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**The Courage to Speak: Breaking the Silence of Sexual Assault in
the African American Community**

Submitted by Kiana Williams, B.S.W.
May, 2013

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a heinous crime that plagues individuals, families, and communities. The stigma associated with this crime often prevents those who are victimized, from telling anyone about these occurrences. Although both men and women, regardless of demographics, are sexually assaulted, the experiences of African American women were of particular interest to the researcher. African American survivors face cultural and societal pressures, which significantly inhibit them from breaking the silence after being assaulted. In response, the researcher investigated the following question: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? This was a qualitative study; participants were interviewed using a semi-structured method. The sample for this study was identified as a non-probability, judgment, and snowball sample. Three different populations were interviewed to gain a holistic view on this topic: African American survivors, African American professionals/community advocates, and Non-African American professionals/community advocates. Three participants were included in this study. Respondent 1 (R1) was a White professional, Respondent 2 (R2) was an African American survivor, and Respondent 3 (R3) was an African American survivor and community advocate. It was discovered that the presence of social support and proper education about sexual assault are key components that can reduce stigma, liberate survivors, and empower African American women to speak up about being sexually assaulted. There are limitations to these findings due to having a non-representative population, non-probability sampling method, and small sample size. However, with more research on this topic, the implications can provide a guide for prevention programs and outreach within the African American community.

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Introduction

Sexual assault is a rampant crime in our society. Every two minutes, someone is sexually assaulted in the United States (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network [RAINN], 2009). Although the definition of sexual assault varies depending on the source, most defined it as an unwanted sexual experience (Brookings, McEvoy, & Reed, 1994; Gilboa-Schechtman & Foa, 2001; Najowski & Ullman, 2011; Sarkar, N. & Sarkar, R., 2005). The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (n.d), defines sexual assault in a similar manner: “the use of sexual actions and words that are unwanted by and/or harmful to another person” (p. 1). This definition includes assaults such as, “completed rape, attempted rape, sexual coercion, or unwanted sexual contact” (Najowski & Ullman, 2011, p. 219).

In the United States alone, 17.7 million women have had encounters of attempted or completed rape (RAINN, 2009). Research has shown that one in four women will be raped in their lifetime (Neville, Heppner, Oh, Spanierman, & Clark, 2004; White, 1995). Unfortunately, many sexual assaults go unreported. In comparison to women of other races and ethnicities, African American women are the least likely to report being assaulted to authorities (Pollard-Terry, 2004). The stigma of sexual assault keeps many survivors silent about their abuse (Arata, 1999; Brookings et al., 1994; Neville et al., 2004; Simmons, 2008), making “rape one of the most underreported violent crimes” (Pollard-Terry, 2004, p. 1). For African American women, that stigma is enhanced due to systems of oppression, and social beliefs that Black women are promiscuous. These ideals result in society viewing them as unlikely victims of rape (White, 2001), and

further create barriers that lead to underreporting and underrepresentation of African American women in sexual assault statistics. Additionally, since a majority of rapes occur by someone the survivor knows and by someone of their same ethnicity (Joiner, 1997; Neville et al., 2004; RAINN, 2009), when a Black women reports this crime, it is often seen as betraying her race to a penal system that already targets Black men. Due to all of these factors, African American women are stigmatized and feel pressured into not seeking resources after they have been assaulted.

Many researchers discuss why Black women remain silent (Brown, 1992; Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Sapp, Farrell, Johnson, & Hitchcock, 1999; White, 2001); however, little research addresses the supports that are in place for women who decide to speak up about their assault. Thus, I am investigating the question: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? The hope of this research is to discover the key factors that empower African American women to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted. This discovery can be used as a guide for preventative sexual assault program development and outreach within the African American community.

Conceptual Framework

The theory of ethnic oppression is a key theoretical framework for this study. This theory emphasizes how social patterns of oppression are legitimized by the beliefs society holds about particular groups of people, specifically people of color (Turner & Singleton, 1978). Those with political and economic power largely influence these beliefs (Turner &

Singleton, 1978). Historically, African Americans were believed to be lazy, unmotivated, incompetent, promiscuous, immoral, and inferior, to the dominant White race (Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). Similar oppressive beliefs have been held by both White and African American men against African American women in instances of sexual assault. This oppression has led to Black women remaining silent about their experience of being sexually assaulted, a silence that has continued across many generations (Pollard-Terry, 2004; Simmons, 2008).

When compared to other ethnicities, African American women are least likely to report their assault to anyone, including authorities (Pollard-Terry, 2004). Remaining silent after such a traumatic event, can cause many negative psychological effects. Studies suggest that survivors are at a higher risk for future re-victimization when their trauma is not addressed, resulting in even more psychological damage (Najowski & Ullman, 2011). It's alarming to think of how many Black women specifically, have never received support after their sexual assault (Pollard-Terry, 2004). These patterns of silence are passed on to their children, which can further foster an environment, which perpetuates sexual assault and a response of remaining silent (Flood, 2005; Joiner, 1997; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Simmons, 2008).

I am an African American woman. It is disheartening to see the state of my community. The African American community is suffering; we have been oppressed as slaves and have been the target of racially motivated violence for centuries. Now, we have turned against one another; about 90% of Black women who are sexually assaulted, are assaulted at the hands of Black men (Joiner, 1997; Neville et al., 2004; Pollard-Terry, 2004; RAINN, 2009; Sapp et al., 1999).

Previous research focuses on the barriers that African American women face that hinders them from speaking up about their assault. I wanted to take a different approach. This study is focusing on the resiliency of Black women, using the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective fits well with this study because of its focus on the resilient qualities in a person and in their environment (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010). The focus is not on the problem one has experienced, rather, attention is placed on one's strengths, despite the problem they've experienced (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010). I'm interested in investigating, through the conduction of interviews, what empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault. I'm seeking to understand the specific factors that contribute to an African American woman deciding to break the silence that sexual assault far too often yields.

Literature Review

Sexually assault is a traumatizing experience that often silences the survivors of this heinous crime. Historically, there has been a collaborative effort, among the African American community, to break the silence. However, African American cultural expectations and discriminatory systems of the dominant culture have reinstated the oppression of survivors.

Shift from Outcry to Silence

In the present day, rape is seen as the individual problem of the survivor; this was not always the case. In most recent statistics, a majority of rapes occur by someone of the same ethnicity as the survivor (Joiner, 1997; Neville et al., 2004; Pollard-Terry, 2004; RAINN, 2009; Sapp et al., 1999); however, during the Reconstruction era and Jim Crow

era, White men on a frequent basis were brutally raping Black women (McGuire, 2004; Simmons, 2008). In certain cases, Black women spoke out and even testified about being raped by White men in efforts to combat white supremacy: “Women’s testimonies were a political act that exposed the bitter ironies of segregation and white supremacy, helped to reverse the shame and humiliation rape inflicts, and served as catalysts in mobilizing mass movements” (McGuire, 2004, p. 910). When a woman gives a testimony about her rape, it serves as an opportunity for liberation, support, and justice, which has encouraged others to speak out as well. On a national level, African American men and women were coming together to take a stand against sexual exploitation and racial injustice (McGuire, 2007). This cause unified the African American community through shared experiences and sentiments.

Simmons (2008) would argue, despite this emergence of unity among the African American community, Black men were also raping Black women and profited from the notion of white supremacy. A notion, which allowed Black men to assert dominance over Black women, like White men have previously done. Statistically, a majority of rapes occur by someone of their same ethnicity (Joiner, 1997; Neville et al., 2004; RAINN, 2009); however, these intra-racial rapes are seldom discussed (Simmons, 2008). As history progressed, the public image of a perpetrator shifted from being a racist white man, to one’s father, brother, uncle, and friend, and the unquenchable drive to speak up diminished into silence. The perceptual and statistical shift from stranger rape to acquaintance rape was psychologically devastating, especially within the African American community (McGuire, 2004; Simmons 2008). Rape was no longer seen as a

societal problem that inspired people to unite under a common cause of racism, but as an individual problem that was shameful to speak out about.

