of women marching for equality, disclosing on social media, and speaking out against sexual abuse and silencing of survivors. Millions of women believe that time is up for sexual harassment, discrimination, and assault. Yet, few have taken note of the fact that many of those who are speaking out are in positions of power; many of those who are finding justice are in positions of power; and many of those who are marching are in positions of power (Prois & Moreno, 2018). While it is great to see a movement pushing for disclosure and an end to abuse, it is it is important to understand that which creates nondisclosure, in order to increase disclosure.

The dissertation captures the voice of ordinary citizens who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and their experiences with barriers to disclosure and their disclosure processes. The dissertation includes a theoretical paper, a qualitative study, and a practice-oriented paper. To understand disclosure processes and barriers to disclosure, the researcher interviewed survivors of sexual violence who had disclosed. In other words, to examine nondisclosure, the researcher examined the process of disclosure.
for survivors to learn about barriers to disclosure and reactions post disclosure. The first paper will provide a new theory that integrates individual, familial and societal factors to develop a theoretically-rooted explanation for nondisclosure. The second is a qualitative research paper that will examine one filial microsystem, siblings, and disclosure between a survivor and her sibling. The third paper builds on the implications from the theoretical paper and the findings from the qualitative study to provide a survivor-informed revised transformational interview guide for human service practitioners working with survivors of sexual assault in order to help practitioners and survivors’ articulate individual, filial, and social reasons for nondisclosure.

**Sexual Abuse Victimization**

Sexual victimization is pandemic, given it occurs every 98 seconds (RAINN, 2018). The United States Department of Justice (2013) defines sexual abuse as:

any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. Falling under the definition of sexual assault are sexual activities such as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape.

The prevalence of sexual abuse among our population is broad reaching. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) report the following findings regarding sexual violence:

- 1 in 5 women have experienced rape
- 1 in 71 men have experienced rape
- 1 in 20 women and men experience sexual violence, not including rape
• 11.8% of high school girls and 4.5% of high school boys reported being forced into intercourse

Prevalence data may vary. For example, other research indicates that 1 out of 6 women and 1 out of 33 men have experienced attempted or completed rape (RAINN, 2018). As was defined earlier, rape is only one of the types of sexual victimization experienced by individuals in our society. Regardless, prevalence rates are quite high and the repercussions of assault are well documented. Sexual assault causes emotional and social problems (see Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), as well as physical and neurological problems (see Anda et al., 2006) for survivors. Sexual assaults, excluding child sexual abuse, cost the United States $127 billion per year (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2018). These findings are particularly intertwined with lack of disclosure. Without disclosure, the abuser is never identified as such. Society suffers when there is a lack of disclosure by allowing perpetrators to continue to victimize others. We are a reactive society, responding to trauma after it occurs rather than being proactive in preventing it (Tabachnick, 2013). Most sex offenders are never reported, therefore even fewer are legally tried (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2018). Our communities then have sexual predators, which we are unaware of, heightening risk for continued abuse but also preventing treatment for abusers. The problem with sexual assault is two-fold. There is the issue of sexual assault and its repercussions at the individual, family, and social level, but also there is the reality that sexual assault is not being disclosed as a result services are not being rendered and perpetrators are not being apprehended (Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013).
Nondisclosure of Sexual Abuse

Why is it that survivors are not disclosing? Some studies report that up to 80% of sexual assaults go unreported therefore the data regarding the prevalence of sexual abuse is poorly understood (Allagia, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). If prevalence data indicates that roughly 20% of women and men, respectively, have experienced sexual violence but those rates are based on reported assaults, and we know that only 20% of assaults are reported, then assault rates may in fact be higher. Yet, our current understanding of sexual abuse seems limited to 20% of disclosers. For example, one potential reason for nondisclosure is that some survivors who do not disclose are perhaps “unacknowledged victims,” meaning they do not define their abuse experience as such and therefore do not see themselves as victims (Gidycz & Kelley, 2016). Nonetheless, their experience meets the definitional criteria of sexual abuse. Given its prevalence even within reported assaults and the underlying reality that rates may be higher, this proposal will examine barriers to adult disclosure of sexual abuse from theoretical-, research-, and practice-informed angles. An important step in stopping and preventing sexual abuse is increasing disclosure of sexual abuse (Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013) because it can prevent reoffending by perpetrators and further victimization of survivors.

Definitions and Theories of Disclosure

The construct of disclosure emerges from the field of communication studies (Alberts et al., 2011) and is defined as the process of establishing a relationship through verbal and nonverbal exchanges between the self and another individual (Greene, Derlega, and Mathews, 2006). Typically, disclosure studies focus on the dialectical
process between two individuals (e.g. Alberts, Martin, Nakayama, 2011; Altman & Taylor, 1973). As it relates to these papers, sexual abuse disclosure refers to the process between a survivor and another individual, during which a survivor and the other individual discuss the sexual abuse experience. Barriers to disclosure are any obstacles, both real and perceived, which the survivor identifies as preventing the sharing of the sexual abuse experience. These two factors, disclosure and barriers to disclosure, are the central foci of this dissertation.

It seems adult theories of sexual abuse disclosure are not readily available (Smith, 2005), but theories that explain self-disclosure in dialectal processes are present in the literature. For example, four common self-disclosure theories are communication privacy management (see Petronio, 1991), social penetration theory (see Altman & Taylor, 1973), social exchange theory (see Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), and the Johari window pane model (see Luft & Ingham, 1955) as reviewed by Masaviru (2016). Each of these theories addresses how self-disclosure allows human relationships to manifest. Both social penetration theory and social exchange theory also account for disclosure as an on-going process where one measures benefits and risks to disclosure. The Johari window pane model also addresses disclosure as a give and take process. In each of these theories, the process of disclosure really accounts for an individual’s decision to share information. A better understanding as to why people do not share, beyond consequences or to not establish a relationship, is not necessarily the focus of these theories. For these reasons, the theories were inadequate in explaining the culture of nondisclosure.
Yet, it is important to note that some of these general communications theories have in fact been applied to sexual abuse disclosure. For example, Petronio, Flores, and Hecht (1997), applied Petronio’s (1991) communication management of privacy theory, to help readers understand how children disclosed their sexual abuse. Similarly, Leonard (1996) applied social exchange theory to help readers understand the disclosure by children of sexual abuse. However, this was the extent of disclosure theory applications the researcher was able to find. As a result of this, the first paper is this dissertation that is described in Chapter II presents a theoretical synthesis, which is the foundation for the dissertation in its entirety.

Positionality

As I continue to evolve as a student and researcher, my interests have evolved as well. Originally, what brought me to my research question of barriers to sexual abuse disclosure was a hunch regarding the impact of social positioning on disclosure agency. I came to this conclusion several times during my doctoral studies. Some of the questions I found myself asking were: Why do survivors choose nondisclosure? What role does education of barriers to disclosure play in disclosure by survivors?

These questions led me to another set of questions regarding my role in this area of research. I began to ask myself: What is my responsibility and to whom? How can I connect the dots in my research in a meaningful way? I started to explore how my research is nested within a larger system. While focusing on barriers to disclosure, I can investigate how and why those barriers are created by society, in other words what purpose does nondisclosure serve? I am tasked with disentangling who is served by lack
of disclosures. I could explore the double message society gives survivors: sexual abuse is horrible and causes a great deal of harm but what role did you play in your own abuse? This double message leads to silencing through shaming and victim blaming. Sexual abuse is not something happening to one person, it is a societal problem. How do I understand the messaging then? How do I bring to the forefront the different types of messages received?

I am uniquely positioned as a first generation Latina academic to have a voice and the gift of education in order to be considered worthy of discussing such a topic. I feel my role lies at the point of intersection between the voice of the survivors, the voice of the practitioners, and the voice of society. From the age of 11, I have been hearing disclosure of sexual assault from classmates, friends, and family. As hard as it was to hear the disclosure, it was harder to see the survivors often silenced by the very people who I felt should help them, family, friends, and the authorities. I pursued psychology and counseling degrees and volunteered as a rape crisis counselor to better assist survivors. All the while, I still felt stifled by the silencing experienced by survivors. As a Latina many of the stories I heard from friends, when I was a child, or as a counselor working with Latino populations, were similar in that it was a minoritized (Benitez, 2010) survivor trying to fight stigma for disclosing or choosing to remain silent within a traditional Latino household. Minoritized refers to the process of treating groups that are not in the majority in discriminatory and prejudicial manners within our society (Black, Latino, women, LGBT, etc.) (see Benitez, 2010). After years of working with survivors
both formally and informally, I chose to better understand barriers to disclosure through this dissertation.

It is my belief that survivors’ stories need to be told; practitioners’ experiences with ramifications of disclosure need to be understood; and society’s debt to maintain a safe environment needs to be explored; and all three need liaising. I can learn to empower survivors through practitioners’ knowledge of fruitful methods of interaction, which lead to disclosure and optimal function post abuse, while also informing society of disclosure barriers, in turn priming the ground for future disclosures, then perhaps survivors will feel safe discussing their experiences of abuse.

**Current Gaps in the Literature**

Most sexual assault survivors never disclose their experience of sexual assault. Lack of sexual abuse disclosure exacerbates the ramifications of sexual assault for survivors, and ultimately for our society. Yet, there is a dearth of theoretical explanations that capture the complexity of disclosure for adult survivors of sexual abuse (Smith, 2005). While there is research regarding sexual abuse disclosure within families, there is hardly any research addressing disclosure between non-offending siblings (Schreier, Pugue, & Hansen, 2017). Finally, many practitioners are ill-prepared to deal with adult sexual abuse disclosure for non-prosecutorial purposes due to lack of training (Kitzrow, 2002; Read, McGregor, Coggan, & Thomas, 2006). This dissertation seeks to understand, explain, and inform the adult sexual abuse disclosure process and its barriers in the areas of theory, research, and practice.
Dissertation Research Questions

The culture of nondisclosure will be examined throughout this dissertation. The overarching research question is how do we come to understand, explain, and inform the processes that underlie the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse? As was discussed earlier, I will examine the culture of nondisclosure with participants who have disclosed. The dissertation will address this overarching research question by examining it through theory, research, and practice.

Research Question 1

The first paper in the dissertation will address theory by presenting the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD). This theory will address how it is that we can understand the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. The related research question is: How does ITD provide a more comprehensive understanding of the culture of nondisclosure by guiding our understanding of disclosure processes through an individual, familial, and social lens?

Research Question 2

The second paper, My Sister’s Keeper: Survivors Disclosing Sexual Abuse to a Sibling, explains the family context within which disclosure of sexual abuse may occur. However, it examines disclosure between siblings, which to the researcher’s knowledge, has not been done before. The related research question is: If, and why, do survivors disclose to their siblings? This study will help the researcher explain whether siblings are viewed as supportive during their disclosure process and what support look like for survivors of sexual abuse.
Research Question 3

The final paper within this dissertation informs the culture of nondisclosure by presenting a *Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure*. This guide is intended to help practitioners ask transformative and intersectional questions in practice, which help survivors gain a more complex understanding of their silence around their sexual violence experience. The related research question is: How do survivors experience the transformational guide for sexual abuse disclosure? This study will help the researcher inform practice settings by asking survivors to improve the TGD guide and to discuss how reading the questions may impact a transformed understanding of their sexual violence experience.

Understanding the Culture of Nondisclosure of Sexual Abuse

Together these three papers address the culture of nondisclosure. The first paper provides a theoretical understanding for nondisclosure. The use of ITD ensures a comprehensive, theoretical explanation for why nondisclosure exists and persists in our society. Paper two explains how nondisclosure may occur within families. The sibling disclosure study examines how disclosure or nondisclosure occurs within the family, thus informing the use of ITD and the need for more research into the culture of nondisclosure and siblings. Finally, the third paper informs how to address nondisclosure in a therapeutic setting. This paper takes theory and research to inform practice. It is the culmination of theory and research into translational practice. The third paper within the dissertation addresses this the bridge between theory, research, and practice by reporting on the nexus of theory, research, and practice, to shed much-needed light on the culture
of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. These three papers help understand through theory, explain through research, and inform through practice implications the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse and how to “push back” against this culture.
CHAPTER II

Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure

As more women begin to disclose their experiences with sexual assault, our society is gaining a new perspective of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse due to the #MeToo movement and the Times Up initiative. The legal definition of sexual abuse is, any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. Falling under the definition of sexual assault are sexual activities such as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape (United States Department of Justice, 2013).

One in five women report being survivors of rape, with over 40% of these women experiencing assault before age eighteen (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012). Some studies have grappled with understanding sexual abuse prevalence, especially since it is believed that up to 80% of sexual assaults are not reported (Allagia, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). This means that the current understanding of sexual abuse is limited to the 20% of the sexually abused population who have disclosed. Sexual abuse is widespread and women in the United States feel a sense of imminent rape; yet, sexual abuse is the least reported of all violent crimes (Low & Organista, 2008).

The researcher-developed theoretical framework, Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD), considers how an intersectionality framework can inform the cultural and family dynamics that alter the perceived and real consequences of sexual abuse disclosure for an individual. ITD is intended as a working theory with “real-life” applications. Latino culture was examined and used for the application of ITD within this
paper. Some evidence suggests that rates of sexual abuse may be higher for Latinas than the general population; although, findings have been inconsistent ( Cuevas, Sabina, & Milloshi, 2012; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Low & Organista, 2008 ). National samples do not show a difference in sexual abuse rates between the Latino subpopulation and other groups, but community samples have reported higher rates of sexual abuse within the Latino subpopulation ( Cuevas et al., 2012; Kalof, 2000 ). Latino culture, defined here as Spanish-speaking individuals with a traditional heritage from the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and South America ( Fontes, 2007 ), was selected as a reference point for the application of this framework. Latina refers to a woman from the Latino culture.

**Literature Review**

Currently, the extant sexual abuse disclosure literature does not provide an integrated theoretical understanding of disclosure barriers ( Smith, 2005 ); although, it does present nondisclosure as a considerable problem ( Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013 ). One of the most holistic theoretical explanation for child sexual abuse disclosure was completed by Allagia ( 2010 ) when she applied an ecological analysis to understanding qualitative finding from her study. However, Allagia ( 2010 ) used ecological theory to organize her findings rather than applied ecological theory to the development of her qualitative study. While the application of ecological theory to organize disclosure barriers is useful, it is limited in its ability to address exactly how individual factors, family factors, and social factors interact at each of these levels and its application centers on individual behaviors rather than on familial and social interactions. Given the lack of theories then, ITD aims to address the void of a comprehensive adult theoretical
explanation for lack of disclosure, based in theory synthesis, for sexual abuse disclosure barriers. One of the overarching goals of ITD is to provide a theory that shifts the current onus of disclosure from survivors alone, by drawing attention to obstacles by family and cultural (and social) systems that prevent disclosure. Consideration of current limitations within disclosure studies and theories led the researcher to develop ITD, which draws from and integrates intersectionality, family systems theory, and consequence theory to understand, identify, and address barriers to disclosure.

ITD addresses both the anticipation of reactions and post disclosure reactions, providing explanations for individual disclosure processes that focus on societal and familial factors. Although survivors of abuse are often tasked with the responsibility of reporting their abuse, general members of society and family members are not always receptive to such disclosures (Ahrens, 2006). Fear of others negative reactions are a well-documented barrier to disclosure (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Variability across cultural practices seem to also affect the levels of stigma experienced by survivors (Chaudior & Fisher, 2010). This will be discussed in further detail later. While, some public health efforts have found that increasing contact with citizens who are stigmatized helps reduce the stigma, (Corrigan, Kosyluk, & Rusch, 2013), this still asks survivors to disclose their abuse in order to help members of society reduce stigma. However, the price for disclosing may seem too high to disclose for survivors. ITD provides an explanation for survivors’ unique experiences in deciding to disclose given their family culture and social context.
ITD addresses disclosure barriers by integrating three existing theories. Together they will coalesce the existing barriers to disclosure literature into one comprehensive theory. Consequence theory will address the real and perceived consequences of disclosure of sexual abuse disclosure. Family systems theory will address rules and roles perpetuated in households that affect disclosure decisions. Finally, intersectionality theory will address power imbalances at the social and filial level that maintain silencing practices for survivors of assault.

The author will flip the current onus of disclosure obstacles from being those selected by survivors to those created (and maintained) by family and social systems. Since consideration of current limitations within disclosure studies led to the development of ITD, the paper will address, using Latinas as an example, how the decision to disclose sexual abuse is often affected by factors such as gender (Allagia, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Ulibarri, Ulloa, & Camacho, 2009), race (Kenny & McEachern, 2000; Maier, 2012; Ulibarri et al., 2009), immigration status (Ahrens, Rios-Mandel, Isas, & del Carmen Lopez, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000; Ulibarri et al., 2009), language ability (Ahrens et al., 2010; Allagia 2010; Allnock & Miller, 2013), socioeconomic status (Kenny & McEachern, 2000), and age (Allagia, 2010; Allnock & Miller, 2013; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Ulibarri et al., 2009).

**Understanding Disclosure**

Increasing disclosure is an important step in stopping sexual abuse (Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013) because it can prevent reoffending by perpetrators and further victimization of survivors. It is important to understand barriers to disclosure in order to
increase reporting. Disclosure is conceptualized in several different ways. The construct of disclosure emerges from the field of communication studies (Alberts, Martin, & Nakayama, 2011) and refers to the process of verbal and nonverbal communication between the self and others to establish a relationship (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Disclosure studies are primarily used to understand the dialectical process between two individuals (e.g. Alberts et al., 2011; Altman & Taylor, 1973). This particular paper is less interested in how two individuals disclose to foster a relationship. The focus of disclosure within this paper is what facilitates or inhibits a survivor of sexual assault to discuss their experiences with another individual, not for generating a relationship, rather to have someone with whom to discuss the traumatic experience. The problem lies in sexual abuse conversations often being viewed as taboo within our families and in broader society. So, what if a topic is taboo? How then do we make a decision to remain silent or disclose?