Need to Protect

Black women are raised to protect Black men (Flood, 2005). Some common sayings in black culture are: “what goes on in this house, stays in this house; protect, don’t expose the black community; Black women raise their daughters and love their sons” (Pollard-Terry, 2004, p. 1). These sayings signify “a communal protectiveness of black men, from the coddling of toddling boys to a reluctance to report rape and incest” (Pollard-Terry, 2004).

Going back as far as slavery in America, Black men have been falsely accused of raping White women on innumerable accounts. Extensive research has shown that the alleged rape of a White woman was used as a means to justify the racial violence against Black men (Flood, 2005; Simmons, 2008). As a result, Black women felt the responsibility to protect their men from these plights of racism and discrimination (Simmons, 2008). Even today, this need to protect is very much present.

A significant factor in this need to protect comes from the disproportionately large African American male representation in the United States penal system. Some communities believe that because of the oppression that Black men have faced, Black women have a duty to sacrifice their well-being to protect Black men from further offenses (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). Doing so is seen as being loyal to their race; the opposite is viewed as betrayal (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

Since a majority of rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows and by someone of the same race (Joiner, 1997; Neville et al., 2004; Pollard-Terry, 2004;

RAINN, 2009; Sapp et al., 1999), African American women have a hard time reporting their assaults. Their social and cultural upbringing teaches them to view racism as the common struggle that should take precedence over any problems pertaining to being a woman, including rape (Simmons, 2008). This idea still comes from the need to protect the Black man and offer an explanation for the projected racial and family “betrayal” that will follow reporting the perpetrator. Although not reporting a rape is ultimately a betrayal to the community (Simmons, 2008), survivors face a deep sense of cognitive dissonance; they would essentially be turning over their fathers, brothers, uncles, and friends to the very system they have fought so hard to keep them out of (Simmons, 2008). Among African Americans, rape mandates consideration of the entire racial community.

Community Responses to Rape

Overall, given its history and current culture, the Black community’s response to rape often contributes to sustaining the silencing of victims. Since African American women are taught to be strong emotionally, feelings of pain or hurt are not openly discussed. Therefore, when painful situations arise, like being sexually assaulted by your uncle, the conditioned response is to “get over it” and continue with one’s daily routine (Joiner, 1997, p. 34). Additionally, seeking help outside of the family is taboo within this community (Joiner, 1997), meaning that a survivor is more likely to share her experience with a family member or close friend, rather than a professional. Whether or not this person is supportive to the survivor is vital to the healing process; research shows that not having the support of loved ones can be detrimental to one’s recovery process (Filipas & Ullman, 2001). When the victim is blamed or shamed, which is unfortunately a common

response, the rejection that results can cause her to remain silent and decide that she just needs to “get over it” (Joiner, 1997; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

The pressure to remain silent even extends from individuals within the community, whom should be sources of support and protection for survivors. A number of women have disclosed being raped by prestigious Black professionals and racial activists (Simmons, 2008). These men are considered to be heroes for their dedication to social justice and equal rights; however, when these men turn around and rape Black women, the situation is instantly complicated. Some women who have spoken up to other Black officials about their rape have been met with ridicule, hostility, and were told to remain silent to protect the reputation of these “prestigious” men (Joiner, 1997; Simmons, 2008). These themes of rejection and dismissal have silenced African American women within their own community and have extended to the greater society.

Stereotypes about the African American Woman. During slavery, White and Black men used Black women as objects of sexual pleasure; this has led to the labeling of Black women as immoral and promiscuous (Foley, 1995; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). Stereotypes of Black women as dishonest, lazy, welfare recipients, and single mothers with multiple children, play into this notion as well (Flood, 2005). The dominant white belief about black sexuality was that of a Jezebel—excessively promiscuous and highly unlikely to refuse sexual advances (Flood, 2005). All of these stereotypes combined, make African American women easy targets for rape because no one would believe they were actually a “victim” (Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). Survivors have attested to this fact. Many have given their testimonies to the police without meaningful action; in fact, the police did not seem to even make an attempt to

catch the perpetrators (Simmons, 2008). Others have gone to court, only to be blamed and dehumanized (Flood, 2005). These stereotypes have contributed to women remaining silent due to fears that no one will believe them (Simmons, 2008).

Court Injustice

Black women not only face barriers from their own race, but also in broader society through the justice system. Like most women, their testimonies of the assault are heavily scrutinized and portrayed in an accusatory manner by defense attorneys (Flood, 2005). However, the accusations differ depending on the survivor's race. While White women have to explain how "force" was involved to make it a rape, in court, Black women are pressured to disclose their marital status, number of children, socioeconomic status, criminal history, and location of the rape (Flood, 2005). All of these factors are heavily scrutinized to determine if the woman could have actually been a prostitute or simply promiscuous, versus a rape victim (Flood, 2005).

Generally, the defense attorneys are able to put doubt about the victim's moral character into the judge. As a result, Black men tend to receive a less harsh sentence for raping a Black woman than a White woman (Simmons, 2008; Flood, 2005). This point speaks volumes to the value of the African American woman to the greater society.

Case Example. The rape case involving Mike Tyson, an African American male and professional boxer, revealed distinct opinions about rape. When a group of Black men were casually discussing their views of the case in a local barber shop, all of them sided with Tyson, even after he was found guilty of rape (Brown, 1992). The victim was blamed for not knowing what she was getting herself into, and Tyson was labeled as

being victimized by the criminal justice system because he was a black male (Brown, 1992; White, 2001). Even clergy members openly supported Tyson (Simmons, 2008).

These reactions from African American men correlate directly with the stereotypes and data previously stated. Due to the fact that justice is generally declared by a white judge/jury and that Black men disproportionately make up the penal system, it is often assumed that because of discrimination, justice will never be in a Black man's favor (Brown, 1992). Whether the perpetrator actually committed the crime or not does not matter; in cases of rape where both parties are African American, the victim is still blamed for betraying her race (Brown, 1992; Flood, 2005; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). Things become even more complicated when the survivor knows the perpetrator.

Myths About Rape: Blaming the Victim

When a person is sexually assaulted by someone they know, society tends to blame the victim for the assault. There is an underlying assumption that the victim did "something" in order to put him or herself in the position to be assaulted. In a study of African American college students, Black men were more likely to believe rape myths such as, "individuals who are raped, must do things to provoke the rapist", and "individuals cannot be forced into sexual acts that they do not want to perform" (Sapp et al., 1999, p. 205). These gender role stereotypes and sexist attitudes are believed to be what promotes "sexually aggressive behavior" (Sapp et al., 1999, p. 207) and desensitizes Black men to rape. These myths divert the blame to the victim, instead of holding the perpetrator accountable for their actions (Sapp et al., 1999; Simmons, 2008).

Depending on the circumstance of how one was raped, the public response can vary. For example, in a study conducted by Pollard-Terry (2004), an African American

survivor explained how when she reported being raped by a stranger who possessed a weapon, this experience was less stigmatizing; she received family and social support without hesitation because this experience fit the “stereotypical idea of rape”. However, regardless of race, rape with a weapon only occurs in about 7% of cases (Pollard-Terry, 2004). This shows a discrepancy between the public’s view of sexual assault and the actual statistics. In reality, in over 90% of all documented sexual assaults in the United States, the survivor knows their perpetrator (Pollard-Terry, 2004; RAINN, 2009; Sapp et al., 1999; Simmons, 2008).

Within the African American community, knowing the perpetrator makes it extremely difficult for the survivor to speak up. Nonetheless, some Black women are determined to break this cycle of silence.

Encouragement to Speak Out

Anti-rape activism. There are a variety of reasons African American women decide to speak up about their assault. Sometimes it takes a public incident for women to speak up, as was the instance in the Tyson rape case (White, 2001). Anti-rape activism, where individuals and groups make commitments to advocate against a culture of rape, can be used as a method to aid survivors in regaining their power (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). For example, “protests marches, vigils, outreach activities, and conferences” (White, 2001, p. 15), have been methods to raise awareness about sexual assault in the community and unite men and women together around this issue (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

Those who participated in these types of efforts, had the following objectives in mind: hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, debunk myths about rape among

Black women, address racism and sexism in the Black community, improve the treatment of Black women, and break the cycle of silence among sexual assault survivors (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). For others, through the support of a friend, they decided that the only way to redeem their experience of being raped and humiliated was to speak out (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

Positive self-image. Although self-blame is a very common response among survivors of sexual assault, not all Black women responded in this manner. Some Black women did not blame themselves because they had high self-esteem and a positive self-image; they saw themselves as upstanding, moral women (Flood, 2005), which was contrary to the stereotypical beliefs currently held about Black women. Many women in this category chose to testify in court against Black men because they believed justice would be served (Flood, 2005). These women possessed a firm conviction that what happened to them was wrong and not their fault; they demanded justice and were determined to fight for it (Flood, 2005; Simmons, 2008). Unfortunately, little information was mentioned about the characteristics of these women, which contributed to their positive self-image.

Incorporation of spirituality and the arts. Some survivors chose to use spirituality as a means of speaking out, not necessarily to other people, but to God. Spirituality can be a vital part of the healing process for African American women. During a focus group of older African American survivors, they collectively identified God as a source of help above any other resource (Paranjape, Tucker, Mckenzee-Mack, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2007); younger African American women also found refuge in God (Simmons, 2008). The importance of including spirituality as an intervention

strategy is often overlooked; this approach can facilitate healing in a unique way that therapy cannot, for example. Additionally, utilizing the arts, such as, poetry, spoken word, music, theater, and visual art, have also been a way to speak out about one's experiences without the need to report it to authorities (Simmons, 2008). These methods offer valuable insight for practitioners to recommend to clients within this community and for prevention programming.

Conclusion

The literature review examined present research on the background of sexual assault within the African American community. Much of the research found, placed an emphasis on the barriers surrounding this issue. It was synthesized that personal, familial, and societal barriers, can diminish the courage of survivors to speak up against this heinous crime. Yet, there is still a scarcity of research and little known about the factors that empower African American women to speak up after their assault. This research study was designed to inquire about this very thing.

Methods

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the research question: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? This was an area not frequently discussed in literature; most literature only addressed the barriers that inhibit African American women from speaking up (Arata, 1999; Brookings et al., 1994; Neville et al., 2004; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Simmons, 2008), instead of focusing on their resiliency. The hope of this research was to discover the key factors that empower

African American women to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted. This discovery can be used as a guide for preventative sexual assault program development and outreach within the African American community.

The design of this study was a qualitative study; participants were interviewed using a semi-structured method (Berg, 2009). A qualitative study best fit the research question because it described, in detail, the narratives, characteristics, language, and subjective experiences of the participants (Berg, 2009; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Qualitative research allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth examination of the key components that influenced African American survivors to speak up about their assault.

A semi-structured interview was conducted instead of other forms of data collection, because of the amount of detailed information that could be gathered. This method allowed for the clarification of questions and responses, probing, and flexibility throughout the interview (Berg, 2009). This flexibility allowed participants to guide the direction of the interview at a pace they are comfortable with, which provided an empowering experience for them.

Sampling

The sample for this study was identified as a combination of non-probability, judgment, and snowball sample. Members of three different populations were interviewed. The first population was African American survivors of sexual assault. As an essential requirement to qualify for being interviewed, participants must have self-

identify as being in a good place and be comfortable discussing basic aspects of their experience. Having a clause of a certain time frame since the sexual assault occurred was inappropriate for this population, as one can still be affected by the experience decades later, if it had gone unaddressed. The second population was African American professionals and community advocates, who have experience working with African American survivors of sexual assault. This population would understand this topic from a cultural and specialized standpoint, offering valuable insight into this research. The third population was non-African American professionals and community advocates, who have experience working with African American survivors of sexual assault. Since they were not members of the African American community, this population would potentially have a specialized perspective on this issue not already addressed by the other two populations.

The ideal sample size was between five to ten participants; however only three participants were actually interviewed. There were other prospects that expressed an interest in being interviewed; however, due to scheduling conflicts, this could not be arranged. Furthermore, overall, due to the nature and sensitivity of this topic, prospects could have been reluctant to participate, since they'd be discussing this personal experience with someone they didn't know.

Participants were targeted in the mid-western part of the United States. The researcher chose this geographic area because it was diverse in nature, and provided a variety of perspectives valuable to this study. Much of the previous research was from the perspective of African American survivors and those within this community (Simmons,

2008; Flood, 2005; Pollard-Terry, 2004; White, 2001; Joiner, 1997; Brown, 1992), so the researcher wanted to expand on these populations to gain a holistic perspective.

A triangular approach was taken because the researcher was interested in viewing this topic from multiple angles, including that of actual survivors and professionals/community advocates, who differ in their cultural backgrounds. Professionals and community advocates were included in this study because they were familiar with the field of sexual assault from a broader perspective; they understood theory, professional jargon, research, biology, etc. This was not to say that survivors don't understand these things, however, professionals and community advocates have worked with multiple clients, thus offered a perspective that transcends their own individual experience.

In cases of sexual assault, the survivor's trust of others has been violated (Simmons, 2008), thus, plausibly making it difficult for one to want to do an interview with a stranger. However, if a trusted figure, who knew the participant, informs them about this study, then survivors are more likely to be open to the idea of telling their story. This is why using a snowball sampling strategy is preferred for this study. Committee members for this study, other professionals, as well as current participants, were asked to identify anyone they believe would be a good fit for this study. Instead of the researcher contacting potential participants directly, they will contact the researcher, to avoid any coercion or pressure to participate from those involved in this study.

Respondents. As previously stated the stories of three respondents comprise the interview data for this study. Respondent 1 (R1) was a White practitioner who counseled

African American survivors of sexual assault in a behavioral health clinic. Most of the clients serviced there were from a lower socio-economic status and had significant mental health needs. The researcher chose R1 to be interviewed due her unique clientele, passion for the field, perspective as a professional, and expertise.

Respondent 2 (R2) was an African American survivor and professor. When she was about 18-years old, in college, her ex-boyfriend raped her. She never said anything about this experience until she was in her 30's, teaching a class on human sexuality. The interviewer chose R2 to be interviewed due to her experience as a survivor, willingness to participate, and upon recommendation from a colleague.

Respondent 3 (R3) was an African American survivor, author, and community advocate. She was raped at ages 7 and 10 by an uncle. She never told anyone about these experiences until she was in her 20's. She then decided to write a book about these experiences and share her story with others. The interviewer chose R3 to be interviewed due to her dual perspective as survivor and advocate, boldness to publically speak out about being sexually assaulted, and upon recommendation from a personal contact.

Protection of Human Subjects

Recruitment process. The researcher recruited participants by contacting sexual assault agencies, professionals with experience in this field, and the committee members serving on this study. Two flyers were sent to these contacts detailing the purpose of the study; one was targeted towards survivors and the other was targeted towards professionals and advocates (See Appendix A for details). Since sexual assault is a

sensitive topic to discuss, on the flyer and consent form (See Appendix B), supplementary mental health resources were included for participants to contact in case the interview evoked traumatic memories and additional support was needed.

Informed consent. Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form (See Appendix B), which was approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). This consent form included the purpose of this study, the process of the interview, the measures to protect the confidentiality of the participants, the potential risks and benefits, and the volunteer nature of the study. Any questions the participants had were answered before they agreed to be involved in the study.

The needs of the participants were paramount, so participants had the option to withdraw from the study up to seven days after the interview. In the case of a withdrawal, collected data would be immediately deleted. All data was kept confidential and no identifying information about the participants is disclosed in the final report.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study consisted of three, in-depth, qualitative interviews with African American survivors, an African American professional, and non-African American professional. All interviews were conducted in a private location chosen by the participant. About 12 interview questions were asked (See Appendix C), and the interviews were approximately one hour in length. Interviews were audio-recorded for an accurate transcription of the data. The researcher performed the

transcription; all tapes and transcripts were kept on a password-protected file on the researcher's computer.