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

The sexual abuse literature currently identifies barriers to sexual abuse disclosure by naming perceived or real consequences of disclosure without providing a cohesive theoretical explanation for nondisclosure (e.g. Allnock & Miller, 2013; Heath, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur, & Smith, 2011; Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, & Landolt, 2012). In some studies, readers can infer theoretical explanations for nondisclosure, such as developmental theories that address age and language limitations (see Allnock & Miller, 2013) or as Allagia (2010) offered, a theoretical explanation to disclosure research findings. Sexual abuse adult disclosure has not been studied using a
clearly defined theoretical lens, which addresses the individual, their families, and their societies. ITD synthesizes consequence theory, family systems theory, and an intersectionality framework to provide a holistic explanation for barriers named in the extant literature. Figure 1.1 helps the reader understand the integration of each of these theories in the development of ITD.

**Consequence Theory**

Consequence theory was developed by Serovich (2001) to provide a theoretical framework for understanding disclosure of HIV positive status through a cost/benefit analysis. She was interested in understanding whether or not the negative outcomes of disclosure outweigh those of silence (Serovich, 2001). The theory focuses only on the victims’ responsibility to make disclosures, and does not attend to family and social considerations. This theory was informed by social exchange theory (Serovich, 2001), which explains that relationships are formed through a cost/benefit analysis, with the goal of maximizing benefits and avoiding costs (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). Serovich (2001) developed consequence theory as a way to comprehend the decision to disclose HIV status to family and friends. At the time, HIV disclosure theories focused on disclosure as a result of the progression of the disease. Serovich (2001), however, found that disclosure decisions were reached by assessing the consequences (costs) of communicating one’s status. Consequence theory focused on the costs of HIV disclosure within a relationship, demonstrating that when costs were high, disclosures were low. Such an application makes sense for sexual abuse disclosure since it also often comes with serious relational consequences. Currently a review of the extant literature did not return any studies, which
examine sexual abuse disclosure through consequence theory. Yet, the application of consequence theory to HIV disclosure parallels the literature about sexual abuse survivors and their consideration of the negative impact their disclosure will have on others.

Take for example traditional Latino households, sexual abuse disclosure comes at high cost within these families. Factors such as loss of marriageability prospects due to loss of virginity, loss of family cohesion due to a reduction in familismo (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2000), silencing and blaming by the family through the “calladita te ves más bonita” attitude translated to “you look prettier when you are quiet”, shunning by the family and close friends, and fear of retaliation are some of the barriers to disclosure within the Latino population (Fontes, 2007). Familismo, the Latino family value around loyalty to, close ties with, and providing for the immediate and extended family (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2000), is a strong motivator to preserve family relationships. As a result, attitudes around silencing to preserve the family persist, hence the Latino mantra of “calladita te ves más bonita”. As a result, the understandable focus among survivors seems to be avoiding negative consequences. The survivor weighs her decision in light of not only herself, but also her family, thus placing disclosure consequences and the burden to disclose on the survivor.

This theory accounts for the individual decision-making process at a cognitive level, where the survivor weighs the impact of disclosure on filial and social relationships. Should the cost of disclosure outweigh the benefits received from disclosing, then perhaps a disclosure may ensue. However, it is not well understood how
this disclosing process of weighing consequences and benefits unfolds. A limitation of this theory then is that it does not explain how survivors “learned” the “weight” or “cost” of their disclosure. The process of learning the potential consequences of disclosure of sexual abuse can be better understood using a family systems theory lens.

**Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory, broadly defined, was developed in the late 1970s in order to explain how family behaviors were created and maintained within the family, acknowledging that these behaviors were influenced by other systems (Bowen, 1978). Bowen (1978) viewed the family as a system in and of itself and advocated for a better understanding of this system in order to prevent intergenerational transmissions of negative behaviors. This theory is widely used in clinical practice. Since disclosure affects more than just the individual (Fontes & Plummer, 2010), a family systems framework provides an explanation for how disclosure decisions are affected by family processes. There have been applications of family systems theory to understanding sexual abuse perpetration and treatment (for example, MacKay & Brown, 2013) but not as a theory to explain sexual abuse disclosure barriers. Regardless, family systems theory seems to explain family practices that either encourage or limit the ability of survivors to disclose sexual abuse experiences but does not discuss the intersection of individual, family, and social behaviors and their influence on disclosure decisions.

An individual should be understood in the context of their family system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). An examination of the interdependence and reciprocity found within families (Bowen, 1978) can help unravel the lack of clarity
around disclosure decisions. Interdependence refers to the level of connectedness between family members where each member affects the functioning of the other in families that are highly interconnected. This is related to the concept of reciprocity, which refers to how a change in one member creates a predictable change in another member of the family. This theory accounts for family boundaries and their function as open/closed systems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009), and their impact on the agency experienced by survivors to disclose.

Family systems theory posits that to understand individuals, their family system must also be understood (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Individuals communicate and behave according to the meaning they create within their systems, and they come to these decisions because they are self-reflective (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Self-reflection may be what survivors do in order to determine the consequences of disclosure given their family context. Family systems theory helps describe the patterns individuals display as resulting from the system itself, in other words, individuals act and are influenced by their family; this is referred to as interdependence once again (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009).

Since, Latino culture tends to be collectivistic, the impact of interdependence can be quite high. The principles of interdependence and reciprocity can explain the effect of abuse on family systems, as the behavior of one family member inevitably affects the behavior of the others (Bowen, 1978). For example, the disclosure of abuse by someone can influence a decision to retaliate in a family member; as a result, a survivor may choose to remain silent to avoid further problems.
The concept of boundaries and open/closed systems can also help explain disclosure decisions for Latinas. A family is its own bounded system but the contextual environment affects it (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Family boundaries vary in how permeable they are, with the extremes being a completely open system or a completely closed system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Closed families are characterized by “emphasizing authority, family values, and moderation over excess” (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009, p. 345) all resonant of traditional Latino households. For example, Bowen’s (1978) family systems framework provides a foundation for understanding family communication and secrecy processes using the concept of family *rules*. These rules refer to both spoken and unspoken communication practices present within a family.

Latinas have many traditional practices that serve as interactional rules about remaining silent in the face of abuse (Ahrens et al., 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000; Maier, 2012). Feedback loops in families describe communication patterns and behaviors that family members ascribe to with the goal of changing a system or having it remain the same (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). Families can display both positive feedback loops (which allow for change) and negative feedback loops (which prefer homeostasis), although it is common for one or the other to exist as the primary form (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). As applied to disclosure decisions within Latino households, homeostasis, through negative feedback loops, is preferred in the family system, and disclosure threatens this. Rules to maintain silence both within and outside the family perpetuate a closed system, a unit that does not allow for external influence (Bowen,
1978), and represent efforts to keep harmony, to protect one’s family from becoming emotionally upset, and to maintain family homeostasis through a negative feedback loop (Satir, 1983). This is explained through the Latino cultural value of familismo and the desire to remain loyal to, maintain close ties with, and provide for the family (Cauce & Domenech, 2002).

Interpersonal boundaries, which are the boundaries between individuals, can further clarify some disclosure decisions within Latino households. Interpersonal boundaries are described by a continuum with two extremes: enmeshed or disengaged (Caspi, 2012). When survivors view their decisions in light of its impact on the others within the system and its impact on their individual relationships, then high enmeshment is occurring and their own individual autonomy does not take precedence rather the individual is functioning for the benefit of others in the systems. Relational rules often influenced by family roles (Satir, 1983), explain the pressures felt by family members not to disclose. For example, the family role for many Latinas is to hold the family together so there are rules against threats to family cohesion. Disclosure threatens family cohesion and therefore their role as a family member takes precedence over their individual functioning (Feiring et al., 2001; Low & Organista, 2008). Myths and secrecy are also used to maintain family function and protect family members (Satir, 1983). Sexual abuse then becomes a secret topic and the survivor “calladita se ve más bonita” “looks prettier quiet!”

When viewing the disclosure process through this perspective, disclosure decisions and their potential consequences are placed on the survivor first and then her
family, and the burden on her family is usually incurred primarily by the survivor. While family systems theory explains how survivors account for filial influences on their assessment of consequences for disclosure decisions, it does not directly account for socio-cultural influences in how families created their own roles and rules. Intersectionality theory addresses this shortcoming by positioning individuals within social domains that are power-laden.

**Intersectionality Theory**

Conceptually, intersectionality theory has been written about by feminist scholars in the latter half of the 1900s (Beal, 1970; Crenshaw, 1989; King, 1988). However, the term intersectionality was coined in 1989 by Crenshaw as a way to capture the distinctions between Black and White women in the legal system (Crenshaw, 1989). Yet, the concepts put forth through this theory have existed long before the term (May, 2015). Intersectionality explains how an individual is comprised of many interlocking identities. Each identity is socially constructed and power laden (Andersen & Collins, 2013). In other words, no two individuals are alike because we all have unique positions of power, which vary as we move through social spaces. For example, a woman is not just a woman, she may be a Hispanic-American, middle class, educated, light-skinned, cisgender lesbian. Each of these categories have value and power in our society, yet in different social spaces their value and power shifts.

The theoretical framework of intersectionality grew out of feminist and critical race theories and is discussed within various realms of social science and legal studies (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The term intersectionality was first introduced in the
late 1980’s as a way of describing Black women’s experiences as similar to White women, dissimilar through “additive or multiplicative” experiences (p. 171), and unique to their status (Cole, 2009). Intersectionality drew attention to people’s experiences as both similar and divergent as a way to create consciousness about the diversity of experiences across and within groups. Some have used the theoretical framework to describe interlocking systems of oppression that individuals experience (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Social location has also been used to describe the different interlocking oppressions by drawing attention to an individual’s position of power based on categories such as race, class, and gender (Anderson & Collins, 2013). The concepts of interlocking oppressions, social location, and most importantly intersectionality, can, and should, also explain the history and context of power relations in order to fully understand them (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013).

Intersectionality, when applied to family research, can explain the nuanced power-based processes within a family as influenced by their varied contexts (Few-Demo, 2014). Family systems theory references suprasystems that affect the family systems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2009). The suprasystem refers to the contextual environment of the family. Adopting “an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 795), allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the suprasystem and in turn a better understanding of individuals and their families. For example, historical and contextual power differentials inherent in patriarchal societies affectsLatinas’ family role of maintaining family cohesion. Another example is the
closed nature of traditional Latino families as influenced by the need to maintain appearances in order to limit an undesirable family and individual social status. An enriched understanding is reached by applying an intersectionality lens to both the family processes and their impact on a Latina’s individual decisions to disclose.

Social structures, such as the state, employment markets, schools, and families have power and inequality present in turn creating and maintaining the social location of Latinas. One’s location in society and the family is based on the intersection of socially constructed, but powerful, variables resulting in an interlocking system of oppression. Latinas may experience diminished power and ability to disclose through systemically created barriers such as lack of education (Ahrens et al., 2010; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000), lower socioeconomic status (Littleton, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2007) and absence of trust in formal support services (Ahrens et al., 2010). The type of socialization practices within her family, such as being the source of family cohesion, may further reduce Latinas’ location. These experiences serve to diminish the interpersonal and familial power of the survivor, in turn affecting her decision to disclose. Again conceptualizing the disclosure process through the ITD perspective allows the readers to understand that much of the responsibility to disclose and the negative consequences for disclosing, are placed, first on the survivor, then her family, and lastly on society.

An intersectional lens of Latinas draws attention to the fact that they are more likely to be victims of sexual assault given their social location in the U.S., disadvantage due to power differentials, and generally lower socioeconomic and ethnic status (Low &
Organista, 2008). For example, Latinas have to navigate sexual advances from a male dominated U.S. culture and a male dominated Latino culture, heightening their susceptibility to sexual abuse (Low & Organista, 2008). Furthermore, some identified costs of sexual abuse disclosure for Latinas include loss of family cohesion, shaming, disbelief, and being shunned (Schönbucher et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2000). Fontes and Plummer (2010) explained that Latino families do not discuss sexual abuse within the family, and even less outside the family, because of perceived negative consequences (e.g. loss of status, lack of marriageability, family stigma). Since Latinas often come from collectivistic cultures, the price of disclosing is very high, and self-sacrifice may seem a better alternative.

An intersectionality framework helps describe social and cultural influences on familial and individual practices by relating them to an individual’s position of power within their families and their communities. Utilizing an intersectionality lens, allows for researchers and practitioners to assess nuanced power differentials experienced by survivors, particularly through extra-familial sources such as culture, race, and socioeconomic status. An intersectionality lens creates the context through which one can examine the family’s suprasystems (Whitchurch & Constatine, 2009). Thus, the consequences weighed by survivors are informed by family processes, which in turn are informed by social and cultural influences (suprasystems). A major limitation of this theory is that it does not specifically address the consequences of disclosures or explain family dynamics that promote or inhibit disclosure on its own because it is concerned
with individual positioning of power as related to social constructs such as race, class, gender, not necessarily behaviors.

**Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure**

ITD provides an explanation for Latinas’ unique experiences in deciding to disclose given their family culture and social context. Consequence theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding disclosure through a cost/benefit analysis of whether or not the negative outcomes of disclosure outweigh those of silence (Serovich, 2001); however, this theory maintains that the individual is responsible to make a disclosure. Family systems theory can explain family practices that either encourage or limit the ability of survivors to disclose sexual abuse experiences, but does not discuss the intersection of individual, family, and society behaviors and influences on disclosure decisions. An intersectionality framework describes social and cultural influences on familial and individual practices by relating them to an individual’s position of power within their families and their communities, but alone does not address consequences of disclosure. Each individual theory helps explain a portion of nondisclosure, but the synthesis of these three theories allow for a complete explanation of the culture of nondisclosure.

The synthesis of these theories provides a compelling framework for understanding sexual abuse disclosure processes. Consequence theory highlights how real and perceived outcomes created by sharing sexual abuse victimization act as a barrier to disclosure. In particular, ITD also demonstrates that the largest impact of disclosure befalls the survivor. Since sexual abuse disclosure is a family phenomenon, a survivor’s
disclosure is affected by and has an effect on the family (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Hernandez, et al., 2009; Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). A survivor’s decision to disclose then is guided by family socialization practices and by family reactions. Applying family systems theory helps explain how women, in this example Latinas, account for their family when determining disclosure barriers and consequences. They do this because disclosure decisions will not only affect them but will also negatively affect their family (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Hernandez, et al., 2009; Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Broader contextual factors dictate these familial socialization practices and reactions. Intersectionality accounts for these contextual factors as they relate to disclosure decisions. In other words, society informs family practices that in turn inform individual behaviors. It is worth noting that disclosure decisions are least likely to affect society, but somehow society has the largest influence on nondisclosure. Due to these power differentials, those influencing nondisclosure do not coincide with those who carry the burden of disclosure. This seems unfair because this would propose that society and families are benefitting from nondisclosure at the expense of individual survivors. As was mentioned earlier, survivors must deal with the responsibility to disclose and shoulder the burden of negative reactions to disclosure. Figure 1.2 illustrates the disproportionality of the burden of disclosure.

**Strengths and Limitations of ITD**

The current utilization of ITD has both strengths and limitations. A major limitation of the theory is that it has not been validated yet. Applying it in disclosure studies will require researchers to conduct retrospective studies, where survivors are
asked to think about what barriers existed prior to disclosure, how those linked to family processes, and how they felt external sources influenced their individual and familial decisions. Another limitation is that within this paper, Latinas were used to help explain the connections; yet, it should be noted that Latinas have been discussed as a general group but there is considerable diversity within Latinas’ experiences. Similarly, ITD can be applied across all ethnic groups, although it was only presented within Latinas. Finally, the explanations for nondisclosure that results from applying the framework of ITD will not be the same across all survivors. The use of ITD is not meant to generate the same answers.

Nonetheless, utilizing ITD should provide a more cohesive explanation for barriers to disclosure by accounting for individual’s cognitions, familial processes, and social influences affecting disclosure. In many ways, the use of ITD by researchers designing disclosure studies would help provide more insight to the interrelatedness of the individual, family, and social systems related to disclosure decisions. It is meant to inform readers about the experiences survivors may have, thus creating a critical consciousness regarding the social and familial influences on disclosure decisions. Critical consciousness is a term used to describe one’s ability to recognize and develop an awareness of oppression stemming from everyday social systems such as, politics, economics, and educational institutions, and to act against these systems (Freire, 2000).

**Implications for Research, Practice, Programming, and Policy**

Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure synthesizes multiple theories to provide a more comprehensive understanding of disclosure barriers for sexual abuse
survivors. It has important implications for sexual abuse prevention and intervention research, family practice, family policy, and programming. Sexual abuse prevention work requires shifting the burden of disclosure away from survivors alone in order to increase disclosures and as a result prevent future perpetration by the same perpetrator. An intersectionality framework was used to demonstrate that family processes result from broader historical and social influences, in turn directly affecting individual choices to disclose. The triangle displaying disclosure impact in Figure 1.2 should be inverted, as it is in Figure 1.3. This would place the primary impact of disclosure on society, rather than the individual in order to facilitate disclosure of sexual abuse. If survivors were dealing with more receptive families and society, perhaps it would encourage survivors to break their silence and in turn begin to decrease sexual abuse perpetration (Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013), by identifying perpetrators before they reoffend.

**Research Implications**

Researchers in various disciplines can now view sexual abuse disclosure through a holistic lens accounting for the individual and how social and familial structures affect them. ITD provides future studies with a comprehensive theoretical lens for gathering and analyzing data. The integration of family systems theory provides an understanding of the role of the family in preventing disclosure, as well as how the family is affected by disclosure. A new application of consequence theory to sexual abuse research results in a broadening of its potential use. Future researchers should reconsider their data collection methods, particularly with traditional groups such as Latinas who seem to disclose more readily within community samples rather than national samples (Ahrens, Isas, & Viveros,
2011). The application of ITD would support such a finding because Latinas are less likely to trust or participate in mainstream research given their social location.