To ensure all of the questions had at least face validity, the researcher completed a thorough literature review that was used as a guide for developing the interview questions. All questions were read and tested for ambiguity and quality, by two social workers and two University of St. Thomas faculty members. All questions were approved prior to conducting interviews.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This method analyzed the text to discover themes, codes, meaning, and patterns (Berg, 2009). The researcher used this technique to initially code the transcribed data using "open coding" (Berg, 2009). Open coding consists of going through the transcribed data line-by-line to search for key concepts (Berg, 2009). The researcher then reviewed the data again to identify patterns, which led to larger themes. Berg (2009) held the view that three occurrences of a particular code led to the development of a theme. The researcher held this same perspective. To check for reliability, the researcher reviewed the developed themes several times before finalizing them.

Strengths and Limitations

Using in-person interviews to collect the data was a strength of this study because this enriched the quality of data and deepened the understanding of this topic from a subjective experience. Another strength was, by sampling from a triangular approach, this topic was addressed from multiple angles, which further enriched the data. Finally, this topic was an area where there is little research available. Identifying the factors that

empowered African American women to speak up after their sexual assault can be a monumental step towards outreach within the African American community.

A limitation to this study was the small sample size, thus, findings cannot be generalized. By interviewing more people, there could potentially be more themes that developed, or potentially more discrepancies. Another limitation was that this study was a non-probability, snowball sample. Participants may not be representative of the general population of African American survivors, and may actually be more similar in nature. Finally, although conducting an interview was a strength, it was also a limitation. Being that sexual assault is stigmatized and rarely discussed in the African American community, survivors could have been deterred from participating because of the interview format with a stranger. The option of doing an anonymous survey may have been more appealing, however, the level of detail needed for this study would not have been captured. Furthermore, there was potential for the Hawthorne effect; participants may have felt pressured to answer a certain way because of being in front of the researcher.

Conclusion

Qualitative interviews can provide an in-depth look at a given topic. Although it can be intimidating to discuss a sensitive issue with someone you don't know, the participants appeared very comfortable expressing themselves. All three targeted populations were included in some capacity, enabling the topic to be addressed from multiple angles. As with any research study, there are strengths and limitations, sometimes outside of one's control that affect the outcome of the study. Despite these factors, even with only three respondents, the findings were profound.

Findings

As previously stated, three respondents were interviewed. Of the tabulated data, eight common themes emerged. The themes were as follows: Don't talk about it, Don't define their experience as rape, Social support, Need to protect Black men, Stereotypes of African American women, Buying into stereotypes about sexual assault, Impact of faith communities, and Sexual Assault Education within the African American community. Following each quote, it's been labeled which respondent made the statement. Respondent 1 is coded as (R1), Respondent 2 is coded as (R2), and Respondent 3 is coded as (R3).

Don't Talk About It

“Don't talk about it” was one of the themes discovered from the data analysis. All of the respondents mentioned how the concept of shame, cultural factors, and the stigma associated with sexual assault has created a culture where victims don't talk about being sexually assaulted. The quotes below emphasize the respondents' views on this topic:

Shame. “Shame is the most powerful element of abuse because it causes even witnesses to retreat” (R3).

“God made sex to feel good, it feels good, even if it's inappropriate, even if it's not suppose to happen. So when you're a kid and that happens, there can be many reasons why kids don't tell” (R3).

“One question that I always ask clients is, if anyone else knows you’re here. And I have many clients who will say no, and I’ll never tell anyone that I’m here. I have a client I’ve seen on and off for years and nobody knows that they see a therapist” (R1)

“There aren’t people who are standing up or people who can be known as that warrior for sexual abuse, because it’s so embarrassing to say, my uncle had sex with me, my uncle molested me; especially when you become a professional” (R3).

Contradiction among respondents. Respondents differed in their beliefs regarding the concepts of blame and shame, as exemplified in the following two quotes.

Respondent 1 stated:

“They [survivors] think they could have prevented it, they somehow deserved it, they provoked it. They internalize that and blame themselves”.

On the contrary, Respondent 2 (Survivor) reported:

“I was ashamed, I wasn’t guilty, but I was ashamed. I felt ashamed. In that shame, I just wanted it to go away. I wanted to move on. So I never told anybody. Never told anybody about it.

No one talks about sexual assault. *“I talked to a bunch of adult friends, who had been raped and molested and no one was talking about it, so I decided I have to talk about it” (R3).*

“I was 7 and 10 when I was sexually assaulted; I didn’t say anything until I was in my 20’s” (R3).

“I don’t think you can talk to one person who will say, I’m not familiar with what sexual assault is, but it’s the elephant in a room. People don’t wanna talk about it, especially if it’s happened to them, or someone they know, or their children, because it’s so close to home” (R3).

“I think there’s possibly a general norm that you don’t talk about it. That you should deal with it on your own” (R1).

“People didn’t talk about this other thing, called date rape or acquaintance rape. Nobody talked to me about it. Nobody said, see this could happen to you too. It wasn’t even on my radar. There wasn’t language to talk about it” (R2).

“There was no message about, this is who you should tell. So I wouldn’t have known who to tell, if I wouldn’t known to tell” (R2).

“These are not discussions that happen. Twenty years after my rape, I don’t think that we’ve progressed very far on this issue”(R2).

“I'm glad that you decided to do this. This is another opportunity to speak about this that I don't talk about much. There are not too many places in society that you can talk about this” (R2).

The researcher identified the wording for the theme “Don't talk about it”, based on the language respondents used to describe this phenomena. Respondents repeatedly referenced this trend of silence, within the African American community.

Don't Define Their Experience as Rape

“Don't define as rape” was one of the themes discovered from the data analysis. All of the respondents mentioned how there was a lack of understanding about what classified as a rape. The quotes below emphasize the respondents' views on this topic:

“There's a girl who lived across the street from me, we were 11, 12 years old. And there was an older guy who rented a room from them, and he was having a relationship with her. He was like, 22, 23 years old. And I remember her telling me about it and it wasn't like, he raped me, she didn't say he raped her, she was like, we had sex. And it wasn't sex; it was a one-sided inappropriate, relationship” (R3).

Women would say “he forced me to have sex with him or he makes me have sex with him. And I think in those situations the women may not recognize that that can be considered as being raped” (R1).

***I didn't know I was raped.** “And this [experience being raped] is what was very confusing to me. And this is also why I never told anyone. Never told anyone about this*

experience until I was an adult teaching. And it took me years to figure out that I had been raped” (R2).

“I felt relieved that I could, understand it was a rape, and that I could share it with other people and call it for what it was. I didn’t know... I didn’t know. I didn’t understand it as a rape; I couldn’t even name it. I was just ashamed, sad, and very, very hurt”(R2).

The researcher identified the wording for the theme “Don’t define their experience as rape”, based on the language respondents used to describe this phenomena. Although this theme could be joined with other themes, it was identified as a separate theme because respondents repeatedly referenced this specific concept throughout the interviews. It’s significance to their narratives warranted it being its own theme.

Social Support

“Social Support” was a theme discovered from the data analysis. Respondents stressed the importance of social support in relation to sharing about their experience being sexually assaulted with others. Social support was needed for survivors to speak up. The quotes below emphasize the significance of social support:

“I think social support is always very important. I’m hesitant to say this, but a lot of clients will say, they didn’t believe me. So one of the possible barriers could be that when clients don’t have a lot of support” (R3).

“When I told her [my mom] she never once denied it, she didn’t denounce me, she believed it.” (R3).

People need to feel safe. An important part of social support for survivors is being in a safe environment. Respondents elaborated on this notion in the following quotes.

“But most people will only feel comfortable talking about it if they know that you’ve been through it or if you’ve divulged it. People come up to me all the time, and they talk to me about it because they feel safe, and people need to feel safe. And they don’t feel safe, if no one in the room has experienced it, or have ever talked about it, or worked in the field. And more times than not, even if you worked in the field, it takes something special to have a victim talk about what they’ve been through” (R3).

“I would say that the clients who are willing to talk about their trauma have a relationship with me where they feel safe. And so it’s more about the relationship that they have versus, any type of characteristics about them” (R1).

Worth the sacrifice. When deciding whether to speak up about being sexually assaulted or not, there are many factors to consider. However, respondents decided that regardless of the negative reactions they might get, it was worth the sacrifice. Those in support outweighed the opposition.

“If disclosing my truth meant, saving one little boy or one little girl, it would most definitely be worth all the sacrifices I made” (R3).

“My immediate family has always been very supportive, but there were a few who were very upset about my divulging the things that had happened and writing this book, but not enough for it to make a difference. There were more people that were very supportive and that reached out to me and said, thank you for telling my story. The same thing happened to me, but I could never be that brave; you told our story” (R3).

The researcher identified the wording for the theme “Social support”, based on the emphasis respondents placed on the reactions and support received from those around them.

Need to Protect Black Men

“Need to protect black men” was a theme discovered from the data analysis. Respondents discussed how due to the rates of Black men in prison, and the desire to keep families together, these factors have impacted how sexual assault is viewed. The quotes below emphasize the respondents’ view on this topic:

“I work with adolescents and I’ve had them report to me that they were abused by their mom’s boyfriend and I’ve had the mom’s go straight ballistic on me, more so because they want to protect the guy” (R1).

Shame the family. *“A lot of the [Black] men are in prison, so we allow uncles to molest young girls in the family, young boys in the family, and we don’t want anyone to know that this person has just committed the ultimate sin and don’t want to send them to jail, because it will shame the family” (R3).*

“There’s a sense of family, and I have stick in there, I have to take care of this person, even though they might be being abusive” (R1).

The researcher identified the wording for the theme, “Need to protect Black men”, based on the care and protection offered to the perpetrators, rather than the victims, within African American families. The lack of trust in the judicial system, for example, prevents the proper action from being taken within homes where abuse is present.

Stereotypes of Black Women

“Stereotypes of Black women” was a theme developed from the data analysis. Although other respondents discussed this topic, Respondent 2 summarized this notion in a concise manner, as she discussed two prevailing stereotypes about African American women. These stereotypes have significantly affected the greater society and led to the exploitation of Black women. The quote below emphasizes her views on this topic:

Beyonce or Aunt Jemima. *“Unfortunately, there are two dominate, prevailing images of black women, that dominate our society. And it's unfortunate. It's either the manly, old strong black women, the big mother, who's gonna come cook me some pancakes; the mammy black woman, or the sexual provocateur. She's erotic and has a certain sexual invitation. Now she's just for sex though. She's not for a relationship. She's not the one who's going to mother your children; she's not any of that. She's just an object. And we're either a mammy or a sex kitten. We're either Beyonce or Aunt Jemima, either somebody's fantasy or somebody's mother. And how does that play into these images of rape? I think they both are an objectification of black women. Anytime you can*

objectify them and not make them human, and not see someone's humanity, you just open the door for exploitation” (R2).

The researcher identified the wording for the theme “Stereotypes of Black women”, based on the respondent’s language, and the content expressed on this issue.

Buying Into Stereotypes About Sexual Assault

“Buying into stereotypes about sexual assault” was a theme developed from the data analysis. Respondents discussed the stereotypes surrounding sexual assault that they believed and bought into, which significantly shaped the outlook of their experiences. Stereotypes such as, only white women get raped, rape is only physically violent, and what you wear can denote consent, made it difficult to see themselves as victims of sexual assault. The quotes below emphasize these messages:

Stereotype: “It’s your fault”. *“So I think the role I have to play, is that person. Letting people know it’s not their fault and educating them about sexual assault. I think a huge barrier in the African American community, and the community in general, is buying into the stereotypes about rape victims. And I think that the clients themselves buy into that” (R1).*

Stereotype: Your appearance equals consent. *“Whenever we wanted to start wearing lipstick, or our hips were forming, or things like that, we were labeled as fast. So we were never taught that it’s okay to grow up and start thinking that you were beautiful, or that it was okay to be beautiful, or cute, or womanly. Whenever we started to wear make-up, we were fast... If a woman is too sexy, she probably asked for it” (R3).*

Stereotype: Rape is physically violent. *“It was emotionally violent, but it wasn’t physically violent. I didn’t have a rape situation where he threw me down, and held me down, he did take off my clothes against my will, but it wasn’t violent. I was not bloody; I was not beaten. Then I could’ve gone to someone and have said, look, here are my scars. I couldn’t show anybody my scars... So barring a violent situation, I would have no problem saying, no! Bye! But in my 20 year old self, the only conclusion I would get to the story was, just let this happen, then it will be done” (R2).*

Stereotype: Rapists don’t look normal. *“He wasn’t somebody you’re going to find on the face of America’s most wanted. People would have considered him a normal guy. So you might expect that from someone who was like a serial rapist. You would think, maybe they’re mentally off, so then you could say, this person has a problem, this person is a psychopath, a serial rapist, but he was none of that, he was a guy going to college. So you would expect him to have enough sensitivity, enough common sense to know that that wasn’t okay. He wasn’t under the influence of drugs or alcohol when he did it” (R2).*

Stereotype: Only white women get raped. *“When I think of a sexual assault survivor, I don’t see another black woman. When I call up that image in my mind, I see a frail, white woman, crying. I mean it’s terrible. I don’t even think about. Like black women don’t get sexually assaulted. When you think of the rape victims, the ones on TV, I’ve seen the women who have been raped in the shows, I’ve seen the CSI episodes; it’s*

never a vulnerable young black girl, right? It was always some beautiful, young, white woman, who had been plucked out of her college dorm room. She was innocent, somebody who was vulnerable and exploited. No, it wasn't a black girl. We're just invisible in terms of when I think about images. Sometimes you see a prostitute who got raped or beaten, sometimes black women are characterized that way. So when you think, what's a stereotype of a sexual assault victim? She's young and she's white, and she's vulnerable. Her story is told, the rest of us, we're just invisible... I couldn't even be raped, because it's vulnerable white girls that get raped. Those are the ones they show on TV. I didn't have that schema. I didn't have that way of thinking” (R2).

The researcher developed the theme “Buying into stereotypes about sexual assault”, due to the concepts respondents expressed. The above content explained which stereotypes about sexual assault they bought into and deeply believed.

Impact of Faith Communities

“Impact of faith communities” was a theme developed from the data analysis. Respondents discussed how faith communities could be a source of support for survivors, but they could also hinder one’s healing if the wrong messages are being conveyed. The quotes below emphasize this point:

Importance of prayer. *“We don’t believe in talking to people, we believe in praying to God”(R3).*

Faith communities can be blaming. *“I think that sometimes they [faith communities] can be contradictory to people feeling supported. So sometimes they can be*

blaming, so needing to be careful about that. Messages like commit suicide and you'll go to hell, the devil's gonna get you, and you need to pray and your depression will go away, make people start to feel shamed like their faith is not enough. Like they're not somehow loving God right and if they did, their depression and anxiety will go away" (R1).

Prevents suicide. *However, "I think the majority I would say find it [faith communities] helpful. I think it prevents suicide sometimes; sometimes people will say I won't do it, I'll go to hell, or it's against my religion. I'm glad you have that belief, it's keeping you alive"*(R1).

The researcher developed the wording for the theme, "Impact of faith communities", based on the respondents' language. The content above, when summarized, encompassed the concept of the theme.

Sexual Assault Education in the African American Community

"Sexual Assault Education in the African American community" was a theme identified from the data analysis. All of the respondents heavily stressed the need for education about sexual assault in the African American community, and in all communities. Respondents explained how the lack of education on this issue has been detrimental to many; however, once properly educated, liberation was the result. The quotes below emphasize their views on this issue:

"Education is needed about sexual assault in general and education about available resources" (R1).