Empirically testing the ITD framework is also necessary to generate support for its theoretical connections. Sexual abuse has been studied through a family lens, but sexual abuse disclosure has not received as much theoretical attention. The contextual impact of social categorizations and historical influences such as patriarchy have also been well documented within the sexual abuse literature however, not as it relates to sexual abuse disclosure within family contexts as impacted by society. To understand the disclosure process, these interrelations need to be understood (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010) and ITD provides insight into those interrelations.

**Practice and Programming Implications**

Sexual abuse survivors are often concerned that disclosure will affect others, in particular their families (McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2014). Non-offending caretakers often have trauma or suffer due to their child’s experience. Furthermore, these effects can last years (Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Siblings too, although often overlooked, suffer vicarious traumatization and experience similar consequences such as disruption in family process, neglect, and changes in school environment, finances, and friends (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Hill (2003) also alluded to difficulties experienced by male siblings when someone considered a male parental figure commits sexual abuse. This caused the male sibling to feel anger, disgust, and contempt that is often misdirected toward the mother or survivor (Hill, 2003). Survivors’ fears were validated when family disruption resulted from sexual abuse disclosure.
(McElvaney et al., 2014). For these reasons, access to culturally sensitive family counseling resources is necessary (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Collins-Vézina, Daigneault, & Hébert, 2013; Hernandez, et al., 2009; Hill, 2003; Low & Organista, 2008; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Culturally sensitive, family-based therapy can address family values and socialization practices that act as barriers or which negatively affect family cohesion. The inclusion of siblings in therapy is also particularly important given the aforementioned research.

School-based programs and community based programs can use ITD to better help individuals in their communities. For example, school-based prevention programs can bring sexual abuse prevention training and education, while also providing education regarding how to overcome barriers to disclosure, particularly as they relate to systemic barriers for survivors. School-based programs have been tested more than any other prevention method and have been found to be successful (Finkelhor, 2009). Hence school-based interventions are an easy and inexpensive way to prevent and de-stigmatize sexual abuse, as well as a source of family intervention (Finkelhor, 2009) since schools provide access to families.

Sexual abuse education can change communities, families, and individuals. However, without accounting for social location, programs introduced in different contexts will not fully address sexual abuse education and barriers to disclosure of sexual abuse. Similarly, without understanding the family context of the communities within which the programs are implemented, family support, as well as understanding of the need for such programs, can be overlooked. Creating program curricula that teach how to
identify consequences to disclosure can lead to the elimination of such barriers. ITD allows for the identification of such barriers. Prevention and intervention programs should account for context specific needs (Hans Zollner, Fuchs, & Fegert, 2014). A one-size-fits-all approach does more of a disservice to the community. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender differentially affect development (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996), as a result, sexual abuse intervention and education curricula can account for these differences by applying ITD as a theoretical underpinning of their programming. Furthermore, the importance of introducing programs, which educate society more broadly regarding sexual abuse and its prevention, is also necessary in order to create a socially responsible approach to sexual abuse prevention.

**Policy Implications**

Sexual abuse is a pandemic, and as such requires political support at the local, state, and federal level to implement social change (Finkelhor, 2009; Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013). A quick glimpse at most major newspapers or magazines, even a short scroll through most news apps or twitter feeds, will draw you into the #MeToo movement, the women’s movement, or the Times Up movement, all aiming to end abuse against women. It seems timely to work toward abolishing sexual abuse and silencing given it is a national conversation right now. According to National Alliance to End Sexual Violence (2018), sexual abuse costs an estimated $147 billion annually, *excluding* child sexual abuse. If policies support school-based programs, then both youth and their families will become knowledgeable about the benefits of disclosing sexual abuse. Federal and state governments already provide financial support (although limited) to
rape centers for education and service-oriented activities (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2018). Redistributing funds in order to break the silence that currently exists around sexual abuse will aid in the prevention and elimination of sexual violence. Rape centers could provide the necessary training and education to encourage youth as well as adults to disclose abuse. ITD could inform policies that support the creation of trainings that account for the systemic and familial barriers to disclosure, as well as the identification and funding of culturally sensitive family-based counseling services within communities.

Conclusion

The Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure provides researchers and practitioners a much-needed theoretical lens for the understanding of sexual abuse disclosure. Consequence theory explains the consequences survivors may face if they disclose. Family systems theory and an intersectionality framework can explain how both family and society dictate consequences. By utilizing ITD, we as members of a broader society can understand survivors’ experiences of nondisclosure when we account for their social location as for example, women, who may be of color and considered minorities within America, disproportionately represented within the poorer and less educated communities, and lacking access to proper resources. This in turn allows for awareness of the structural systems of power and inequality at play to create and maintain silenced victims of sexual abuse. This theory hopes to lead toward the empowerment of survivors of sexual violence by flipping the onus of disclosure onto family and members of society.
The facilitation of disclosure on the part of individuals other than survivors may lead to survivors enacting their agency to disclose.
References


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Figures

**Figure 1.1.** Individual Theory Contributions and ITD. Each individual theory contains an aspect necessary to understanding disclosure processes. Together they address a holistic theoretical view of disclosure.
Figure 1.2. ITD theory integration and the current disclosure impact model. The triangle on the left represents the influence of each theory on nondisclosure decisions and the triangle on the right represents who is most negatively impacted by disclosure. Shading corresponds between the theory and who bears the onus of disclosure.
Figure 1.3. ITD theory integration and recommended disclosure impact model. The following figures represent ITD and the recommended impact of disclosure, inverted from Figure 1.2, placing the primary onus of disclosure away from the individual.
CHAPTER III

My Sister’s Keeper: Survivors Disclosing Sexual Abuse to a Sibling

Siblings are typically our longest lasting relationship (Rocca, Martin, & Dunleavy, 2010) and most individuals have at least one sibling (Volling, 2012). Siblings often share a bond that is different from other relationships particularly due to their shared upbringing. Yet, relatively little research is conducted on siblings in comparison to other relationships such as parent-child or child-peer relationships (Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012; Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007; Moser, Jones, Zaorski, Mirsalimi, & Luchner, 2005). The research that does exist often cites siblings as a major source of influence on human development and behavior. Siblings are a source of support and strain throughout life (Caspi, 2011; Kramer, 2010).

This study will examine the relationship between siblings pre- and post-disclosure of sexual abuse, from the perspective of survivors of sexual assault. This study will also explore whether or not siblings are a source of support after disclosure of sexual abuse, one of the most traumatic experiences endured by 1 in 5 women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Non-abused, non-offending siblings are not usually identified as a group to be examined by researchers (Schreier, Pugue, & Hansen, 2017). While the non-abused, non-offending sibling will not be included in this study, I am examining their role in receiving disclosures from a sibling from the perspective of the survivor. Since most survivors have a sibling, and no prior study has explored the role of siblings in the disclosure process that is known to this author, this study will address this gap. Also, since most survivors choose not to disclose to a family member (Tener &
Murphy, 2015), this study will examine some of the family dynamics which may be in place to prevent or encourage disclosure by examining the sibling relationship as it relates to disclosure of sexual abuse. This fits into the larger dissertation by examining the individual consequences weighed by survivors in disclosing to a family member, in this case their sibling. It also addresses familial and social factors that inhibited or encouraged disclosure. This study was informed by the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD) (Barrios & Caspi, 2014) as a theory in understanding sexual abuse disclosure. Some of the study’s findings provided support for ITD.

**Sibling Support Literature Review**

Sibling support refers to behaviors such as giving instruction, being a companion, and providing an emotional outlet, among other positive behaviors (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). Sibling relationships are complex and the roles, meanings, and behaviors that constitute support and closeness likely differ across social and ethnic contexts, although this has yet to receive much empirical attention (McGuire & Shanahan, 2010). While support may look different across time and context and between sibling dyads, it is typically one of the features of the sibling relationship. However, while not a focus in this study, it is important to note that not all sibling relationships are supportive, and some are actually destructive (see Caspi & Barrios, 2016).

**Benefits of Sibling Support**

Siblings have been found to provide support during times of hardship. A research study found that in the presence of stressful events such as deaths, illnesses, and disasters, sibling affection had a moderating effect on internalizing behaviors (Gass, Jenkins, &
Dunn, 2007). Similarly, siblings reporting high sibling support in the highly conflictual home had higher self-esteem and self-worth in turn deterring the internalization of familial conflict (Caya & Liem, 1998). Sibling support also compensates for lacking support in other relationships (Milevsky, 2005). A study found compensatory effects between sibling support and low support from mothers, fathers, and friends (Milevsky, 2005). Sibling dyads with high sibling support scored lower on loneliness and depression, and higher on self-esteem and life satisfaction as compared to sibling dyads with low sibling support (Milevsky, 2005). Youth of divorced families have named siblings as a buffer to the negative impact of the divorce (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). A qualitative investigation found that the siblings’ shared experiences and the sense of stability afforded by the sibling dyad, allowed for a buffering effect (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). These compensatory effects persist in foster youth where siblings are discussed as a beacon of support even while separated (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). In another study, supportive sibling relationships significantly lessened the negative impacts of peer isolation (East & Rook, 1992).

**Sibling Support and Sexual Abuse**

Survivors of sexual assault suffer grave consequences due to their endured abuse. According to the CDC (2014), the possible effects of sexual assault are chronic pelvic pain or gynecological complications, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, guilt, confusion, anxiety, isolation, strained interpersonal relationships; and some negative health behaviors are high risk sexual behaviors, along with substance abuse. There are also neurological effects of early child abuse such as less density of the hippocampus
resulting in memory problems; less density in the amygdala resulting in inappropriate sexual behavioral, aggressive behavior and heightened fear responses; and the medial prefrontal cortex and the limbic system improperly control anxiety and mood (Anda et al., 2006). Furthermore, research supports the claim of vicarious trauma experienced by siblings of survivors of sexual abuse (Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011), possibly more readily seen in close, supportive sibling dyads.

Understanding and strengthening supportive sibling relationships has implications for both survivors of sexual assault and their siblings. Acknowledging siblings as a source of support is critical since research has shown a negative relationship between symptomology in survivors of child maltreatment and positive reactions from family and friends (Baker et al., 2001; Evans, Steel, & DiLillo, 2013; Folger & Wright, 2013; Shlafer, McMorris, Sieving, & Gower, 2013). It should be noted however that many studies do not distinguish which family member is providing support, hence the results cannot be interpreted with a particular familial dyad in mind. Similarly, many of these studies focus on child maltreatment, and the results do not specifically delineate support for sexual abuse survivors. This study will examine the role siblings had in disclosure processes for survivors.

**Sibling Support and Disclosure**

Survivors of assault typically delay disclosure of their abuse for various reasons (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011; McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2014). Three common reasons for delayed disclosure are fear of getting into trouble or causing trouble to others and a sense that they were responsible for the abuse (Malloy et al., 2011;
McElvaney et al., 2014). As discussed, the abuse does in fact affect siblings yet siblings are not as common a recipient of sexual abuse disclosure as mothers, peers, and teachers (Malloy et al., 2013). This study will address this gap by exploring why siblings were selected, or not, as recipients of disclosure. Although, another possible explanation for siblings not being identified could be that siblings are not usually included in studies (Schreier et al., 2017). Again, this gap is addressed through this study by directly asking about siblings. To the researcher’s knowledge, the role of siblings as supportive within the context of non-sibling sexual abuse and the impact of disclosure on the sibling relationship has not been yet been studied.

**Current Study**

This study aims to explore sexual abuse disclosure processes between siblings. Since siblings are implicated as a source of support for other negative experiences, as described above, this study examines possible sibling support during sexual abuse disclosure. It seeks to understand if, and why, survivors disclosed to their siblings, and if their siblings were viewed as supportive during their disclosure process, and what support may look like. In addition, an examination of the dynamics involved when siblings were not perceived as supportive will also be reported. This exploratory study of siblings serves as a microcosm of larger societal and familial relationships. For example, the sibling relationship can provide insight into survivors’ perceived and/or real consequences of disclosure of sexual abuse. It also can elucidate familial patterns of roles and rules around discussing taboo topics. Finally, it provides insight into broader contextual factors affecting disclosure decisions. These three factors, an examination of
consequences, an examination of familial patterns, and an examination of socio-cultural influences on disclosure render support for the use of an Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD) (Barrios & Caspi, 2014). This particular study will further our understanding of disclosure processes and what survivors view as supportive or not during that process, through a focus on siblings, who are often viewed as supportive during difficult times.

**Study Aims and Research Questions**

Given their potential as a supportive relationship, this study aims to understand if, and how, the relationship between non-abusing siblings is altered after an individual discloses that they have been sexually abused to a sibling and if the disclosure was viewed as supportive. The research question explored by this particular study is if, and why, do survivors disclose to their siblings? This is part of a broader research question: How do we understand the culture of nondisclosure?

**Methods**

**Design**

This study was done using a grounded theory qualitative design, which included a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A. A qualitative exploration was selected given the dearth of research in the area of sexual abuse disclosure processes between siblings. Grounded theory is the overarching methodology used due to the study’s exploratory nature, however constant comparative analysis was specifically used during the analysis. In-depth interview style questions can provide broad explanations, and in turn themes about
this gap in the literature for further large-scale exploration and theory development (Merriam, 2009).

The interview questions were created through an understanding of the literature surrounding consequences of disclosure and familial roles and rules about discussing taboo topics. In large part, the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (Barrios & Caspi, 2014), informed the development of the questions. The questions are also informed by the sibling literature regarding supportive sibling relationships. However, none of the questions explicitly ask about family dynamics, social dynamics, or about support, rather these were probed for depending on the participant responses, so as to not influence the responses of the participants. Due to the nature of qualitative studies, the questions were iterative; however, they remained within the scope of the interview protocol.

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited via a campus wide e-mail. The e-mail asked participants, with a history of non-sibling sexual abuse, to contact the research investigator for inclusion in the study. This method of recruitment was used in a mid-sized northeastern university. Participants were also asked to refer other participants increasing participation through snowballing. Snowball sampling is considered one of the best methods for including participants that are hard-to-reach or for participants discussing sensitive topics (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Hendricks & Blanken, 1992).
Sample

This study included a small, non-probability, convenience sample of ten female survivors with a history of non-sibling sexual abuse. Small sample sizes are typically used when a study is exploring a phenomenon about which little is known. Saturation of ideas is the typical goal of qualitative data collection as it relates to sample size (Mason, 2010). This refers to a point during data collection in which new insights are not shared any longer. In other words, new findings are not likely regardless if more participants are added. It should be noted that when and how saturation is achieved is poorly understood and varies considerably without any formal answers as to how many participants are needed and why (Mason, 2010). More data does not necessarily mean better or new data (Mason, 2010). The goal with this sample size was to explore some of the themes that exist in understanding the sibling relationship as it relates to sexual abuse disclosure.

Sample characteristics. Each of the participants in the study had at least one sibling. The 10 female participants ranged in age from 20 to 65. Six of the participants self-identified as Latinas, three self-identified as White, and one self-identified as Middle-Eastern. All of the survivors were either in college or had completed an undergraduate or graduate degree. Other categorical data was not collected. Table 2.1 contains demographic information collected from the participants. During the recruitment phase, four potential participants opted not to meet the researcher for inclusion in the study after emailing for inclusion. Similarly, the researcher removed one male survivor and three siblings who had been interviewed from the analysis in order to include a more homogenous participant group.
**Procedures**

**Data collection.** IRB approval was obtained prior to initiating the study. The researcher scheduled participants who contacted her for inclusion in the study. Participants who responded and appropriately met the criteria of the study (i.e., non-sibling sexual abuse, over age 18, female) were scheduled by the researcher via email. The participants met with the researcher in a private office. The review and administration of an informed consent was completed at the start of the study (see Appendix B). The participant then chose a pseudonym before the interview. The interview was audiotaped and consisted of basic demographic questions regarding age, gender, and ethnicity and a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions.

**Recordings.** Interviews were recorded using a small handheld recorder. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend recording interviews in order to capture the full conversation for future analysis and to provide the participant with full attention. The informed consent, researcher’s notes, audio files, and transcriptions were kept in a locked cabinet in a secure location.

**Analysis**

After conducting the interviews, the audio files were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 11. Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided the analysis process of this exploratory study. This analysis is used to compare the experiences shared by the participants. The goal is to find themes and patterns across the participant’s experiences. It is an inductive approach to the data where meaning making is created through the themes identified in the participant responses (Glaser & Strauss,
It should be noted, this is related to grounded thematic analysis that is used to develop theory (Merriam, 2009). Exploratory studies and their analysis lay the groundwork for future studies, as is the intent of this research study. There are three steps to constant comparative analysis as per Glaser and Strauss (1967), open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each of these steps were followed and the researcher also included a member checking activity (Creswell & Miller, 2000) to aid in the validity of the coding process. The analysis was completed using NVivo 11.