Social services actually want to help families. *“Black families worry that their children will be taken away, that social services are not really focused on helping families to heal that social fabric. That they just want to come in and tear their families apart, so people in helping professionals, really need to drive home that they want to help the families” (R3).*

Outreach within the community. *“I’m working on with a Senator to plan a town hall with the African American community to talk about sexual assault, healthy behavior, awareness, and try to figure out how to create a campaign that sticks past sexual awareness month” (R3)*

Educate both men and women. *“Parents [need] to educate their children, male and female. Like that man that raped me, he was somebody's son. He somehow got a message, or didn't get a message from his mom or dad about how to treat women, about how to have a healthy sexual relationship. They are all stakeholders to me. Like if somebody would have taught him better, maybe he would have known that it wasn't all right to have sex with someone who wasn't [responsive]. He needed someone to teach him” (R2).*

Contradiction among respondents. Respondents differed in their beliefs regarding whether survivors understood their experiences as a sexual assault or not. The following quotes expand on this distinction.

Respondent 1 stated the following:

“I think they understand that they’ve been sexually assaulted, but not that that can have implications, emotional and behavioral (R1).

On the contrary, Respondent 2 explained her experience below:

“I didn't know it wasn't right. I knew that I didn't want it to happen, but I didn't know that I could say no and get up and walk away. I needed to understand myself as a sexual person and my own sexual development. I needed to understand how to relate that to another human being in a way that was healthy. And try to understand what is rape and the whole gambit of it”.

Educate about sexual assault. *“Rape can be violent, it can be non-violent. It can be someone you know or somebody you don't know. I needed to understand all of those things. Because you see, the only images I had, were some poor vulnerable white girl who got plucked up and pulled into an alley somewhere and that was a rape. There were no 18- year old black girls who got raped by their ex-boyfriend; that wasn't an option” (R2).*

“If I were doing some kind of education, I would want everyone to know exactly what I said, how do you understand your own body, your sexuality, how do you begin to relate that to another individual human being, in a relationship, and how do you know what is normal, appropriate sexual behavior, and what would be abusive. Like when does it become abusive? I would want all women to know those things, as a means of preventing

rape, and how to keep yourself safe. What does rape look like. Who is a rapist? Who can you tell if somebody has sexually assaulted you, whether that's penetration or not. It should just be unwanted touching. If somebody touches you in a way that is sexual that you don't desire, that's non-consensual. It doesn't have to be that someone penetrated you. I want African American women to know that, but I want all women to know that" (R2).

Educate about depression. *"I've had clients tell me that black people can't be depressed. So this idea that depression doesn't affect African Americans is going to be a huge barrier... So I'll generally do a few session about what is depression, how do people get depression, who does it affect" (R1). [Clients have been receptive to this.]*

Educate within the home. *"My husband doesn't know. And I need to talk to my husband about that. I wasn't keeping a secret from him; I just think I was kind of avoiding it because I know he has traditional thinking. I should start [educating] with my own home. And I have a 4-year old daughter and it's very important to me that she has a healthy developing sexuality and knows the difference between what is consensual and what is rape. That is very important. And I think in order to do that, her father, and I need to be on the same page with those things" (R2).*

Education removes shame. *"It's just been there for years, an experience that happened to me that was just hanging out somewhere. It didn't have a category; it was just this shameful thing. So to be able to out a name on it and say that was rape,*

somebody exploited you and made you do something that you didn't want to do. They took advantage of you, and hurt you, and to be able to name that was very healing. Very healing, it took it out of the shame; I didn't have to feel shame about that because that was not my problem. That was the problem of the person who raped me. He was messed up. I didn't have to feel shame for that, I just didn't know. I was vulnerable and didn't know, so that all was very healing for me". (R2)

Education provides healing. *"When I sat down to write the book, I was healed... I went really deep, it's very graphic, because I wanted the people to know the depth of what had happened, and I wanted the victims to know that they could be survivors. So I needed people to read the book and really feel the deliverance, and I wanted victims to know that you can be set free. You can be healed and that you can walk in deliverance. You can walk and be free" (R3).*

The researcher developed the wording for the theme, "Education in the African American community", based on how respondents greatly emphasized the necessity of education when describing their experiences. The word "education", or similar connotations were continually acknowledged and stressed.

Conclusion

Overall, respondents held beliefs and expressed meanings that were comparable to one another. Each respondent, in her own words, mentioned almost every theme recorded above. This consistency demonstrates a common experience shared among the

respondents that transcend their ethnic background and individual perspectives. The interview data also paralleled precisely with the literature review.

Discussion and Implications

Researcher's Interpretation of Findings

Theme 1. The eight themes stated above include a majority of the contents of the interview. The first theme, "Don't talk about it", was apparent throughout the interview. The respondents frequently mentioned how the topic of sexual assault is not discussed within the African American community, although its prevalence is apparent. One distinct difference was discovered between Respondent 1 (White professional) and Respondent 2 (African American Survivor) in this area. From Respondent 1's perspective working in the field, she observed that survivors blamed themselves for the assault, while Respondent 2 explained how she didn't feel any guilt or blame, rather, she felt ashamed of the experience. Respondent 3, also mentioned feeling ashamed of her experience, but blame was not mentioned. Thus, it was the shame and embarrassment that kept them silent. Upon further investigation by the researcher, it could have been discovered that Respondent 3 also felt blame, but since shame was not specifically a concept being studied, not enough information was gathered in this area. Nonetheless, both perspectives are valid because they offer valuable insight into the mind frame of what a survivor could be experiencing. The shame and blame associated with this experience creates a culture of silence and an unsafe environment to feel supported in this area. Due to the significance of this concept, the researcher saw this as an essential theme.

Theme 2. The second theme, “Don’t define their experience as rape”, was common among all three respondents. Since rape and sexual assault are not widely discussed in the African American community, this resulted in a lack of understanding about how rape is defined within the context of this community. Alternative phrases such as, “we had sex”, or “he forced me to have sex”, were used to explain respondents’ confusing and painful sexual experiences, as they were left to make sense of these occurrences in isolation.

Theme 3. The third theme, “Social support”, held a vital role for respondents. The presence of social support empowered women to feel safe, and freely share about their experiences, while the absence of it produced an environment of confusion, fear, shame, and silence. The importance of having another genuinely listen to you, believe your story, and support you through the healing process, cannot be overlooked.

Theme 4. The fourth theme, “Need to protect Black men”, was clearly communicated throughout the interviews. Respondents strongly asserted how women will tolerate their children being sexually abused by a family member or their mother’s boyfriend, in an effort to preserve the reputation of the family, and prevent having another Black male put in jail. Knowing that single women head a majority of Black households, this could also be an attempt to preserve the idea of a nuclear family, by seeking to keep the men in the homes. This contributes to the above themes because the abuse is not talked about, which could leave those who are victimized feeling ashamed, blamed, isolated, and unsupported.

Theme 5. Theme five, “Stereotypes of Black women”, displayed two distinct views of the Black woman, a mammy and a sex kitten, both of which are objectifying. If

these views are as prevalent as Respondent 2 emphasized, then this can play into how a survivor defines rape, or if she even talks about it. If she is viewed in society as an object, or less of a person, the types of support available to her, within or outside of her community, could be very slim.

Theme 6. The sixth theme, “Buying into stereotypes about sexual assault”, further explained the experience of a survivor when they internalize the stereotypes told to them about sexual assault. Respondents reported that when they believed messages such as: only frail, white women get raped; rape is physically violent; rapists are creepy strangers in an alley, and if you’re an attractive women, you must have asked for it, it was severely damaging to their psyche. Growing up, respondents explained feeling extremely self-conscious and even had issues seeing themselves as victims of sexual assault. There was no schema to associate their experiences to, until they began to educate themselves on the issue, and talk to others with similar experiences.

Theme 7. The seventh theme, “Impact of faith communities”, offered a dual perspective on this issue. Respondent 1 discussed how although faith communities can be helpful, they can also inadvertently send messages that produce blame, such as the belief that you need to pray your depression away, or else your faith is called into question. Respondent 3 discussed how practitioners needed to understand the prominence of prayer within the African American community, above talking to professionals about their problems. It appears as though, regardless of the efficacy of this method of coping, it is still held to a high standard and can even save lives. As Respondent 1 stated, the fear of going to hell keeps many clients from committing suicide. The impact of faith communities continues to flourish within African American communities.

Theme 8. All three respondents mentioned the eighth theme, “Sexual Assault Education in the African American community”, most frequently. There was an overwhelming sense of a need for education about the range of what sexual assault can be constituted as. Respondent 2, for example, was completely confused by her experience and had no place to categorize it. She didn’t even think she could be raped because “Black women don’t get raped”. These misconceptions about sexual assault have led others to drugs, risky sexual behavior, and deep psychological pain. On the other hand, education can bring deliverance and confidence. It’s powerful when victims start to see themselves as survivors once they’ve understood there is a name for this painful experience, and they are not alone.

Connection to research question. The eight themes relate to the main research question: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? As mentioned in theme 1, when survivors are in environments free of blame and shame, they are more likely to speak up about their experience, rather than remain silent. Having a clear definition of rape, as discussed in theme 2, gives insight into this experience, reducing the stigma associated with it. When survivors feel safe and comfortable with another, it enables them to freely share their story; the emphasis of theme 3, social support, cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, the support of families, and the need for them to seek to protect those victimized, rather than the perpetrator, as in theme 4, can greatly facilitate women speaking up. Theme 5 and 6, in relation to stereotypes, when one is aware of these stereotypes, and is educated on the truth, it can empower survivors to stand up against this injustice. Given the right circumstances, faith communities can be a source of support. As described in theme 7, speaking up to God,

can be more fulfilling than speaking to another person. Lastly, as theme 8 described, receiving education on sexual assault can lead one to experience a type of deliverance and freedom that is immensely healing. All of the themes have underlying commonalities of the need for the survivor to feel supported and place an emphasis on education, which work together to empower an African American survivor to speak up about being sexually assaulted.

Findings and Relevance to Literature

The research addressed this topic from a macro standpoint, while the interview data, approached it from a mezzo, micro viewpoint. It appeared as though the voices of survivors were not meaningfully included in the literature. Moreover, the research discussed sexual assault more from the standpoint of how society views it, and the data provided the individual perspective. Even still, the interview data directly correlated with the literature.

Social support. Social support was a commonality between the data and research. Whether or not this person is supportive to the survivor is vital to the healing process; research shows that not having the support of loved ones can be detrimental to one's recovery process (Filipas & Ullman, 2001). Respondent 1 discussed how many of the clients she works with are not supported in their environments, which has inhibited their progress in this area; on the other hand, Respondent 3 was supported by her mother, husband, and other members of her family. This support became a catalyst for her decision to write a book about her experiences and share the truth with all willing to read her story. She stated, "When I sat down to write the book, I was healed".

Protect the Black male. The interview data revealed that some women have a tendency to protect the perpetrators to prevent jail time (Sapp et al., 1999; Simmons, 2008), and keep families together. It was seen as being loyal to your family, or loyal to your race, by protecting the black male; on the contrary, speaking up was seen as betrayal (Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

Stereotypes of African American survivors. The two prevailing stereotypes about African American women were identical to those mentioned in the research. Viewing the Black woman as a mother figure, and as sexually promiscuous (Flood, 2005). Both sources addressed how these stereotypes make it difficult for them to be seen as a victim of rape (Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001). If a woman is physically appealing, others think she must have elicited the sexual encounter, not even considering that she could have actually been raped (Flood, 2005). This further supports the fallacy that “Black women don’t get raped”, as was elaborated on in the interview data.

Shame. The concept of shame was addressed in the data; however, the research didn’t mention this as a significant factor. Its focus was on the tendency for society to blame the victim for the assault (Brown, 1992; White, 2001). The individual experiences, other than that of Respondent 1, mentioned how their battle was more internal, dealing with the shame they felt within themselves, rather than the blame from society. Although it can be argued that this shame could have also been influenced by external factors as well.

Stereotypes of rapists. The idea of a rapist being a creepy, stranger, guy lurking in an alley is a fallacy, given over 90% of people are sexually assaulted by someone they

know (Pollard-Terry, 2004; RAINN, 2009; Sapp et al., 1999; Simmons, 2008).

Respondent 2 explained believing this stereotype, which skewed her view of her experience and caused her to not classify it as a rape (Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Simmons, 2008; White, 2001).

Faith communities. The importance of faith communities was mentioned in the interview data and research. Both sources discussed how African American women feel more comfortable disclosing their assault to God, rather than to another person. It was agreed that faith communities are a source of refuge and support within this community (Paranjape et al., 2007; Simmons, 2008).

Lack of sexual assault education. The research did not address how a lack of education on sexual assault has impacted the African American community, like the interview data emphasized; this was a key component in the experiences of respondents. In these cases, a lack of understanding in this area led to decades of shame, confusion, and other psychological complications. If for years, someone didn't even know they were raped, the damage can be detrimental. Unfortunately this is the case for many survivors today.

Implications of Research Findings

Although the findings only represent the perspective of three individuals, and cannot indefinitely be generalized to the entire population of African American survivors of sexual assault, there are still real implications that can inform social work practice.

Building rapport is essential for a productive working relationship to develop. When working with African American survivors, it is important to understand their narrative. Practitioners should take the time to hear their story and be familiar with their

background, family values, and personal ideals. Before a survivor will open up, they have to feel safe and supported. Creating an environment free of judgment can help facilitate this process.

Once a safe environment has been established, practitioners should explore their core beliefs about sexual assault as a whole. Knowing the plethora of false stereotypes out there, as well as how they can impact survivors, these conversations should be discussed head on. However, it is important to not discredit one's beliefs. Survivors should be validated in their views, and then appropriately educated about the truths surrounding sexual assault. Proper education can be the key that liberates survivors and reduces the stigma of being sexually assaulted.

To further reduce the stigma, practitioners should develop a deeper understanding of the barriers that silence survivors. For example, the concept of shame can play a significant role in silencing African American survivors. Educating survivors on this concept can relieve much of the embarrassment they harbor within and propel them on their journey towards healing.

Practitioners should not only work with individuals, but also with their families when possible. Within the African American community, a family does not only include the immediate family, but also extended family members, and close friends. This term is used very broadly and should accommodate all whom clients identify as a part of their family unit. Families can play a vital role in a survivor's conceptualization of their assault. For example, when practitioners understand the history and context of women protecting Black men, this information can be integrated into the work with a family. Families can become aware of this inclination to protect the perpetrator, and gain an in-

depth understanding of its effects on the survivor. By acknowledging this notion, families can work together to combat this “need to protect” and promote healthy family systems.

The interview data offered practical implications for working with African American survivors of sexual assault. Implementing these insights can empower survivors to speak up about being assaulted and begin to heal from these experiences. The literature correlated precisely with the interview data and supported the findings, yet still, more data would need to be tabulated to assert the generalizability of these findings on this topic. However, the findings offer valuable insight into further social work research and opportunities in this field of study.

Implications for Social Work Research

The information presented through the literature review and interview data uncovered key factors that contribute to what empowers African American women to speak up about being sexually assaulted. Social workers should be aware of the impact the African American culture has on survivors. This culture, which has experienced significant oppression throughout history, is inadvertently oppressing those within its own community. Understanding how these historical implications impact the view of sexual assault is vital when working with this population. There is an abundance of research on the barriers survivors face (Brown, 1992; Flood, 2005; Foley, 1995; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Sapp, Farrell, Johnson, & Hitchcock, 1999; White, 2001); however, there is a lack of research about how these barriers can be overcome. This stresses the need for the actual voices and perspectives of survivors to be included in research. Approaching this topic from a macro standpoint, can only offer so much insight. Consequently, little research discusses the factors that encourage women to speak up and break the silence.

By intentionally including the perspective of African American survivors, this can enhance research and have a monumental impact on addressing this crime.