After reading through the transcripts and becoming familiar with the data, the coding process began. First open coding was completed across all 10 interviewees’ transcripts. Fifteen open codes or meaningful units of analysis resulted from the opening coding process. This initial naming of theme or units of analysis allowed for a basic organization to begin to emerge from the data. Individual references that were tied to these open codes were reviewed as emergent themes, and this is part of axial coding. Each emergent theme was given a code name. The meaning units, which will be referred to as references, within each code, were then reviewed to determine a proper fit within that particular code. If the initial code seemed incorrect, the reference was recoded to a more appropriate code. In other words, the researcher looked for related references, grouped them together, and analyzed for consistency within the parameters of a broader category code. After broad codes contained all relevant references from the data, the researcher organized the references into subcodes within the larger categorical code. This allowed for identification of major themes and the organization of subcodes within each theme or categorical code. At the end of axial coding there were 5 categorical codes, 16
subcodes, and one subcode contained 6 different subcodes within it. There were a total of 361 non repetitive references throughout the ten interviews. The ten interviews were then selectively coded using the five main categorical codes and their subcodes, as this is the third phase of constant comparative analysis. Table 2.2 contains the themes and subcodes from the analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

After selective coding was completed, the findings were shared with two participants. They were asked to reflect and comment on the findings. This allowed the participants to examine if the findings had resonance with what they shared and to check the validity of the findings (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Similarly, the researcher checked in with senior researchers and colleagues during the steps involved in the analysis process to discuss and address any researcher concerns or questions. This resulted in a sort of peer debriefing practice for the researcher to aide in the validity of the findings as well (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Results**

All of the participants had disclosed to someone in their life, if not several other individuals. Seven participants had shared their experience of sexual violence with a family member. Of the family members disclosed to, six participants shared with a sibling, three of who had shared with a sibling but not a parent; four participants shared with a parent, only one of who had shared with a parent but not a sibling; and three participants shared with both a parent and a sibling. Lack of sibling disclosure did not exclude the participant from the study as it offered an opportunity to discuss barriers to
disclosure between siblings. Of the four participants who had not disclosed to a sibling, two did not disclose to their sibling to avoid family conflicts, one did not disclose because of the sibling’s younger age, and the other did not disclose because the relationship with their sibling was distant and felt unsafe to her. As a result of the analysis, five major themes emerged. The next section will describe each of the five major themes.

**Disclosing Process**

The disclosing process seemed to be captured by a couple different factors but everyone in the study had disclosed. Within the disclosing process, participants discussed disclosures to those outside the family, family disclosure, precipitators to disclosure, confusion about the perpetrator, and barriers to disclosure. As was discussed earlier, all of the participants had disclosed to someone outside their family, often before or in place of speaking to a sibling or parents. Best friends and partners were the recipients outside of family members or siblings. Seven out of the ten participants discussed some level of disclosure within the family, and of these disclosures, six had discussed their sexual violence experience with a sibling. Participant 002 explained, “I had told people before I told my brother; he wasn’t the first person I told, but he was the first person in my family I had told.” This participant went on to say, “I wasn’t ready to tell my parents yet so I felt like my brother was a good bridge between like not telling anyone until telling my parents. Four participants also mentioned that the sibling relationship was unique, because of the “shared experience” as described by Participant 005. The relationship between the siblings perhaps due to its more egalitarian nature may have facilitated
disclosure. This seemed to be the case in another disclosure study about siblings and sexual orientation (Grafsky, Hickey, Nguyen, & Wall, 2018), where participants felt at ease discussing their sexual orientation with close siblings.

Seven of the ten participants discussed the precipitator to their disclosure. This was best captured by Participant 010 who expressed, “I had been thinking about it for a while. I always knew that I wanted to tell someone.” The different reasons that led to sharing their abuse varied. For example, some participants expressed needing someone to talk to about it, wanting to better understand herself by discussing it, or offering insight to the person they disclosed to about their behaviors. Another salient reason to disclose to a sibling seemed to be the siblings’ mutual understanding. This was best summed up by Participant 005, “But there is something to be said for a sibling, for that, for that family connection.” All three of the participants who had only disclosed to their sibling and not their parent cited a mutual understanding between siblings. Participant 006 remarked, “Your parents can only do so much for you, let’s face it, we all don’t go to our parents about everything. So, the sibling’s the next best thing.” Siblings provided a safe space for sharing amongst the siblings who had disclosed. Siblings also had shared knowledge as one participant referred to it, and often this shared knowledge was about the perpetrators relationship to the family or about the family dynamics, which inhibited or facilitated disclosing. This sentiment was captured by Participant 002 who stated about her brother, “They know about your family more than anyone else of your, any of your friends will or any stranger or any therapist honestly.”
This shared or mutual understanding spilled over into the last subtheme, confusion about the abuser. A family member had abused all but two of the participants. All of the disclosed abuse referenced a childhood sexual violence experience. Two of the perpetrators were biological fathers, three were cousins, one was an uncle, one was a grandfather, one was a brother-in-law, one was a family friend, and the other was a boyfriend of the survivor. Since none of the perpetrators were strangers, and most were family, most of the survivors were confused about how to feel toward their perpetrator. There seemed to be a tension between knowing their perpetrator was wrong for abusing them and balancing that with feelings that their perpetrator was not a bad person. For example, Participant 012 expressed, “I didn't want my uncle to think that his son was a monster.” Participant 009’s concern also lends credence to this confusion. She stated, “I know that now he has a relationship with the perpetrator so I feel like I would be worried how that would change his feelings towards him, I guess.”

The steps involved prior to disclosing seemed to be calculated and the reasons for not disclosing until they did also seemed to be a strong dissuader. Most participants cited a desire to protect their sibling from learning about the abuse as the main reason not to disclose. And although six participants did disclose to their siblings, they still expressed these concerns. Other concerns the participants cited at a lesser frequency were fear of disbelief, protecting the family, fear of retaliation by a sibling or family member against the perpetrator, victim-shaming, and self-protection from negative stigma. The most commonly cited reason was to protect their sibling and only one participant did not state this reason. She had disclosed to an older brother in order to have him serve as a bridge to
disclosing to the parents, as previously mentioned. All the other participants were worried about how the disclosure would negatively impact their sibling. Some of the things participants worried about were that their sibling would not know what to do, would not be able to emotionally handle the disclosure, or that the disclosure would ruin their siblings’ relationships with the perpetrator. Five participants mentioned a fear of retaliation upon disclosure. Some of the participants specifically stated they did not share with their sibling because a fear of retaliation.

Four participants explained a fear of disbelief held them from sharing either to their parents or to any member in the family. Participant 011 stated, “I guess there's always that doubt of whether or not the person is going to believe you.” Related to this subcode was a desire to protect the family from knowing about the abuse, in particular a desire to keep family dysfunction or conflict at bay. Also there was a desire to self-protect and it was expressed by those participants who did not disclose to anyone in the family. Participant 011 stated, “As far as discussing it, nope, because I think in the long run it would've caused more harm than good, and it would've added more drama into my life that I don't need, and didn't need at that point.”

**Disclosure Consequences**

There were three subthemes related to real or perceived disclosure consequences. The three subthemes were negative sibling consequences, negative survivor consequences, and general positive consequences. Participants were asked to describe the things they worried about before they told their siblings. Of the six participants who told their siblings, five described being worried about negative consequences befalling them
or their sibling due to the disclosure. They worried about disbelief on the part of the sibling, siblings’ self-blame or self-harm for the abuse, rejection on the part of the sibling, fear the sibling would share with other siblings or family members, and traumatizing their sibling. For example, Participant 002 explained, “What if he doesn’t believe me…what if he actually thinks it’s true and he gets really mad, and he wants to tell my parents because he’s worried.” Participant 012 explained, “I was worried that they were going to take it out of context and start blabbing to everyone.” Participant 010 said that after she disclosed to her sister, one of her fears came true, “My big sister felt like she failed in protecting me.” Participant 014 said when asked why she didn’t share with her brother, “Suicide!” She explained she was afraid of him hurting himself, given the abuser was their father.

As far as consequences affecting the participant post-disclosure, there was a fear of being viewed as a victim, having a sibling confirm survivors’ self-blame, fear of the sibling getting upset for not saying something sooner, and a fear of disrupting the family. For example, Participant 005 stated she did not share with her siblings because she didn’t want a sense of vulnerability by them “seeing her as the victim, in a sense, or the one that got hurt.” Participant 012 explained how by disclosing, her sister would be upset for hiding it from her, “It did also show how much I was hiding from her for years.” Yet another survivor, Participant 010 explained that she had not disclosed because “I didn’t want the same way that I viewed it (referring to self-guilt), like in a negative way, I didn’t want her to have those same feelings.”
Overwhelmingly though, there were positive consequences for the disclosure. Eight of the ten participants cited a positive experience after disclosing. For example, Participant 010 stated the following about her relationship with her sibling after disclosing, “Once I told her I felt like, um, she just viewed me in a different light, like I'm-- like she respected me more, she-- and she was able to better communicate with me after telling her.” Participants discussed the fact that disclosing to their sibling allowed for a more open dialogue, a better level of understanding between them, and a better understanding of the family dynamics they grew up within. Generally, participants discussed the importance of being able to talk about sexual violence experiences to feel supported and to prevent other instances of trauma. Participant 005 explained,

So, as an adult um, it's important to communicate to others who have been through it with empathy and also to communicate with siblings and, and letting them know that it is important to share it for your own benefit um, potentially for them too, but for your own benefit.

**Family Dynamics**

Several of the participants, as cited above, wanted to maintain peace in their households by not disclosing. As the interviews progressed, family dynamics and their role in facilitating or preventing disclosures became apparent. The participants who experienced abuse at the hands of their father, grandfather, and brother-in-law who played a parental role, also described households which were chaotic. Participant 006 explained why it was hard to disclose or discuss the abuse in a chaotic home.
Um, so I think with everything else falling to pieces you couldn’t focus on each other’s problems too many times. You just had to treat each other normally because we were all we had and we, that’s the only thing we can say to each other.

The other aspect of general family dynamics that seven of the ten participants described was family secrecy and ignoring discussion about the abuse post disclosure.

I know my mom remembers but like sometimes I wonder if I can be like – ‘Hey, do you remember this happen?’ because like nobody ever acknowledges it at all. So it’s like, ‘do you know this happened to me?’ and that I'm a survivor too, or is it just kind of something that you pretended did not happen, which I think is the case definitely. (Participant 009)

As referenced above, five of the seven participants discussed how their mom, or other mother-figure, knew about the abuse but failed to have any conversations about it after the disclosure. In fact, these mothers maintained the sexual abuse experience a secret, never acknowledging or telling others about it.

**Sibling Dynamics**

Several sibling dynamics became evident as the interviews progressed. The participants discussed first how they did not disclose to their siblings if they had a distant relationship with them. The distance between the siblings caused participants not to confide in their sibling as a recipient of disclosure. Contrasting the lack of closeness was a rich discussion by other participants regarding the mutual understanding that exists between siblings, which facilitated disclosure. This mutual understanding served as a
precipitator for their disclosure as discussed above and it certainly was one of the prominent sibling dynamics described by half of the participants.

The six participants who disclosed to their sibling described their siblings’ reactions to the abuse in detail. None of the participants indicated during the interview that their sibling did not believe them after they disclosed. None of them expressed that the disclosure negatively impacted their relationship. However many siblings responded with silence that immediately followed learning about the abuse. This then at times was followed by some general question about the abuse, such as when did it happen. Participant 002 expressed the following about her older brother’s reaction, “So he wasn’t really speaking a lot but he didn’t really ask a lot of questions either.” It seems as though the younger the sibling when learning about the disclosure the less they had to say about it. The older the sibling when learning about it, the more the participant perceived support. This was not always the case though. One of the more salient findings regarding sibling dynamics was that none of the siblings treated the survivor differently (in a negative manner) after learning about the abuse. Participant 006 who stated, “My sister and my brother both didn’t change at all,” captured this sentiment.

Finally, the participants were clear about what their siblings did that they perceived as supportive. All of the siblings who received the disclosure from their sister rendered support. “What my sister offered, right, she was non-judgmental, non-confrontational, um, she was quiet for most of it, right, she just let me talk” (Participant 010). There was a range of behaviors perceived as supportive expressed by the participants’ siblings. For example, the two male siblings told about the sexual violence
experience became physically protective of their sisters, expressing sorrow for the experience and mediating between family members and the survivor. One of them was an older brother and he offered to pay for counseling as well as provide emotional support. The other four sibling recipients were female. All of the sisters listened to the participants when they wanted or needed to talk. None of participants perceived judgement from their siblings.

**Experts in their Trauma**

The survivors all presented advice for survivors and for siblings of survivors in order to better support a survivor who wished to disclose to her sibling. This was categorized as experts in their trauma, as each survivor gave poignant insight into what she needed as a survivor and what she needed from her sibling to feel supported. There were three main pieces of advice for siblings: listen, allow for communication, and continue to treat the survivor normally.

I want them to know that their sibling, the knowledge of what happened, doesn't change who they thought their sibling was before they knew. Um, and that it's okay to feel angry and that it's okay to have, you know, whatever kind of feelings that you have, but that they need talk about it with, um, with their sibling.

(Participant 009)

As far as advice for survivors, here too the participants had some fruitful advice regarding why it was good to speak to their siblings.

Um, do it as soon as you start thinking about it, um, don't put it off, um, for long as I did obviously. Um, know that they are your family ultimately. They want you
to be well. You're not gonna get rejected, you're not gonna get, you know, um, look down upon, um. If anything it's gonna make you feel more whole, feel more support and like you have an outlet, um, to go somewhere, um, if you need it. And again it's not your fault, it's not, it happened but having that person to tell and who can you can talk to and have that insider, um perspective, will first of all ultimately help you to like, you know, heal and move on. (Participant 010)

The survivors also expressed that as long as you felt close to your sibling and you felt you trusted your sibling, it would benefit you to disclose. In general, the advice seemed to be to just share your experience, “Share, you have nothing to lose by sharing, at all. You don’t have anything to lose. If anything you’re just gaining strength to talk about yourself” (Participant 014).

**Discussion**

The results from this study demonstrate that in fact survivors do tell their siblings about sexual abuse experiences, unless the family dynamics are already strained or if the siblings are viewed as too young to learn about the abuse. Also, all of the participants struggled with the choice to disclose even if they ultimately shared, a consistent finding in the research (Tener & Murphy, 2015). Related to the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure, the survivors seemed to weigh the consequences or be preoccupied with the negative impacts the disclosure could cause them, their sibling, or their family. This supports one of the premises within ITD that states the individual decision to disclose seems hampered by a cost versus benefit analysis (Barrios & Caspi, 2014). In some cases the costs against the family and siblings is just too high to disclose, evidenced
by the three participants who never told anyone in their family. A discussion around why the negative consequences exist and how they outweigh the positive consequences could help researchers better address these barriers. This is also the point of ITD. How do we have a discussion around socially and family created barriers rather than a discussion about how a survivor “chooses” not to disclose?

The participants who did disclose to their siblings had positive experiences. Survivors in this study mentioned the same barriers often cited in other studies (Malloy et al., 2011; McElvaney et al., 2014) namely not disclosing to prevent disruption in family functioning or to keep their family, siblings, or self, safe. Even though they worried for their sibling and themselves, the results of disclosing were positive. Survivors were met with sibling support and improved sibling relationships. All of the six siblings disclosed to were perceived as supportive. Survivors described their siblings as supportive when they believed their disclosure, became physically protective, and listened. This finding is particularly salient and provides an original contribution to this existing body of literature. It was a welcome finding as it has been replicated in other types of hardships experienced by siblings as described earlier (see Caya & Liem, 1998; East & Rook, 1992; Gass et al., 2007; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Milevsky, 2005; Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). The findings support that in siblings’ discussions around sexual abuse experiences, survivors benefitted from the disclosure to their sibling. This is important as it had not been shown in prior literature. It is also worth noting however most survivors described their siblings’ reactions of silence and minimal discussion around the abuse. This particular reaction could be in line with various trauma that could be experienced by
siblings of survivors (Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). This may also explain why four of the participants spared their siblings the details of the abuse if they did share, or why they chose not to share in the first place.

The general findings from this study indicate that survivors in fact weigh consequences while processing if they will disclose. Often a precipitator causes the disclosure and these survivors accounted for family and sibling dynamics, as a precipitator. The survivors also held valuable information for other survivors and for siblings of survivors. The survivors weighed in on what they found supportive from siblings and what they feel are the parameters and benefits of disclosing to a sibling. Since positive reactions decrease negative symptoms in survivors (Baker et al., 2001; Evans et al., 2013; Folger & Wright, 2013; Shlafer et al., 2013), heeding survivors’ advice seems critical.

The survivors did not really discuss ethnicity, gender, or religion, much which are implicated by the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure. This could be because the participants were not prompted to discuss these topics. To report on findings based on demographics could seem like splitting hairs, given the small participant pool. However, of three survivors who had not told anyone in their family, two of them were Latinas and they discussed the perceived family disruption their disclosure would cause. Of three survivors who had only told their siblings, two of them were White, and they discussed how close they felt to their siblings. Also, the only one to mention gender directly as a reason for sibling nondisclosure was a Latina. She explained how it would be weird to talk about her sexual abuse with him because he was male and she was female. Another
Latina mentioned her lack of sibling or family disclosure was in part the result of not wanting them to know she was having sex. Similarly, the Middle Eastern participant mentioned that she did not want her sisters to know about the sexual abuse because she wanted to preserve their innocence and their family name since it was a family member.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The findings from this study inform researchers about how siblings are a potential source of support during sexual abuse disclosures. Also, since siblings were generally perceived as supportive, practitioners can explore, if and, how to utilize siblings as a source of support with survivors, both of which are missing in the literature (Schreier et al., 2017). This study also captured the voices of survivors by asking them what their needs were from siblings as well as what their advice are for other survivors as it relates to disclosure. To the knowledge of the researcher, both of these findings are new to the literature.

Little, if any research, discusses how or why survivors choose to disclose to a sibling. This study provides some insight into that decision-making process. However, this study has several limitations. First, the study included a small sample size. Second, it had a limited scope of the disclosure process, given it is only being explored between siblings. Another limitation is that the sample is comprised solely of survivors; as a result, the siblings’ voices are missing from the data. This creates a biased perspective of the disclosure process as it only accounts for the survivors’ perspectives, not both accounts of the disclosure. Another possible limitation could be that survivors with a poor sibling relationship may be less likely to participate in a sibling study since they do not
view their sibling favorably. Yet another limitation are the lack of questions directly addressing ITD. The interview questions in this study did not specifically ask about sibling dynamics, family functions, the weighing of consequences versus benefits of disclosure, or how positions of power could influence disclosure. Specifically, this study did not ask about intersectional factors, such as ethnicity, gender, or religion, which are central to ITD.

**Research Implications**

Even accounting for the limitations of the questions, the participants still spoke about sibling and family dynamics and their influence on how consequences are perceived and weighed for the purpose of disclosing within the family. Future studies are needed to continue to understand each of the thematic findings as they relate to siblings. Future research that delineates the steps involved in disclosing to a sibling is needed. Furthermore, more research which accounts for consequences and sibling dynamics is needed to better explain factors that inhibit or facilitate disclosure. Perhaps quantitative or mixed methods studies with more targeted questions could help draw connections across the individual, their family, and social factors that contribute to disclosure. In addition, more research is needed that addresses how survivors exercise their agency to disclose. More targeted questions around feelings of agency could prove useful in future qualitative studies. Future studies linking ITD and siblings are also needed in order to build more of an empirical foundation for ITD as a holistic theory that helps readers gain a better understanding of sexual abuse disclosure.
Practice Implications

This study on siblings begins to lend empirical support to the link between consequences and family dynamics. This can translate to practice settings where more dialogue around disclosure barriers could facilitate disclosure discussions for survivors. Further, the knowledge generated about siblings as sources of support could lead to inclusion of siblings in prevention and intervention strategies since siblings helped survivors cope with the abuse and were even used as bridges to further disclosure within the family. In a practice setting, siblings could be explored as a potential disclosure recipient when working with survivors who desire talking to a family member but have not yet done so. The findings may also inform policy recommendations regarding the inclusion of siblings in family programming, survivor outreach, and counseling services. In general, fostering greater sibling inclusion and support in sexual abuse cases where the siblings are close to one another seems to be beneficial.

Conclusion

This study supports the notion that a sibling may also prove to be a source of support when dealing with sexual abuse trauma. Including siblings in research and practice may similarly prove to be beneficial for researchers and practitioners hoping to bolster sources of strength for survivors. As one participant said, “there is something to be said for a sibling” and as researchers, a better understanding of siblings’ roles in our participants’ lives may prove fruitful.
References


### Table 2.1

**Participant Demographics**

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Table 2.2  

*Sibling Support and Disclosure of Sexual Abuse*

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CHAPTER IV

A Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure

Sexual abuse is widespread and yet relatively few disclose. In addition to practitioners receiving little training in sexual abuse disclosure, there have been few tools to aid them in this process. As a result, there is need for transformation as it relates to the culture of nondisclosure of sexual violence. Specifically a better understanding of barriers to the disclosure of sexual violence is needed. The #MeToo movement has created a dialogue around sexual violence and harassment in popular news and in academe as well (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). Women’s disclosures through notable press such as The New York Times and Huffington Post, as well as through social media, have shed light on the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. This article will outline the process of creating, empirically studying, and revising a transformational guide for sexual abuse disclosure (TGD). The TGD is proposed for practitioners’ use while in therapeutic settings. The original TGD guide was a researcher-developed tool derived from a theory that draws attention to multiple contextual realities affecting sexual violence disclosure decisions. The integrated theory of sexual abuse disclosure is a new theory, developed by the researcher, which accounts for individual, familial and societal factors affecting disclosure decisions. The guide was also developed by this author to aide practitioners that may be undertrained in, as a result not prepared to address, sexual violence in practice (Kitzrow, 2002; Read, McGregor, Coggan, & Thomas, 2006). The guide contains questions to help practitioners elicit disclosures and also to help raise survivors’ awareness of how different family and social constraints lead to nondisclosure. The TGD
was studied to improve it, which involved the researcher asking women who have a history of sexual violence to provide feedback on how to best revise the TGD guide. The researcher documented the iterative revision process. The researcher opted to revise the TGD before piloting or disseminating it in order to make it survivor-informed as a result potentially improving the quality of the responses that the guide may elicit (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The researcher also wanted to respect the sensitivity of discussing sexual violence, and felt participants who have a history of sexual violence could provide the best insight around producing questions that do not cause further harm but still generate transformative dialogues.

**Study Aims and Research Question**

The goal of this study is to create a revised, participant-informed interview guide. The TGD guide has two main purposes. It is intended to facilitate first-time or continued disclosure in therapeutic settings, and also it is intended to problematize nondisclosure of sexual abuse by framing social and familial barriers to disclosure through ITD (Barrios & Caspi, 2014); thus, shifting the onus for disclosure away from survivors alone. The research question is: *How do survivors experience the TGD guide?*

**Literature Review**

A review of the extant literature did not produce any practice-based interview guide focused on generating sexual violence disclosure from adults in therapeutic settings, although a range of forensic interviewing guides for children do exist (for a summary see Cheung & McNeil Boutte-Queen, 2010). It seems counterintuitive to solely focus on childhood disclosure since most children do not disclose until adulthood
(Esposito, 2015), and some may not even realize they were victimized until adulthood.

Given this knowledge, forensic interviewing is not the focus of this study, rather, this study aims to better understand the type of questions that generate disclosure by survivors in practice settings by utilizing questions that facilitate or problematize familial and social practices that silence survivors.

Disclosure has been found to improve mental health, namely by creating a greater sense of self, increasing the ability for intimacy, and increasing one’s belief in the self (Esposito, 2015). Yet, most practitioners are not trained on asking about sexual abuse trauma (Read et al., 2006) and are ill-prepared to assist clients who may want to, or have, disclosed (Kitzrow, 2002). A current gap in the literature is a better understanding of the disclosure process, specifically the impact of culture and socioeconomic status on disclosure, and motivations and strategies to generate disclosure (Esposito, 2015). The TGD guide addresses these gaps and asks survivors if and how effective they deem the TGD guide in order to improve the questions in the guide so that survivors may experience a transformation in their thinking about nondisclosure.

**Theories of Disclosure**

Most disclosure theories and subsequent research studies focus on the dialectical process between two individuals whose goal is to establish a relationship (e.g. Alberts, Martin, Nakayama, 2011; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006)). This paper however focuses only on sexual abuse disclosure. The researcher is defining sexual abuse disclosure as the dialectical process during which a survivor and another individual discuss a sexual violence experience.
To the researcher’s knowledge, adult theories of sexual abuse disclosure have not been readily accessible (Smith, 2005), but disclosure theories that explain self-disclosure are present in the literature. Four common self-disclosure theories are communication privacy management (see Petronio, 1991), social penetration theory (see Altman & Taylor, 1973), social exchange theory (see Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), and the Johari window pane model (see Luft & Ingham, 1955) (Masaviru, 2016). These theories address self-disclosure as a means to establish human relationships. Social penetration theory and social exchange theory describe disclosure as an on-going process of sharing personal information during which benefits and risks to disclosure are examined. The Johari window pane model is different in that it describes disclosure as a give and take process between two individuals. One aspect that is common across all theories is that disclosure is viewed as an individual’s decision to share information. What seems absent from these theories is a focus on why people do not share, aside from just consequences of disclosure or to not establish a relationship. As it relates to sexual violence disclosures, some of these general communications theories have been applied to understanding disclosure processes. For example, both social exchange theory (Leonard, 1996) and the communication management of privacy theory (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997) were applied in order explain how children disclosed sexual abuse. These applications however did not address adult disclosure of sexual violence nor barriers to disclosure.

**Integrated theory of sexual abuse disclosure.** Given these shortcomings, the integrated theory of sexual abuse disclosure (ITD) (Barrios & Caspi, 2014) was used to develop the questions in the TGD guide. Developing a guide which facilitates disclosure
requires understanding the barriers to disclosure. A variety of theories have been put forth as discussed above, however, none has been comprehensive and included familial and social contexts with the exception of ITD. ITD is a new theory that takes multiple factors including individual, familial and societal factors into consideration. As such, it was used to inform development of this paper’s interview guide.

The integrated theory of sexual abuse disclosure (ITD) (Barrios & Caspi, 2014), may help researchers and practitioners understand individuals’ disclosure processes in a more nuanced and comprehensive manner than current theoretical frameworks. ITD integrates consequence theory, family systems theory, and intersectionality theory, thus providing a holistic perspective of disclosure decisions by survivors of assault. With a better understanding of barriers to disclosure, perhaps practitioners can better help survivors discuss their experience with sexual violence. This is important because increasing disclosure can prevent future instances of sexual abuse to the survivor and other potential victims of that particular perpetrator (Zeuthen & Hagelskjaer, 2013).

Accounting for familial barriers to disclosure allows survivors to understand mechanisms within their upbringing that silence them. Furthermore, accounting for social practices that also silence survivors provides them with an understanding of why they may self-blame and remain silent even if they want to disclose. A study by Miller, Markman, and Handley (2007) investigated the relationship between self-blame in sexual assault victims and future revictimization. They explained the following about self-blame,

If they (victims) perceive as ‘‘given’’ that their environment is saturated with (legal) opportunistic sex, victims will be more likely to blame themselves,
perhaps perceiving their control failures made the critical difference in the occurrence of their own sexual assaults, ultimately increasing revictimization risk.

(p. 143)

In other words, if people feel they live in an environment where assault is something that occurs when a perpetrator sees an opportunity, then those who are victimized may feel that keeping themselves safe is their responsibility. People who have been victimized may believe rape myths, as discussed by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994); they may believe they did something to provoke the attention, such as dressing provocatively or being alone. Thus, if assaulted, the individual did not succeed at staying safe, and therefore they are at fault. Blaming yourself then carries some level of control over the situation, but results in self-blame when you are victimized.

**Developing the TGD Guide**

Incorporating ITD in the development of the TGD generated questions regarding familial and social contexts as they relate to disclosure, which in turn may facilitate a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) for the survivors. Critical consciousness refers to an ability to recognize, and awareness of, oppression from the various systems, which influence our daily life, such as, for example, politics, economics, and educational institutions, and to act against these systems (Freire, 2000). The original TGD contained questions regarding prevalence, disclosure, agency to disclose, ITD, and intersectionality. The questions addressed consequences for disclosure thus linking responses to consequence theory. There are also questions about family rules and roles regarding sexual abuse and its disclosure, thus linking responses to family theory. Finally,
intersectionality theory is addressed by asking about cultural beliefs regarding sex, sexual abuse, and women, patriarchal beliefs and socially sanctioned beliefs about sexual abuse, and the impact of social categories such as educational level, socioeconomic status, and LGBT status on disclosure. The researcher believed that using ITD informed questions, survivors may develop a more critical understanding of their family and social groups, which may have directly or indirectly, influenced their personal agency to disclose their experience of sexual violence. Once they are aware of these barriers, perhaps they may choose to disclose even if it is not what their family or social groups agree with.

Practitioners do not always have training about sexual abuse (Kenny & Abreu, 2015; Kitzrow, 2002; Read et al., 2006) and as a result may lack an understanding of familial and societal barriers to disclosure of abuse. The use of the proposed interview guide, which is informed by ITD, can instruct interactions that may elicit disclosure, by shifting the blame for nondisclosure from survivors to family and social practices. Giving practitioners the questions to ask survivors regarding silencing familial and societal practices can do this. This is important given that the negative short-term and long-term ramifications of sexual abuse on mental health are well documented (see Allagia, 2010). Clinical presentation of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, suicidality, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, among other disorders, is not uncommon (Allagia, 2010). Therefore, creating a guide that facilitates disclosure while also shifting the blame for nondisclosure away from survivors may allow practitioners to have transformational conversations around sexual violence. Furthermore, even without formal
training, a guide of questions to facilitate sexual violence disclosure may be better than nothing at all.

**Disclosure Barriers**

The barriers to disclosure of sexual abuse have been well documented in the literature yet, disclosure is still relatively low. Some of the commonly reported barriers to disclosure are a fear of negative consequences for the survivor or their loved ones (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011; McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2014) and a fear of disbelief and self-blame (Conklin, 2012). These fears have been validated in the literature. Non-offending caretakers and siblings are often negatively affected by abuse (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). The family is often left in disarray post disclosure of sexual abuse (McElvaney et al., 2014). There have also been documented differences between children who delay disclosure versus those who disclose relatively quickly after the abuse. The four main predictors of delayed disclosure were penetration, use of verbal/weapon threats, if the perpetrator was close to the survivor, and if the abuse occurred between 12 and 17 years of age (Bicanic, Hehenkamp, van de Putte, van Wijk, & de Jongh, 2015).

Practitioners may themselves be worried about engaging in disclosure dialogues with client who experienced sexual violence. A guide developed for practitioners working with childhood survivors of abuse outlined the difficulties experienced by practitioners (Nelson & Hampson, 2008). This guide quotes people who work with survivors and their rationalizations for why they are reluctant to engage in conversations about childhood sexual abuse with clients. For example, some of examples of the fears
practitioners’ stated were inducing false memories, increasing suicidality, treatments have not been successful, survivors will disclose when they want to, leave the past in the past, there is lack of support and supervision for the practitioner around this topic, and this discussion may do more harm than good. These findings seem to support Read et al. (2006) and Kitzrow (2002), who claim there is a lack of training around working with people who experience sexual violence.

Furthermore, knowing the barriers for disclosure does not necessitate further disclosures, unless practitioners are aware or willing to ask about abuse on more than one occasion during their sessions. Disclosure of abuse can take several sessions (Esposito, 2015). Therefore, continued opportunities to disclose are a necessity. The manner in which survivors are assisted is just as important as the type of help received (Ahrens, Campbell, Temier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007). Survivors, in a study, who accessed formal providers seemed to have negative experiences as compared to survivors who went to informal providers, unless the formal provider initiated the disclosure, at which point the survivor experienced positive reactions (Ahrens et al., 2007). These negative experiences may be better understood in light of Nelson and Hampson’s (2008) guide that reported on the fears of formal providers in learning about sexual violence. Thus, helping practitioners facilitate disclosures is important given the chance that a large proportion of their clients are survivors (see CDC, 2012) even if they have not disclosed (Allagia, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). Hence, the TGD, informed by research and survivors of sexual assault, can help mental health providers, who work in therapeutic settings, facilitate and support survivors’ disclosure.
Utilizing the TGD Guide

Practitioners are likely to work with potential sexual abuse survivors; yet, Read et. al. (2006) discuss how anywhere from 63% to 78% of the survivors in their study were never asked by practitioners about sexual abuse. A study by Kitzrow (2002) reports that there is a dearth of training. In Kitzrow’s study, 69% of respondents stated they received no training on sexual abuse treatment in courses certified by the Council of Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Although practitioners may be inadequately trained in sexual violence or its disclosure, the TGD is a tool for practitioners who are working with survivors of sexual violence. The TGD can help practitioners ask questions that may elicit or facilitate further disclosure. The guide has several areas of questions (prevalence, disclosure, agency to disclose, ITD, and intersectionality), allowing its use with survivors along a disclosure continuum from nondisclosing to disclosing survivors. For example, practitioners that suspect their client may be a survivor, who ask questions about prevalence and disclosure, may help survivors segue into their own disclosure. In addition, it can be used with survivors of sexual violence who have disclosed already in order to help them view their lack of disclosure in a different manner. Survivors may learn about the culture of nondisclosure perpetuated by families and society, thus shifting the onus of disclosure away from just themselves. Furthermore, the guide may serve as a tool around which therapeutic training may coalesce in the future, perhaps leading to a transformed understanding of sexual violence for the practitioners as well.
Transformative Interviewing

Transformative interviewing refers to a postmodern qualitative approach in which the “researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understandings of the participant” (p. 221, Roulston, 2010). Transformative interviewing, as described by Roulston (2010), has two strands for researchers wishing to apply it, therapeutic and critical. Transformative therapeutic interviewing focuses on creating a space of healing with the participant in research settings. Transformative interviewing was used in the development of the wording used within the guide order to generate a transformative dialogue that helps survivors shift the onus to disclose onto society and family as well. Another feature of the transformative interviewing approach is its collaborative spirit. Researcher and participants work together to create “transformed” understandings of the topic at hand. The hope with this study is that engaging participants with a history of sexual violence about their barriers to disclosure will allow them to speak their truth.

The current paper will utilize a critical change technique since transformative interviewing can be an action approach that fosters change and advocacy, as the facilitator and the participants engage in dialogues that create new understandings. If transformative interviewing is infused with an intersectionality framework, viewing the social, political, familial, and the personal as interconnected, (May, 2015) then critical consciousness may be achieved (Freire, 2000). As it relates here, survivors of sexual violence could perhaps gain a more critical understanding of their disclosure processes. If transformative interviewing is utilized, then the facilitator should be aware of critical issues in order to help participants attain knowledge. In other words, it is hard to make
someone else aware of something you are not aware of yourself (Gutierrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye, 1995). Utilizing transformative interviewing may guide an “inquiry of discomfort” (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006), where practitioners may embark in a dialogue they are not comfortable with or feel totally competent about if they have not received training in this area, as reported by researchers (Kenny & Abreu, 2015; Kitzrow, 2002; Read et al., 2006). Practitioners’ ability to engage in conversations about sexual abuse, even if it is an “inquiry of discomfort” as found by Nelson and Hampson (2008), may help individuals process and heal.

**Intersectionality and Agency**

In its most rudimentary form, intersectionality, as defined by May (2015), is a theoretical framework that sheds light on the multiple social identities an individual simultaneously possesses at every given moment, such as one’s cultural, religious, sexual, educational, financial, ethnic, racial, and developmental identity. These identities are not individual but overlapping and intermixing at all times. Also, each identity possesses a certain level of social power and this power often dictates the social interactions we may encounter (Andersen & Collins, 2013). This understanding is critical in helping to better elucidate the process of disclosure in that the power we believe we engender is socially created, and without examination we are often unaware of our agency.

Agency as a term has had a long history of trying to be defined (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). As it is understood in this paper, it is the ability of a person who experienced sexual violence to disclose the experience with another individual. Systems
of oppression nest and vet an individual’s agency to disclose. As was stated by Green (2010), “Reactive systems preclude authentic agency” (p. 4). If authentic agency is understood as our ability to disclose, and reactive systems are understood as rules regarding what can or cannot be discussed, then Green’s statement lends truth to the idea that agency is nested and vetted by social systems. If the reactions of these systems are negative then the agency to disclose begins to feel limited. Thus, the agency of a survivor to disclose is tightly linked to the social power the individual has in their respective spaces to discuss such a topic.

**Revising the TGD Guide**

The current study presented participants with the TGD as was initially developed by the author (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to review the questions in the guide and provide feedback about them individually. Based upon their feedback, the researcher generated a revised and improved, participant-informed transformational guide for sexual abuse disclosure.

This study points to the importance of including participants in the early steps of research. Their input, before that of practitioners who will implement or even before piloting the interview guide, allowed the researcher to engage participants with insider knowledge given their history of sexual violence and to engage participants who may reflect the intended recipients of the guide, in order to refine the interview guide before formal dissemination. Refining an interview guide prior to piloting vets the guide to “strengthen the quality of data obtained” (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 811). Furthermore, using insider-knowledge, the knowledge provided by those within the group you are
investigating, provides findings that facilitate implementation later (Jagosh, et al., 2012). While practitioners will be the implementers of the TGD, the researcher wanted to first ask intended recipients of the guide to inform the questions, as ultimately they will be the ones asked these questions. Working from a participatory stance centers the research and methodology around the intended recipients of the work (Herr & Anderson, 2015) and that was done with this study.

**Researcher’s Position**

As a critical, feminist, Latina researcher, positioning was critical to this research process. The researcher’s graduate training was in counseling and she interned as a sexual abuse counselor within a rape center prior to entering doctoral studies. This training has enabled a straddling of theory, research, and practice and ultimately facilitated the creation of a collaborative research space between the participants and herself. Her critical, feminist lens also guided the use of intersectionality and transformative interviewing. The researcher developed a guide that would challenge conventional therapeutic questions, as well as push participants to think more critically about the disclosure of their sexual violence experience.

**Methods**

**Design**

The design of the study is a critical, qualitative design, inspired by participatory action research (PAR) (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The focus was to explore participants’ perspectives on a new guide for practitioners’ implementation called the Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure (TGD), in order to revise and refine
it prior to formal dissemination. The interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework outlined by Castillo-Montoya (2016) was utilized to achieve the refinement of the guide.

The IPR framework has four steps. This study addressed the first three steps of the IPR and the analysis of step 3 was documented as it related to receiving feedback on the interview guide. Step four of the IPR, piloting the interview, was not completed for this study. The first step is to ensure the interview questions, in this case the questions in the interview guide, coincide with the research question. The investigation intended to identify: How survivors experienced the TGD? This research question is addressed by the last two question in the TGD, which ask about survivors’ experiences after reading the TGD. The second step in IPR is developing an inquiry-based discussion through the questions. In this study, one of the questions asked during the revising process was about the types of responses they may give to each questions. This allowed the researcher to address whether or not the questions generated guided and fruitful discussions. The third step in the IPR is receiving feedback. This was the overall focus of the analysis portion of the study since participants were asked to revise the TGD by providing feedback on the wording of the questions and the types of responses the TGD would elicit. Finally, the fourth step of the IPR is piloting the protocol, and this was not within the scope of this study but is a goal of future studies. The outcome of this research is to offer a refined guide, co-constructed with the receivers of the instrument (survivors), for practitioner use, researcher examination, and incorporation in settings where practitioners are trained.

Based on the feedback of the participants, the original questions were revised and a survivor-informed interview guide was generated. The inclusion of participants for
whom research and recommendations are developed is a seminal part of PAR (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Her & Anderson, 2015). A distinctive aspect of using PAR is that participants are included in the research process thus increasing commitment to the project and the utility of the findings given the same people who will benefit from the findings inform them (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Herr & Anderson, 2015). In this study, participants with a history of sexual violence were asked to revise the TGD, as the guide is intended to be used with them. The design of the questions in the TGD guide were informed by ITD (Barrios & Caspi, 2014) and transformative interviewing (Roulston, 2012) in which the “researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understandings of participant” (p. 221, Roulston, 2010). The TGD is intended to transform survivors’ understanding of disclosure.

**Recruitment**

Women, 18 years of age or older, with a history of sexual violence were recruited through various methods. Participants were recruited after participating in another study conducted by this researcher. Participants were also recruited through snowballing, during which participants are asked to refer other participants increasing participation. Snowballing is considered one of the best methods for including participants that are hard-to-reach or for participants discussing sensitive topics (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Hendricks & Blanken, 1992).
Sample

This study included a small, non-probability, convenience sample of 10 women with a history of sexual violence. The nature of the study requires the use of participants with a history of sexual assault, an often-difficult population to sample, thus requiring non-probability sampling. The study is exploratory, where the goal is refinement of the TGD, not its feasibility. Choosing a sample size requires clarity on whether the goal is depth or breadth of the findings (Patton, 2015). The smaller sampling of 10 participants allowed the researcher to engage the participants for more depth in their responses, thus providing more information and justifications for the refinement of the TGD. This sample likely resembles future recipients of the finalized TGD. Maxwell (2013) recommends using participants in the piloting of research instruments that resemble the intended recipients of those instruments. While this study is not a pilot study, the same reasoning was applied to the selection of the participants. The design of the study was for 10 participants, however the researcher was determined to add participants if saturation was not achieved. Saturation refers to the point in data collection at which new findings are no longer being generated. Saturation of ideas is the typical goal of qualitative data collection as it relates to sample size (Mason, 2010), but when and how saturation is achieved varies considerably without any formal answers as to how many participants are needed and why (Mason, 2010). Although the sample size is small, the researcher achieved saturation of recommended edits to the TGD, and therefore more participants were not required.
Sample characteristics. The 10 female participants ranged in age from 20 to 35. The sample of female survivors consisted of five Latinas, one middle-eastern woman, and four white women. Four of the participants were undergraduate students, one was a master’s student, and the other five were working professionals with a graduate degree. Other categorical data were not collected.

Procedures

Data collection. The researcher scheduled participants who responded and appropriately met the criteria of the study (a history of sexual abuse, female, and over 18). A review and administration of an informed consent was completed at the start of the study, although this study was IRB exempt (see Appendix D). The reason to include the use of a consent form was to ensure participants understood their rights as participants and the goal of the study, as well as they would receive contact information about relevant community resources. The dialogue between the participant and the researcher was audiotaped and notes were taken by the researcher. There were a total of four questions utilized with each participant. The researcher asked the participants the following two questions about each individual TGD question: 1) What does this question mean to you? and 2) What kind of responses would you provide to this question? Participants were also prompted about the use of the individual TGD questions in therapy and what they would change about the questions. This was a blend of a close read and a think aloud of the TGD questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Seeking feedback to improve the TGD is in-line with recommendations from Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Hurst et al. (2015) in order to ensure the questions are tailored to inquiry goals which is
also the goal of transformative interviewing (Roulston, 2012). This is also similar to cognitive interviewing which is often used to improve survey measures, by asking participants to rate and discuss survey items (Haeger, Lambert, Kinzie, & Gieser, 2012). Participants were then asked two summative questions: 3) *Can these questions help a survivor and practitioner understand how complicated disclosing is?* and 4) *Can you discuss how thinking about these questions all together would help you feel that your decision to disclose really has depended on what family, friends, and society would think about you?* These questions were asked to ascertain overall transformation in thinking about themselves and disclosure as a result of the interview guide. The participants’ general responses and reasoning for each question were noted by the researcher.

**Recordings.** Interviews were recorded using a small handheld recorder. The practice of recording allows the researcher to provide their full attention to the participant, as well as to capture the conversation for transcription and analysis purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The informed consent, researcher’s notes, audio files, and transcriptions were kept on a password protected laptop within a secure location.

**Analysis**

Step three in the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework Castillo-Montoya (2016) is receiving feedback and this is what was analyzed in this study. It should be noted Castillo-Montoya (2016) does not provide specific steps for determining what to change in an interview guide, but offers methods to receive feedback on interviews, such as a close-read or think-aloud activities. Similarly, the qualitative nature of the findings does not lend itself to quantifying the findings to justify the recommended
changes from the participants. Depth and detail in responses guided changes, not a specific number of recommended change instances. This is consistent with qualitative design and methodologies (Patton, 2015). Emergent themes guided the revisions in the guide. The respondents’ answers to the four questions were separated during the analysis. The first two questions were analyzed for themes to revise the guide. The second two questions of the study were analyzed using directed content analysis.

**Analyzing the TGD for Revisions**

After all ten interviews were completed, the researcher focused first on the responses to the first two questions that each participant was asked about each individual TGD question. The researcher made decisions to revise, eliminate, or sustain questions based on themes that emerged from the participants’ feedback. When themes emerged around agreement of the meaning of the question and the value of the question, then the question remained. If themes emerged around a need for change or lack of clarity, then the questions were revised. The questions were revised to fit the suggestions of the participants. The steps included in developing the analysis follow.

The participant responses were analyzed for themes in order to revise the TGD. This was done by developing a table in Excel, which contained the participants’ responses. A sample of how to set up this table can be viewed in Table 3.1. The table contained all of the original questions across the top row. Each participant was listed down the first column and her responses to the corresponding questions were inserted into the table. What resulted was a column for each question with the all of the responses to that particular question. The responses were analyzed for themes across two areas: the
meaning of the question and potential answers to the questions. In other words, the researcher first analyzed the responses looking for themes regarding whether wording of the question made sense to the participant. The researcher then reviewed the responses analyzing if the potential elicited response for each question was appropriate for the presented question. A new list of questions was generated that reflected as often as possible the exact words of the participants. The researcher selected the exact words from different participants based on phrases they provided that were inclusive of other participants’ ideas and which maintained fidelity to the goal of the original question. For example, the researcher collated participants’ suggested phrases by question, and then from the phrases selected, the researcher searched for a phrase that captured what was being proposed by the others and also captured what the original questions was attempting to ask. Table 3.2 contains a sample of edits to questions and participant and researcher reasoning for the revisions.

**Directed Content for Analysis of Transformation**

Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) for language indicative of transformation through change in thinking and intersectionality through change in self-identifying was used with the final two questions of the study. Specifically, any reference to transformation in thinking or intersectional thinking was coded at one of these two predetermined codes. For example, transformational thinking was defined by the researcher as language indicative of a change in the manner in which the participant had processed information about their sexual abuse disclosure. This change is usually signaled by key phrases such as “I realize now”, “I never thought of that”, or “now this
makes sense”. This type of analysis is a deductive approach during which raw data is coded for categories constructed around a specific focus (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), in this case intersectionality and transformation. Table 3.3 summarizes the overall findings by themes and subcodes. Appendix E contains the revised TGD questions.

**Trustworthiness**

At the conclusion of each interview, given the iterative nature of qualitative investigations, the researcher briefly discussed the recommended changes from previous participants with the current participant. The researcher did this to continually examine if the previous recommended changes had resonance with what each particular participant had shared and to check the validity of the potential findings (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). At the conclusion of the study, after the TGD was revised, the researcher shared the new guide with two participants who had expressed interest in reviewing the changes. This too allowed the researcher the opportunity to see if the guide changes seemed reliable (Birt et al., 2016). Finally, the researcher checked in with a senior researcher and a colleague during the analysis process and after the revisions were made to the guide to discuss and address any researcher concerns or questions. This peer debriefing practice aides in the validity of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Findings**

The TGD underwent many changes due to the feedback of women who have experienced sexual violence. Of the original 36 questions (excluding multiple questions asked in one question), 3 were removed, 5 remained the same, and 28 were changed or separated, resulting in a new total of 45 questions. Many of the revisions were the result
of language changes to create a more inclusive TGD. The other major finding was regarding the utility of the TGD. Finally, there also seemed to be a level of transformation in the survivors thinking regarding barriers to disclosing sexual violence.

**Language Revisions**

Many of the recommended language changes were about incorporating user-friendly language and participant-informed language. Another set of language-related changes were the result of observations and comments made by participants regarding the use of relevant language.

**User-friendly language.** A large portion of participant feedback focused on the language used in the TGD guide. The language was found to be too academic for a therapeutic setting. For example, one participant stated, “I think a lot of these questions are directed at people who have a really good educational background.” There was a need to address this concern as more than half of the participants alluded to this. There is often overlap in the line of questioning used by therapists and researchers (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In this study, developing questions for therapy while grounding them in research proved difficult at times. Including the voice of participants, by utilizing their exact words in the changes to the TGD, rather than the researcher’s words, while still capturing a research-based question was critical. The following are two examples of changes in language from academic to practice-oriented:

*Original question:* How did you come to care about these consequences?

*Participant-Revised question:* What makes these reactions meaningful for you?
Original question: As you think about your own experience, what would or did stand in the way of you disclosing?

Participant-Revised question: As you think about your own experience, what would or did stand in the way of you talking about it?

The researcher also made changes to ensure the guide had language that was more accessible, by eliminating words that confused participants or words they did not know, such as prevalent or disclosing, changing them to say “how often” or “talking about.”

Participant-informed language. Another finding was the need to change the words survivor and sexual abuse because they did not capture everyone’s experience. Not all participants considered themselves survivors or labeled their sexual violence experience as sexual abuse. Socially, experiences of sexual violence are often called sexual abuse and people who experience sexual violence are often called victims or survivors. Research has shown the negative impact of such labels on people who have experienced sexual violence (McMullin & White, 2006). Some participants explained that they did not use the term sexual abuse until others called it that; if they used it at all. As a result, the terms survivor and sexual abuse were replaced with language such as people who experience sexual violence or your sexual violence experience to be more inclusive. For example, a participant stated:

I really struggle with the word survivor, because I don’t like it. I think it labels. I don’t consider myself to necessarily be a survivor of anything other than life’s b*llshit…as it related to sexual violence, I feel it labels me, it puts me in a box, and that makes me uncomfortable.
As some research moves closer to a space of inclusivity, perhaps one of the easiest manners to be inclusive is to include participants throughout the research, which is the premise of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Including participants in the revision process led the researcher to avoid using labels, such as survivors, and rather to ask participants, or clients, to self-identity. Another example of labelling language was changing the word female within the guide, because some people who are experiencing the guide may not identify as female, so the researcher removed gendered language as it related to the potential client. Furthermore, researchers may want to be mindful of the meaning some language may hold for participants, as discussed by McMullin and White (2006). Utilizing language that does not elicit blame or shame while working with people who have experienced sexual violence seemed important to most of the participants. This led to eliminating words such as responsible, secret, consequences, report, and perceived. For example, when asked “Who is responsible to talk about sexual abuse? Why them?” One participant said, “What do you mean by who is responsible? Are you now telling me this is my responsibility?” She went on to say, “It immediately comes off like a victim-blaming undertone”. Questions were edited to create a space that was less triggering but still allowed for conversation around difficult topics. For example, a question phrased: *Have you purposely chosen to keep your experience secret? Why?* was changed to say: *To what extent have you remained quiet about this?* to make the question less triggering. The questions nonetheless remained because it was also necessary to allow a client to discuss fears, consequences, guilt, self-blame, and the reasoning behind decision-making.
Relevant language. The researcher removed questions that would seem inappropriate or awkward for therapy, such as asking “What kind of questions should therapists or counselors ask to help someone disclose they were sexually assaulted?” Questions that contained various related questions within the one question were separated to facilitate clarity. Questions that could elicit different responses at different points in time, as suggested by the participants, were changed to capture change over time. For example, by adding “How has this changed over time?” the researcher ensured the question was flexible to changes. Along the same lines, the researcher noted when privilege may have impacted suggestions to remove questions. The researcher reworded questions rather than eliminated them, based on the responses of marginalized participants. For example, questions about wealth, education, or cultural upbringing, seemed to generate suggestions for removal in some participants with more privileged backgrounds, but not for those with less privileged backgrounds. These questions were reworded from language of “rich or poor” to “social class” or “your education level” to the “role of education”. Once again, the researcher weighed recommended changes in light of depth and detail in responses.

Transforming the Guide

The next set of changes to the guide were about transforming the guide, beyond language changes. Specifically two major themes emerged; 1) implementation changes and 2) structural changes.

Implementation changes. One of the first findings alluded to by the participants was the need to clarify which clients would benefit from the TGD guide. Some
participants asked “What age group is this for?” Participants explained that the questions seemed geared to adults, and in fact this helped the researcher identify that these questions worked best for adults. Another point that some participants brought up was if the TGD was intended for someone who had disclosed or someone who had never disclosed. The researcher found that practitioners who utilize these questions would need to implement them according to their client’s needs. Several participants discussed the need for a rich relationship between the therapist and the client in order for these questions to be successful. Tremble (2014) investigated the experience of counselors who had clients that experienced sexual violence. One of the prominent themes from her work indicated the importance of specific counseling skills and more importantly the need for a trusting connection between the counselor and the client (Tremble, 2014).

The participants in the current study also expressed more often than not that the TGD would need to be implemented over a series of sessions as the questions themselves could guide an entire therapeutic process between the therapist and the client. The questions are intended to guide a therapeutic process around disclosure for the client, but the questions similarly allow practitioners to enter a discussion that the client may not regularly engage in. This could potentially be in line with solution-focused therapy, which seeks to strengthen clients’ assets, as well as help them develop new coping mechanisms in order to address both current and future presenting issues by focusing on solutions rather than the problem (Beyebach, 2009). Solution-focused therapy with sexual abuse clients has been discussed in the literature (see Dolan, 1991). As it relates to disclosure of clients, helping people who have experienced sexual violence better
understand silencing mechanism, may be viewed as a solution-focused therapy by helping clients move past silencing, which is the problem, and toward disclosure, which is the solution. After clients disclose, practitioners may then help clients develop coping mechanisms and strategies for future disclosures. The practitioners can help transform clients understanding around disclosure, and find solutions to their silencing, namely by facilitating disclosures.

**Structural changes.** Similarly, participants discussed the importance of organizing the questions in groupings, which lend themselves to fluid discussion in practice. As one participant pointed out, “Are you going to move that blurb down lower (referring to the intersectionality explanation that occurs mid-way through the questions), so that they can reference this?” These types of suggestions were summed up by another participant who recommended beginning with general discussions around life experiences, ethnic and cultural upbringings, family’s attitudes around sex and sexual violence, then delving into family, community and social support after sexual violence experiences. Subsequently perhaps clients will discuss individual identities and positions of power from an intersectional lens and their impact on discussing sexual violence in a transformational way. The guide was reorganized to address this recommendation.

**Transformational Thinking**

Throughout the data collection process, the participants expressed “aha moments” or moments of great insight, which were also understood as moments of transformed thinking, and moments of change. As a novice research, it was validating to hear the participants, even with errors in language and use, still find the questions valuable in
shifting understanding and ultimately blame. There were two main subthemes that emerged from transformed understandings. First, participants discussed transforming their understanding for their nondisclosure. Then participants discussed transforming blame for their nondisclosure.

**Transforming understanding.** The way the questions were phrased and the different angles from which the barrier to disclosure questions were designed, allowed the participants to experience a change in their understanding. For example, after being asked if the questions helped her feel that her decision to disclose really has depended on what family, friends, and society would think, she stated,

> Even though I didn’t answer each one (the questions), I was merely dissecting it, I still was like to myself, ‘Oh’, ‘Oh’, ‘Oh’, ‘Okay, that kind of makes sense as to why I didn’t’, just hearing my answers to myself, in my own head, it made me understand myself a little better. So I think these questions did do that.

Another participant stated, “*The trauma gets so much bigger when you factor in the compromised social capital.*” She referred to the “*everything that happens after the incident or leading up to it*” as just as traumatic as the sexual violence itself. This coincides with other research findings (see Allagia, 2010; Barrios & Caspi, 2014), regarding the impact of disclosing and not being heard, being blamed, being shunned, and other negative reaction. Specifically, research has shown that negative reactions exacerbate things for people who experience sexual violence (Allagia, 2010). Perhaps, allowing for conversations that capture the fears of individuals’ compromised social capital may facilitate disclosure. The fear of compromising relationships with people, as
the participant went on to explain, seems to be what propagates the culture of nondisclosure, which allows sexual abuse to continue. Thus, by using the TGD, a therapist can create a space where clients can address concerns they may be aware of but not feel safe discussing. By asking questions that allow clients to verbalize what is often in their head practitioners can engage in a conversation about how silencing happened to them. Another participant explained, these questions (referring to the TGD) are “thoughts that floated in my head but I never had a conversation of like ‘Oh how did this happen?’”

Transforming blame. Overwhelmingly, survivors felt that the questions captured the complexity of disclosure and helped shift blame for nondisclosure. Participants reported that the guide helped them understand sexual violence in context, or as one participant stated that they could better see “the bigger picture”:

It helps me to look at the bigger picture as opposed to just looking at how I’ve affected, like my actions with disclosing, with the actual abuse itself, as opposed to just looking at that, which is what I feel a lot of survivors do. You know they think about the abuse as just their fault, what they did, why they haven’t told someone? So questions like this help to kind of put the pieces together to make them feel less shameful, less guilty, because now it’s not just about her or his decisions but more so you know everything else put together, family, society, culture, religion, whatever, everything together. So it helps me feel better about myself.

Another participant explained how reading the questions helped her realize that how she phrased or defined her experience really impacted the response she received. She stated:
I had never thought about how different the response was when I said I had sex with this person versus this person sexually assaulted me. And those two responses, essentially one kept me quiet and the other got me help.

Yet, another participant discussed how the questions helped her shift blame away from herself by allowing her to see her silence through other lenses. She discussed the following:

The way the questions are phrased is actually good to get the person to think about their own issue…Because you brought up factors, some of them outside of your own control, so thinking about it you’re like wait, it’s not all me. You know what I mean? And knowing that yeah, society’s really not talking about it, yeah you feel bad because of the fact that you, that society, you know you are bringing up those facts…it helps, I mean you feel guilty but it also helps you know that it wasn’t really just 100% you, your fault.

None of the participants expressed that the questions did not help them see things differently regarding silencing practices or their own experiences. This was important for the study as the goal was to capture the experiences of the participants while revising the guide. More importantly, the underlying goal was to document if the TGD seemed to evoke some level of transformation in their self-blame and silencing, and it did.

**Discussing the Current Implementation of the TGD**

There are certain parameters for the implementation of the revised guide. The TGD seemed to be well-received and positively experienced by the participants. They expressed that the guide allowed them the opportunity to talk. While going through the
questions, the majority of the participants remarked that the questions would get people talking and thinking more about what they went through and what obstacles prevented speaking about it. Adult women who are in counseling may be the best recipient of the guide as it stands now. Currently the guide could perhaps be used by rape center staff providing counseling services to women who have experienced sexual violence. The guide could also be used by practitioners who specialize in sexual trauma. These two groups of practitioners may directly benefit from the use of the guide because they likely have already received training about sexual trauma. Specialized training in sexual violence is lacking in most other practitioner groups (Kitzrow, 2002; Read, McGregor, Coggan, & Thomas, 2006). This potential trauma-based training may facilitate use of the guide because these practitioners may be aware of the culture of nondisclosure. Specifically, practitioners who specialize in sexual trauma may have a better understanding of barriers to disclosure (Tremble, 2014).

Using the guide in practice may vary by client. The guide’s questions were reorganized through the feedback received from the participants. This reorganization could facilitate its implementation by providing practitioners with a natural progression of how to ask the questions. Some may choose to ask prevalence questions as part of the intake to gain a better understanding of clients’ attitudes and experiences with sexual violence. Others may implement the guide over multiple sessions. Certain questions about family and culture may require for a rapport to be developed with the client prior to exploring these areas. Practitioners are able to delve into sections of the guide as needed by therapeutic demands. Similarly, the questions within each section can be reorganized
or chosen as needed. Special attention was given to changing the language of the guide. The therapist could maintain fidelity to the language while making needed adjustments.

**Strengths**

Without sexual violence survivors’ input, a researcher steeped in the sexual abuse literature, even with a history of training in sexual violence and who has worked with people who have survived sexual trauma, would have released a well-meaning TGD full of inaccessible and triggering language. Using participants in the refinement process demonstrated the advantages of a participatory action approach (Garcia et al., 2008). Including the participants in the refinement process, and asking them to offer language and conceptual changes to the questions, facilitated a stronger version of the TGD. Changing the language and structure of the guide, in turn potentially made it more user-ready and client-friendly. Often it is easy to overlook the inaccessibility of the language we use and perhaps this is why translational writing is gaining some popularity and national funding (Rubio et al., 2010). Similarly, the use of participants who mirror the intended clients (Maxwell, 2013) proved fruitful in designing questions that would be better received by clients.

Another strength of this study is that the TGD provides practitioners with an innovative tool to help generate discussions around sexual violence experiences and ultimately shift the burden of disclosure away from solely the survivor. Yet another strength is that theory, research, and most importantly, women who experienced sexual violence, informed and refined this interview guide, making it a first of its kind. Also, the guide accounts for social, familial, and personal influences in disclosure decision-
making, lending support to the ITD theory (Barrios & Caspi, 2014) while also addressing multiple gaps in the literature.

**Limitations**

There are some limitations in this study. Given the participants shared their thoughts on the guide’s questions and did not answer them directly; the researcher cannot overstate findings of transformation, changes in perception of barriers, or patterns in disclosing practices. The TGD was revised with ten self-selecting, adult, females who have experienced sexual violence; this is a small and specific group of participants. The sampling method of snowballing was used which also could bias findings given that the participant typically knew at least one person involved in the study. The women who participated also opted to self-identify as survivors and therefore the voices of survivors who have chosen not to disclose are still missing. Similarly, this group only accounted for adult women between the ages of 20-35. Other demographic groups, such as men, older women, and youth are not included in this study. Another limitation has to do with the development of the original questions, given that the theory used to develop the questions has not been empirically tested and it is a researcher-developed theory. Yet another limitation is that the researcher completed the analysis without other coders. Finally, knowledge of sexual trauma and intersectionality, both of which most practitioners may not have, may make the implementation of the TGD easier.

**Implications**

There are several implications for future practice and research. The TGD is just one step toward changing the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. The guide’s
successful implementation depends on the facilitator’s knowledge of intersectionality and systemic oppression. As a result, practitioners who utilize the TGD will need training regarding how to use it. However, first, licensed practitioners may benefit from a course on sexual trauma while receiving graduate training. Training in sexual violence could also be delivered through continuing education credits as well. More specifically, a training program on how to implement the TGD is needed as well. Thus, the successful implementation of the TGD requires practitioners to be trained in sexual violence, intersectionality, and systemic oppression. Future training of practitioners that incorporates these learning areas could facilitate the use of the TGD.

While formal practitioner education mechanisms around sexual violence and disclosure would be ideal, practitioners with an understanding of the Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD) (Barrios & Caspi, 2014) may still be able to use the TGD. Practitioners informed about ITD have a better ability to incorporate knowledge of intersectionality and systemic oppression in their practice. Practitioners grounded through ITD may have a lens for careful examination of their clients’ responses and experiences of discrimination. Another manner to address lack of training on sexual violence, intersectionality, and systemic oppression, is for practitioners to familiarize themselves with some of the widely available materials through online sources on intersectionality. The fact is that our understanding of findings is dependent on our own knowledge of how to interpret findings (Stewart, 2010).

Future research is needed to continue to develop the TGD. First, the same process of revising the guide with survivors should to be completed with practitioners since they
will be implementing the guide. Revising the guide with practitioners can inform the organization of the areas of inquiry, when to use certain questions, and who to use certain questions with. Once that is completed, the guide should also be piloted since this initial step was to revise the questions not pilot them through implementation. This would complete step four in Castillo-Montoya’s instrument refinement protocol. This would in turn lead to a study which investigates the outcomes of the TGD. The outcomes of the TGD could be investigated from two angles. First, researchers could investigate how people who experience sexual violence are better able to understand the disclosure process and how to shift blame away from themselves and onto families and society, because of using the TGD. Second, researchers can study whether or not utilizing the TGD allows practitioners to engage clients in practice to increase disclosure, to help clients overcome barriers to disclosure, and to help practitioners talk about a topic in which they may not have much training. Also, future research could consider continuing to use participants who reflect the intended recipients of an intervention (Maxwell, 2013) given their insider knowledge (Jagosh, et al., 2012) of the material being investigated. Future research that chooses to include these participants may continue to bridge research and practice.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the goal of exposing the role of society and families in creating the ‘culture of nondisclosure’ will shift the onus of disclosure away from survivors. Acknowledgement of familial and societal acts used to suppress disclosure after experiencing sexual violence is the first step in increasing disclosure. Identification,
acknowledgment, and implication of familial and social beings as the ones who need to change rather than survivors can create a disclosure culture where the “oppressed” is not blamed for their abuse rather protected from further abuse.
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## Tables

Table 3.1

*Sample Table for Data Input of Individual Responses by Question.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Question 2</th>
<th>Question 3</th>
<th>Question 4</th>
<th>Question 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 001</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 004</td>
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Table 3.2

*Original and Revised Questions and Editing Reasoning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original Question</th>
<th>Revised Question</th>
<th>Participant Reasoning</th>
<th>My Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How prevalent do you think sexual abuse is?</td>
<td>How often do you think sexual violence occurs in our society?</td>
<td>prevalent is too complicated a word; sexual abuse can be non-specific</td>
<td>need to make the questions more accessible; sexual violence is more accessible than sexual abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do you think survivors discuss their abuse? Why do you think that is?</td>
<td>To what extent do people discuss their experiences with sexual violence?</td>
<td>lose survivor, not all claim this label; abuse is too vague</td>
<td>several participants did not like to be called survivors because they did not feel that way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Who is responsible to talk about sexual abuse? Why them?</td>
<td>Do you feel comfortable discussing sexual violence experiences? How can we come to discuss sexual violence more openly? Who should discuss sexual violence?</td>
<td>lose responsible, elicits blame; get more specific</td>
<td>responsible was triggering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What kind of questions should therapist or counselors ask to help someone disclose they were sexually assaulted?</td>
<td>remove</td>
<td>overwhelmingly did not like this question</td>
<td>some liked it but it seems like an awkward therapy question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3

*Summary of Findings: Refining the Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Language Revisions</td>
<td>User-Friendly Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant-Informed Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevant Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transforming the Guide</td>
<td>Implementation Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structural Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational Thinking</td>
<td>Transforming Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transforming Blame</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V

Conclusion

People who experience sexual violence exist within a culture of nondisclosure. There are many obstacles to disclosure which serve to silence survivors and perpetuate this major social problem. Every 98 seconds someone experiences sexual violence (RAINN, 2018); yet formal reporting of sexual violence is completed by only approximately 20% of survivors (Allagia, 2010; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). This dissertation begins to fill the void of knowledge between abuse and disclosure by theoretically documenting how decisions to disclose are contemplated, by reporting the real and perceived consequences of disclosure within family, and by demonstrating that participants are capable of identifying a culture of nondisclosure once they are asked to consider obstacles. It is important to note nonetheless that understanding the culture of nondisclosure in this dissertation was limited to examining the experiences of disclosers.

The Culture of Nondisclosure

Developing a theory to understand the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse allowed for an examination of how society, family, and an individual intersect and coalesce generating silence around sexual violence. The Integrated Theory of Sexual Abuse Disclosure (ITD) addressed the call from Smith (2005) for a better theoretical understanding of adult disclosure of sexual abuse. This theoretical integration combined theories on individual choice, consequences, family dynamics, and intersectionality to draw attention to patriarchal and systemic-based enforcers on individual choices and family dynamics. While disclosure is seemingly an individual choice, the power that
potential consequences may have on family seemed to highly affect disclosure decisions for the participants in these studies. The development and application of ITD in research provided insight into the complexity of disclosing sexual violence particularly within family or with individuals who are close to the survivor. The theory and its application demonstrated how disclosing agency was intimately nested with family loyalties and social expectations. Disclosure questions regarding why a survivor does not disclose shifted to why is it so difficult to disclose. For example, the theoretical paper in this dissertation was supported by the responses provided by the participants in papers two and three. Some participants acknowledged and identified that their choices were nested in family loyalties and social expectations, as stated above. This supports the applicability of ITD in better understanding disclosure decisions and the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse.

Given the dissertation and its three papers, what ensued was a more critical theoretical lens of family dynamics and socialization practices that silence. More specifically, taking the theory and two studies into consideration, the onus of changing the culture of nondisclosure flipped from being the responsibility of survivors to disclose to the responsibility of family and members of society to create a space for disclosure. While it seems easier to ask individuals who experience sexual violence to discuss their experience openly, this dissertation elucidated the difficulties that they may encounter within their family and the social pressure they feel to remain silent rather than disclose. Thus, this dissertation allowed for a clearer theoretical and empirical understanding of the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse. It became evident to the researcher that family
and society are responsible for changing the culture to make disclosure easier. Relying solely on survivors, who did not choose their abuse, to disclose in a space that is not open to disclosure seems unjust. This dissertation begins to shed light on those pre-disclosure family and social dynamics that inhibit discussing sexual violence experiences.

**Future Theoretical Implications**

It has been over ten years since Smith (2005) discussed the need for a more comprehensive adult sexual abuse disclosure theory. After examining the ITD through the sibling study and the practice paper, the theory offers explanations for barriers to disclosure. Future examination of the theory is necessary to draw direct links across the individual, their family, and broader social influences. A series of case studies could facilitate knowledge bridging by drawing attention to the nuanced connections across intersecting realms of influences at the individual, family, and social level. The sibling study pointed to survivors’ weighing of real and potential consequences. Future research that examines survivors’ preoccupation of not wanting to cause harm to an abuser, their fear of family trauma and family chaos, and the family practice of silencing, need further investigation to better understand how ITD can continue to be used as a theory for understanding disclosure. Similarly, the TGD paper demonstrated that the participants who experienced sexual violence were unaware of a number of silencing practices at the family and community level. This too, needs further investigation to help elucidate connections between society and family who may be unconsciously colluding to silence survivors. For example, investigations into how family dynamics are weighed by a person who experiences sexual violence in deciding to disclose, as well as the connection
between socialization and cultural practices in the development of family dynamics is needed. These connections need further and more concrete examinations.

The applications of ITD to inform future studies that are investigating pre-disclosure decisions are necessary to continue to lend validity to the theory. Themes emerged in both studies that demonstrate the influence socialization practices and family practices have on individual choice. As a result, further investigation into these themes and their connections could help develop a better understanding of how to apply ITD in disclosure studies. Similarly, while this dissertation used disclosing participants to inform the culture of nondisclosure, ITD-based research could potentially apply methodological approaches that can capture beliefs and attitudes around nondisclosure from for example, non-abused family members, mental health practitioners, educators, legal service providers, and law enforcement, rather than just focusing on disclosing survivors.

A comprehensive visual model that demonstrates the connections of ITD could guide future theoretical applications, and more directed research on the theory. For example, future studies could apply ITD theory to help explain some of the differences in survivors’ experiences with disclosure. The heterogeneity of experiences with disclosure was a current criticism of the #MeToo movement. Prois and Moreno (2018) wrote a story in the Huffington Post that drew attention to less visible voices in the #MeToo movement, such as those voices of women of color or of lower socioeconomic status. ITD can address such differences. Thus, the use of ITD theory could inform future sexual violence disclosure experiences by providing explanations at the individual, family, and social level.
Future Research

Future research on disclosure of sexual abuse can be framed within the context of ITD since it provides an integrated lens for understanding and explaining disclosure decisions. As mentioned earlier, this dissertation begins to address the theoretical gap that existed in the literature (Smith, 2005). Another gap addressed in this dissertation is a better understanding of why family members are not typically disclosed to. Tener and Murphy’s work (2015) reported that people who experience sexual violence do not typically discuss their abuse with family members, and this dissertation explains some of the reasons for this. For example, the sibling study which focused solely on understanding disclosure between siblings, a family dyad, explains barriers to familial disclosure. Furthermore, this dissertation also addressed a gap in the literature related to disclosure of sexual violence between non-offending siblings. In previous studies, siblings were not named as a typical recipient of disclosure (Malloy et al., 2013), much less included in research (Schreier et al., 2017), yet this dissertation does both. Finally, this dissertation also addressed a gap in the practice literature by providing questions that can be used in therapeutic settings to create a conversation around the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse within which many survivors exist.

Taken together the findings in this dissertation have begun to address the various gaps in literature and in turn, there are several resulting research implications. To begin, further investigations are needed into how and why a specific sibling is disclosed to but not another. When framed within the ITD framework, a better understanding of gender socialization practices is needed when examining disclosure decisions through ITD.
Some participants, who did not disclose to their sibling, were female survivors who would have had to disclose to a brother. Examining the role of gender as a recipient of disclosure could help us better understand the role of patriarchy and gender’s impact on disclosing practices. A foreword by Riccardi (2010) addressing men in the military who have experienced sexual violence calls for a need to better understand male survivors of sexual violence and the barriers that exist for them to disclose, which seem compounded when compared to women. Thus, the fact that women seem to disclose at higher rates than men, needs further investigation. It could be that the culture of nondisclosure disproportionately silences male survivors, as we hear about male abuse much less when compared to women disclosers. Research that applies ITD in examining the role of gender socialization practices and their direct effect on individual disclosing choices may create more nuanced understanding of disclosure.

A continued movement toward future research involving siblings in the disclosure of sexual violence is needed. Siblings are a subsystem within the family and therefore continued examination of siblings can explicate the family dynamics that promote or inhibit disclosure. More specifically, examining sibling dynamics as they relate to the broader family dynamics provides better insight into how ITD can be used to explain disclosure-promoting or –inhibiting behaviors within the family. For example, in this dissertation, a maternal figure often knew of the abuse but did not discuss it or address it with the survivor, even if the sibling was also disclosed to. Again, research that examines who in the family is disclosed to and why could benefit our understanding of the disclosing process within families. While other research has supported that mothers are
common recipients of disclosure (Malloy et al., 2013), further research could examine why this might be the case? Also, as mentioned earlier, since this dissertation found that siblings were disclosed to as well, further research into how and when a sibling was disclosed to is needed. Furthermore, drawing research connections between the sociocultural practices influencing the family dynamics that are promoting or inhibiting the disclosure of sexual violence by a member of the family by examining gender, taboo topics, and family cohesion, and their impact on family dynamics, can reframe our individualistic perceptions of the disclosing process. This shift away from the individual as the person solely responsible for disclosure, in turn could implicate members of families and broader society as a necessary part of the disclosing process. As a result, research that investigates the role of individuals, other than the survivor, in the disclosing process can inform the culture of nondisclosure, in hopes of shifting it toward a culture of disclosure. Lastly, future studies on disclosure decision-making would benefit from directly applying ITD as their theoretical design, as well, using ITD to inform research questions, given the success of the TGD in generating transformative thinking around disclosure barriers by asking questions that draw attention to family and social practices of silence.

**Future Practice Implications**

Future implications for practice vary. To begin, training of mental health practitioners around sexual violence trauma as a core requirement, would help in shifting the culture around nondisclosure to one of disclosure. As was discussed by Read et al. (2006), most practitioners do not know how to talk about sexual abuse trauma. Similarly,
Kitzrow (2002) found that practitioners may be ill-prepared to assist survivors of sexual violence because they do not receive training in their educational programs for this population. Thus, there are two education-specific practice implications. First, there is a need for the development of training modules for clinical students who are studying to become clinicians. Second, practitioners who are already licensed and practicing are in need of continuing education on the topic of sexual violence trauma.

Within practice, there is a need to shift the traditional focus on the individual experience. Yes, while the individual in therapy should be the focus, another practice implication that resulted from this dissertation is the need to inform clients of the culture of nondisclosure. The culture of nondisclosure demonstrates the need to account for family dynamics and socialization practices rooted in patriarchy that directly impact personal choices around disclosure. Many researchers have pointed to the need to have culturally sensitive family counseling (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Collins-Vézina, Daigneault, & Hébert, 2013; Hernandez, et al., 2009; Hill, 2003; Low & Organista, 2008; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Thus, if one agrees there is a culture of nondisclosure, then practitioners are in a prime position to dismantle this culture through their line of questioning, as seems to be possible given the findings from the TGD study. A recommendation for practitioners is providing clients a space to discuss their fears of consequences by drawing clients’ attention to familial and social barriers to disclosure. Asking questions in a way that draws attention to these barriers may lead to continued transformation by the client in understanding that nondisclosure is not their sole decision rather it is part of a culture of nondisclosure, a culture of silencing. Future practitioners
who learn about ITD may reap the benefits of framing questions in therapy from more than an individual perspective. Furthermore, future practitioners may benefit from implementing the TGD to generate disclosure discussions aimed at changing the way survivors view their silence.

Along the same lines, we know that learning about a child’s sexual violence experience can cause trauma to other family members (McElvaney et al., 2014), particularly siblings (Baker, Tanis, & Rice, 2001; Hill, 2003; Tavkar & Hansen, 2011). Family member inclusion, beyond the survivor, in future therapeutic settings could address broader issues occurring within the family that are causing silencing, and can also address vicarious trauma in the family. Through this dissertation it became clear that while the perpetration of sexual violence may occur between two individuals, it is that perpetrator and the survivors’ families and broader social networks, which silence. A practitioner that enters a discussion with survivors from this “new” space of understanding the culture of nondisclosure is in a better position to help the client shift the burden and shame of silence away from them and onto those who silence.

Community-based implications. Since the culture of nondisclosure is maintained in broader social infrastructures, it may benefit us as a community to create opportunities for disclosure. Two simple, but hard to implement, changes are recommended. First, support of Erin’s Law (2018), which mandates school-based training of sexual violence, could begin to shift the burden of disclosure by creating a space for disclosure. Having a space to speak about sexual violence was one of the findings from this dissertation that survivors’ needed in order to disclose. Second,
education and training of primary care physicians and pediatricians around sexual violence may benefit some survivors. Specifically, as is the case with nation-wide suicide prevention training and the implementation of the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (Posner et al., 2011), developing community-wide screening tools that are concise but which ask the questions we avoid, can create an intervention tool to facilitate access to services for all individuals by allowing for disclosure. If we can create education around sexual violence in school systems, and simultaneously develop an intervention tool that can capture if an individual is a victim of sexual violence, then we can start to shift the culture of nondisclosure by allowing survivors the room to identify what they are experiencing and discuss it by being asked about it.

**Social Change**

Moving toward a culture of disclosure, by moving away from silencing people who experience sexual violence, is difficult but plausible. The culminating work of this dissertation drew attention to the culture of nondisclosure of sexual abuse by exposing familial and social silencing practices that contribute to the culture of nondisclosure. A continuation of this work will inform changes at the social level by providing the education and training needed to slowly shift the culture of nondisclosure. Continuing to provide a space to transform survivors’ understanding of sexual violence silencing will shift the burden of nondisclosure one person at a time. As one participant stated, “Tell everyone! Cause it’s so much harder to live in this fake life than it is to actually deal with the problem.”
Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation provided a theoretical explanation for the culture of nondisclosure of sexual violence. Family dynamics, specifically through the sibling dyad, were examined to better explain barriers to disclosure. The role of families and society in silencing people who experience sexual violence was also investigated. As it turns out, people who experience sexual violence need a space to understand they have been silenced and to discuss their experience, if we are to shift toward a culture of disclosure. People who experience sexual violence and that exist within the culture of nondisclosure needs us to facilitate disclosure, by creating the space to disclose.
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tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? Qualitative Health


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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Sibling Disclosure of Sexual Assault

1) If you could choose five words to describe your relationship with your sibling, what would they be?

2) What was your relationship like with your sibling before talking about the abuse?

3) Were you worried about telling your sibling?
   a. What kinds of things were you worried about?

4) Why did you decide to share the abuse with your sibling?
   a. Did you share everything?
   b. Were there elements you didn’t share?
   c. Why?

5) How did your sibling respond to your sharing of the experience?

6) In what ways was talking to your sibling about the abuse helpful?
   a. What did your sibling do that you perceived to be supportive?

7) In what ways was it not helpful, or that you wished it went differently?

8) In what ways has sharing your experience changed your sibling relationship?

9) Is there anything you want to add that I forgot to ask or that is important to you?
Appendix B

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Study’s Title:** How Do Siblings Talk About Sexual Abuse Experiences?

**Why is this study being done?** This study aims to understand how the relationship between siblings may be affected after an individual has been sexually abused.

**What will happen while you are in the study?** You will be administered a questionnaire about your sibling relationship, and then you will be interviewed about how non-sibling sexual abuse experience(s) impacted your sibling relationship. You will not be asked about sexual abuse experiences directly.

**Time:** This study will take about 45 minutes.

**Risks:** We anticipate there may be some risks to you. You may have recollections of the trauma as a result of the interview process. This may result in some difficult memories and emotional reactions.

Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

**Benefits:** There are potential benefits to you and to society. You will gain access and information regarding local resources which you may not have known of. You will have an opportunity to know you are contributing to the development of knowledge that can help support future sexual abuse survivors. Researchers will gain knowledge regarding how sexual abuse alters relationships between siblings and how siblings can be best utilized as a source of support. This knowledge can lead to inclusion of siblings in prevention and intervention strategies. The findings may also inform policy recommendations and social change to foster greater sibling inclusion and support in sexual abuse cases.

The interview is not about your sexual abuse, it is about your sibling relationship. This interview is voluntary and you can stop or pause the interview at any time if you become too uncomfortable. Contact information for counseling services and hot-lines for the state is provided in case you become overwhelmed and need support, or want to have this information.

Throughout the interview process, we will do emotional check-ins. The link to all state services is http://www.njcasa.org/sexual-violence-nj/sexual-violence-programs. You will
also be told about Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on campus and the phone number to CAPS is 973-655-5211.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential and use pseudonyms or “fake names” to protect your identity. Your real name will never be used.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency. In addition, reports of homicidal or suicidal intentions are required by NJ state law to be reported to the proper authorities immediately.

**Do you have to be in the study?** You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** Phone or email: Veronica R. Barrios, Family & Child Studies Department, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, Phone: (973) 655-6905, barriosev2@montclair.edu and Dr. Jonathan Caspi, Family & Child Studies Department, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, Phone: (973) 655-6905, caspij@mail.montclair.edu

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

**Future Studies**

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial:  Yes  No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial:  Yes  No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.
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Appendix C

Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure

General Sexual Abuse Prevalence Questions:

1. How prevalent do you think sexual abuse is?

Disclosure Questions:

2. Do you think survivors discuss their abuse? Why do you think that is?

3. Who is responsible to talk about sexual abuse? Why them?

4. What kind of questions should therapist or counselors ask to help someone disclose they were sexually assaulted?

Personal Agency to Disclose Questions:

5. As you think about your own experience, what would or did stand in the way of you disclosing?
   a. Who would you disclose to?
   b. Have you told anyone? Why them?
   c. Have you wanted to tell others but chose not to? Why?
   d. Have you purposely chosen to keep your experience secret? Why?
      1. What do you think your ethnic background had to do with this decision?
      2. What do you think being female had to do with this decision?
      3. How do you think being of a certain socioeconomic class, religion, a mother, LGBT+ or other categories affected your decision NOT to disclose?
4. How do you think these multiple parts of yourself come together to change the way you make your decision to not disclose?

*Read this aloud to your client:* Intersectionality is a theory that explains how each of us is comprised of many interlocking identities. For example, a woman, a white woman, a middle class white woman, an educated middle class white woman, a straight educated, middle class white woman, etc. The idea is that each of these identity categories, gender, race, class, is created by society and has a certain power and value attached to it (Andersen & Collins, 2013). In other words, no two individuals are alike and no two experiences are alike, but society and our families have a large influence on how we view ourselves and how they view us.

**ITD and Disclosure Questions:**

6. What kind of consequences are experienced by you, or other women, who report?

   a. Are these consequences “real” or perceived

   b. How did you come to care about these consequences?

7. What kind of messages did you, or perhaps do other women, receive from society regarding sexual abuse?

   a. Do you think society is supportive of women who are abused?

8. Do you think messages about sexual abuse are different for women of different ethnicities? How so?

9. What kind of messages did you, or do other women, receive from men regarding sexual abuse?

   a. Do you think men are supportive of survivors of abuse?
10. What kind of messages did you receive from your family about sexual abuse of women?
   a. Did you ever hear messages about women “looking” for these things?
   b. Did you ever hear messages about not talking this issue?
   c. How do you think your cultural upbringing affected your decision to talk about this?

11. What kind of messages did you receive from friends about sexual abuse of women?
   a. Did you ever hear messages about women “looking” for these things?
   b. Did you ever hear messages about not talking about this issue?

12. How do you think money affects reporting sexual abuse?
   a. Do you think it is easier for rich people to report? How so?
      1. Poor people? How so?
      2. Do you think living in a different area affects reporting? How so?

13. How do you think education level affects reporting of sexual abuse?

Intersectionality and Disclosure Questions:

14. Did you ever think about how the decision to discuss sexual abuse is yours but your decision is really impacted by all these other things?

15. Understanding all of these things together, do you still think it is the survivor’s responsibility to disclose, or do you think its society’s responsibility to make it easier to talk about this?

16. Do you think there are any other factors or questions, which need to be included in order to understand why we may not disclose abuse? If so, what are they?
Appendix D

CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study's Title: What stops survivors from talking? Improving a Transformative and Intersectional Disclosure Interview Guide.

Why is this study being done? The purpose of the study is to improve an interview guide for practitioners who work with survivors of sexual assault in order to help survivors and practitioners understand disclosure barriers better.

What will happen while you are in the study? I will give you a copy of an interview guide. I will then ask you a series of questions about the questions found in the interview guide. I will record and take notes while we talk about the questions.

Time: This study will take about 30 minutes

Risks: You may feel some discomfort with the questions you are reading since it has to be with sexual abuse disclosure. You may also have some recollections of your own disclosure processes while reviewing the questions.

Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

Benefits: You may benefit from this study by gaining information regarding local resources which you may not have known of to support sexual abuse survivors. You will have an opportunity to know you are contributing to the development of an interview guide that can help support future sexual abuse survivors.

Others may benefit from this study by/because practitioners may become better at asking questions about how hard it is to talk about sexual abuse.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Youth and Family Services.

Do you have to be in the study?
You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

If you are a student at MSU, your grade for the course will not be effected by your participation or non-participation in this study.

If you are an employee at MSU, your employment will not be effected by your participation or non-participation in this study.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** Phone or email Veronica R. Barrios, Family Science and Human Development Department, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, Phone: (973) 655-6905, barriosv2@montclair.edu and Dr. Jonathan Caspi, Family Science and Human Development Department, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, Phone: (973) 655-6905, caspij@montclair.edu

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.

**Future Studies** It is okay to use my data in other studies:
Please initial: _______ Yes _______ No

**Study Summary**
I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _______ Yes _______ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:
Please initial: _______ Yes _______ No

**One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.**

**Statement of Consent**
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

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Appendix E

Revised Transformational Guide for Sexual Abuse Disclosure

**Prevalence and Openness:**

How often do you think sexual violence occurs in our society?

To what extent do people discuss their experiences with sexual violence?

Do you feel comfortable discussing sexual violence experiences?

How can we come to discuss sexual violence more openly?

Who should discuss sexual violence?

**Disclosure Process and Barriers**

As you think about your own experience, what would or did stand in the way of you talking about it?

Can you tell me about a time you wanted to talk about your sexual violence experience but you didn’t? What circumstances surrounded that?

When was the last time you talked about this? What circumstances surrounded that?

To what extent have you remained quiet about this?

**Consequence Weighing via Social and Familial Messaging**

What reactions were you expecting when talking about sexual violence?

Have any of these reactions not happened yet but you are afraid they will?

What makes these reactions meaningful for you?

What kind of messages did you hear from your family about sexual violence? Have these messages changed over time?
Did you hear messages about women “looking” for these things? How has this changed over time?

Did you ever hear messages about not talking this issue? How has this changed over time?

How do you think your upbringing affected your decision to talk about this? Culture?

How did your friends talk about sexual violence? How has this changed over time?

Did you ever hear messages about women “looking” for these things?

Did you ever hear messages about not talking about this issue?

What kind of messages did you hear from your community regarding sexual violence?

Do you think society is supportive of women who experience sexual violence?

What kind of messages did you hear from men regarding sexual violence?

Do you think men are supportive of survivors of abuse?

How, if at all, did money or wealth affect your ability to report or discuss your sexual abuse?

Do you think if you were in a different social class, things would have been different?

How do you think living in your neighborhood affects your decision to talk about your sexual violence experience?

What role did education play in your ability to discuss your sexual abuse before? What about now?

Read this aloud to your client: We are made up of many connected identities. For example, a woman, a white woman, a middle class white woman, an educated middle class white woman, a straight educated, middle class white woman, etc. These identity
categories are created by society. Each one has power and value attached to it (Andersen & Collins, 2013). Because of this, no two individuals are alike and no two experiences are alike. Society and our families have a large influence on how we view ourselves and how they view us.

Agency and Intersectional Factors

Did your ethnic or cultural upbringings play a role in your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience? If so, how?

What do you think your gender had to do with your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

How do you think your socioeconomic class affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

How do you think your religion affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

How do you think being a mother affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

How do you think your sexual orientation affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

Do you think there are other factors that affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence experience?

Have you thought yourself as this full package?

How do you think all of these combined influences affected your ability to discuss your sexual violence?
**Transformational Thinking**

Did you ever think about how the decision to discuss sexual violence is yours but all these things influence it?

What would make it easier for you to talk about this?

In what ways can society make it easier for you to talk about this?

Do you think there are any other factors or questions, which need to be included in order to understand why we may not disclose abuse? If so, what are they?