More research needs to be done about the type of education program models that best address sexual assault within the African American community. The lack of education on this topic is alarming. This epidemic is too widespread to be ignorant of the prevention and education tactics most effective to address this issue. Since faith can be a sense of strength within this population, working with faith communities could also provide a means to educate the African American community; however, research would need to be done to clarify how this could be successfully implemented, considering the taboo nature of this topic. Over the years, a great deal of progress has been made, but there is still much to accomplish.

Implications for Policy

It became apparent through this study that addressing sexual assault has failed on a systemic level. The individual responses of family members cannot be disconnected from those tolerated in society. Sanctions are not nearly as severe for sexual assault compared to other crimes. The judicial system makes it difficult for a survivor to proceed with a case, due to their emphasis on blaming the victim. Furthermore, there is a lack of funding for programs that support this population, both the survivors and the perpetrators. There are a few foundational policies such as the Violence Against Women's Act (VAWA), but more needs to be done in this area. If society continues to tolerate sexual assault, then change will never happen. As seen with this topic, systemic failure leads to systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Sexual assault is a devastating crime that affects not only those victimized, but it also plagues communities. “Shame is the most powerful element of abuse because it causes even witnesses to retreat” (R3). All too often, this issue is viewed from a deficit mentality, focusing on the barriers survivors face, but the researcher wanted take a different approach.

The research question being investigated was: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? By focusing on resiliency and empowerment, it was discovered that social support and proper education about sexual assault are key facilitators in this process. Environments that offer unconditional support and compassion can empower a survivor to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted. Furthermore, when individuals, families, and communities understand the facts about sexual assault such as: the definition, understand the falsehood of stereotypes surrounding this topic, and it’s effects on one’s level of functioning, these can serve to reduce stigma and liberate survivors. The key is to get people to understand that this is not just an African American or women’s issue, this is a human rights issue, a family systems issue, a global problem. If a sense of urgency could be generated around this topic, a movement can be formed that could be sustained and put an end to this destructive crime.

The information presented in this study serves as a useful tool to implement preventative sexual assault program development and outreach within the African American community. Although more research is needed to clearly identify what these programs would look like, progress is being made in the right direction.

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Appendix A

Research Opportunity for Professionals & Advocates

Please consider sharing your experiences about sexual
assault

*This research is being conducted
through the University of St. Thomas'
Graduate Social Work Program*

The purpose of this study is to discover the key factors that **EMPOWER**
African American women to break the silence associated with being
sexually assaulted

The **ONLY** thing you will be asked to do is participate in one
confidential, audio-taped, face-to-face interview, approximately an hour
in length

The researcher is looking to interview:
**Professionals and Community Advocates from both African American
and Non-African American backgrounds, who have experience with
African American survivors**

For more information, please
contact the researcher:

Kiana Williams
will9094@stthomas.edu

###-###-####

Want support after a sexual assault? You are not alone. Here are a few resources:

- Crisis Connection
Offers 24-hour crisis counseling by telephone.
Call 612-379-6363

- Neighborhood Involvement Program
Offers sliding scale counseling services.
Call 612-374-4601

Research Opportunity for Survivors of Sexual Assault

Please consider sharing your story about sexual assault

*This research is being conducted
through the University of St. Thomas'
Graduate Social Work Program*

The purpose of this study is to discover the key factors that **EMPOWER** African American women to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted

The **ONLY** thing you will be asked to do is participate in one confidential, audio-taped, face-to-face interview, approximately an hour in length

The researcher is looking to interview:

**African American women who are survivors of
sexual assault**

(Must self-identify as being emotionally comfortable discussing basic aspects of your experience)

For more information, please
contact the researcher:

Kiana Williams
will9094@stthomas.edu
###-###-####

Want support after a sexual assault? You are not alone. Here are a few resources:

- Crisis Connection
Offers 24-hour crisis counseling by telephone.
Call 612-379-6363

- Neighborhood Involvement Program
Offers sliding scale counseling services.
Call 612-374-4601

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

University of St. Thomas

The Courage to Speak: Breaking the Silence of Sexual Assault in the

African American Community

405749-1

Introduction:

I am researching sexual assault in the African American community. There are many barriers that hinder African American women from speaking up about their sexual assault; however, I'm interested in finding out what key factors empower African American women to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the question: What empowers African American women to speak up after their sexual assault? Previous research only focuses on the barriers that hinder African American women from speaking up about their sexual assault, but I want to investigate the factors that encourage African American women to speak up and break the silence. The hope of this research is to discover the key factors that empower African American women to break the silence associated with being sexually assaulted. This discovery can be used as a guide for preventative sexual assault program development and outreach within the African American community.

Procedures:

Participants will be interviewed in a private location of their choice. Interviews are expected to be approximately an hour in length. Upon the permission of the participant, the interview will be audio-recorded for the researcher to do an accurate transcription of the data; however, no identifying information of participants will be disclosed.

Risks and Benefits of Study:

There is some risk that the interview may bring up difficult, painful, and sensitive topics. In addition to the community resources listed below, risk is also mitigated by allowing participants to skip questions or withdraw from the study, and by asking questions focused on the participant's response to the assault, not questions about the assault itself. The resources are as follows:

Crisis Connection: Offers 24-hours phone counseling, 612-369-6363

Rape & Sexual Assault Crisis Line: Offers 24-hour phone counseling, 612-825-4357
 Walk-in Counseling Center: Offers counseling with no fee or appointment necessary,
 612-870-0565

Neighborhood Involvement Program: Offers sliding fee counseling services, 612-374-3125

There are no direct benefits, but participants will receive a copy of the final paper if they wish.

Confidentiality:

The types of confidential records are: consent forms, written notes, audio-tapes, and transcriptions. Only the researcher will have access to these records. All records will be destroyed by 5-1-14.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until one week following the interview. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you will be destroyed and will not be used in the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions:

My name is Kiana Williams. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ###-###-####. You may also contact my advisor, Katharine Hill, at 651-962-5809. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to being audio taped. I am at least 18 years of age.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Professionals/Advocates

1. How would you define sexual assault?
2. Can you describe your professional experiences related to the issue of sexual assault in the African American community?
3. What is your racial ethnicity?
4. How does your racial ethnicity impact your perspective on sexual assault in the African American community?
5. In your experience, what stereotypes are held about African American women in society? How do these stereotypes affect African American women?
6. In your opinion, what stereotypes are held about sexual assault survivors? How do these stereotypes affect survivors?
7. In your experience, what barriers (personal, societal, systemic, etc.) hinder African American women from speaking up after being sexually assaulted?
8. What message is important for African American survivors to know in order to encourage them to speak up about their assault?
9. What characteristics have you seen in African American women who have spoken up after being sexually assaulted? Are there any particular traits or environmental factors that these women have in common? What are their strengths?
10. Are there any key stakeholders, factors or components that must be present for African American survivors to speak up? If so, please elaborate.
11. What is important for practitioners, working with African American sexual assault survivors, to know?
12. Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to express related to this topic?

Interview Questions for Survivors

1. In general, how would you describe yourself before the assault? After the assault?
2. In relation to your experience, how would you define sexual assault?
3. In your experience, what stereotypes are held about African American women in society? How do these stereotypes affect you? In what ways?
4. In your opinion, what stereotypes are held about sexual assault survivors? How have these stereotypes affected you? In what ways?
5. What barriers (personal, societal, systemic, etc.) hinder African American women from speaking up after being sexually assaulted? Did you encounter any of these barriers? If so, please explain.
6. How did you decide to speak up about your experience? Did you tell a friend, write a poem, file a police report, etc.?
7. What encouraged you to speak up after being sexually assaulted? Are there any personal traits, beliefs, or environmental factors that contributed to you speaking up instead of remaining silent?
8. Who are the important stakeholders that supported you, as an African American survivor? (Family, friends, public health professionals, community outreach, police, churches, etc.)
9. How knowledgeable do you believe the African American community is on the topic of sexual assault?
10. What is important for practitioners, working with African American sexual assault survivors, to know?
11. Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to express related to this topic?

