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Exploring the Academic Experience of College Student Survivors of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

This article reports findings from an exploratory study of six undergraduate college students who described their academic experience after undergoing an incident of sexual violence while in college. Eight essential constituents comprise the academic experiences the six participants described: negative emotional and mental health consequences, shame and self-blame, isolation from classmates and professors, impaired ability to focus on academic tasks, losing motivation and questioning academic goals, finding ways to cope, healing and reconnection, and academic identity as more than GPA.

Subject Areas

Education

Keywords

Sexual Violence, College Student, Academic Experience

1. Introduction

Sexual violence is an all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse [1]. Research suggests that students attending universities that have more sexual violence resources are better supported following an incident of sexual violence [2]. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a federal civil-rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity that receives federal funding, addresses sexual violence, sexual harassment, and any gender-based discrimination that may deny a person access to educational benefits and opportunities [3]. Title IX also protects students' rights to pursue their education free

from discrimination and harassment across all academic, educational, extracurricular, athletic, and other programs, whether the program or activity takes place on or off campus. Educational institutions are required to provide survivors of sexual violence with remedies that can facilitate the pursuit of their education. In addition, they are required to provide appropriate academic accommodations, such as options to avoid contact with the accused individual, and modifications to the survivor's academic or living situation or both, so survivors can successfully complete their coursework and graduate from college [3]. Little to no research has specifically addressed the academic experience of students after an incident of sexual violence [4].

2. Literature Review

Research on Sexual Violence during College

Approximately 21% of female undergraduates and 7% of male undergraduates report being sexually assaulted while in college [5]. Research suggests multiple negative outcomes from experiences of sexual violence while students are in college. Survivors of sexual violence commonly experience physical health impairments, negative psychological consequences, and adverse impacts on social relationships [6]. Researchers [7] found that female students who were sexually assaulted prior to college and those who were assaulted during their first semester had lower GPAs after their first semester than did women without a sexual-assault experience. Other researches [8] found that students who experienced an incident of sexual violence had lower GPAs after the incident and were more likely to leave their university than students who experienced an incident of physical/verbal abuse by an intimate partner. The researchers also found that students who experienced physical/verbal abuse by a partner or an incident of sexual violence during their first year were more likely to leave their university than students at other academic levels who experienced an incident of physical/verbal abuse by a partner or an incident of sexual violence [8]. The negative impact of sexual violence on academic performance and persistence has been documented in additional studies, as well [9] [10] [11].

Survivors of campus violence, including sexual violence, often leave school by either dropping out or taking a leave of absence to move back home to recover, regroup, or transfer to a different school [12]. Data collected through a sexual-assault education and prevention course provided to more than 530,000 college students on more than 400 campuses across the United States confirm that many survivors of sexual violence transfer out of the institution where they were victimized [13]. If survivors remain in school, they can have problems concentrating, studying, and attending classes [12], which in turn results in lower semester and final-term GPAs [9]. For college student survivors of sexual violence, attempts to avoid the individual who committed the violent act can result in the survivors avoiding academic and social activities that are an integral part of a college education [12]. Somatic symptoms for survivors of sexual violence

can include having difficulty concentrating, taking longer to think, and experiencing restlessness, fatigue, and insomnia [14].

The current study utilized a qualitative research design to look beyond the academic performance indicators of GPA and persistence through graduation to understand the impact of sexual violence on the overall academic experience of college students. Academic experience refers to all aspects of a student's academic journey from enrollment through graduation; this experience can be more fully understood only by asking college student survivors to describe their lived academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence.

3. Research Questions

This study was the first to interview college student survivors of sexual violence about their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence. The primary research question was "How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence?"

4. Methodology

4.1. Population and Sample Identification

In phenomenological research, the goal is to describe the structure of an experience, not the characteristics of the group who had the experience [15]. Therefore, fewer participants are needed and a small sample size allows the researcher to focus on the individual experiences [16] [17] through extensive, in-depth interviewing that fully captures the life experiences of the participants [18]. The objective of participant selection is to obtain richly varied descriptions of the phenomenon by choosing an array of individuals, typically from 5 participants to 25 participants, who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored [15].

The actual number of participants in a phenomenological study depends upon the nature of the research problem and the potential yield of findings; the number is not always possible to determine before one conducts the data analyses [19]. Researchers may deliberately continue to recruit participants to uncover a broad range of experiences for a fuller understanding of the research topic [19] while seeking saturation. Saturation occurs when sufficient redundancy is achieved to fulfill the research goals [19].

Study participants were recruited during the fall and spring semesters of the 2018-2019 academic year through fliers posted at nonprofit organizations whose mission is to support survivors of sexual violence, and on college and university campuses. Participants had to be currently enrolled, undergraduate college students, age 18 and older, who had survived an incident of sexual violence while enrolled in college. Participants were not asked details of the incident; they were asked questions only about their academic experience following the incident of sexual violence.

4.2. Data Collection

Several ethical issues were taken into consideration to protect participants' confidentiality as well as their wellbeing. First, the project was cleared through IRB processes to ensure ethical procedures were identified. Next, participants were presented an informed consent document that notified participants of their rights, including the right to remove themselves from the study at any point, the details of the study, and a list of support resources for survivors of sexual violence. Third, the researchers did not collect information regarding college or university attended. Fourth, the consent forms were stored separately from the interview data and the interview data was stored on a password-protected computer in password-protected files on the hard drive.

The first author [4] conducted semi structured interviews (from 1 hour to 2 hours in length) which were recorded and transcribed. Participants were reminded that they were not required to share information about the incident of sexual violence unless they believed details were necessary to provide context regarding their academic experience following the incident. The definition of academic experience was reviewed and demographic information was collected.

Using the prompt "Following the incident of sexual violence," participants were asked to talk about aspects of their academic experience, such as class attendance and participation; studying, reading, and writing; talking, and interacting with professors and classmates; academic performance; GPA; selecting classes and choosing a major; and their experience with any types of academic support following the incident of sexual violence. Participants were also asked about any thoughts they had related to leaving the college or university after the incident of sexual violence; their current academic experience—how it was the same or different after the incident of sexual violence; and any additional comments about any of the topics discussed.

4.3. Data Analysis

The authors used a descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi [20] [21] [22]. Philosophically, phenomenological research allows for a holistic approach to answering the proposed research question and recognizes the unique aspects of each individual's experience while at the same time seeking greater understanding of what constitutes the essence of that experience for all participants [16]. Phenomenology is based upon the belief that psychological reality has essential features that can be faithfully discovered through rich description of meanings and subjective processes [19]. Because consciousness contributes to the meaning of objects, and "the ultimate outcome of a phenomenological analysis is to determine the meaning(s) of an experience" [20], it is more rigorous to acknowledge the role of consciousness and take it into account than to ignore it [23]. Accordingly, the current study utilized an interview format to explore participant experiences rather than collecting data through a survey with multiple-choice response options predetermined based upon the research literature.

The analysis of the data included four steps. In Step 1, transcripts were reviewed to get a general sense of the whole description of each participant's experience. In Step 2, meaning units were created by noting the places in the transcripts where a change of meaning occurred. In Step 3, meaning units were transformed into language that allowed for a more generalizable understanding of the feelings and thoughts that underlay what the participants had experienced. These then became essential constituents of the data. In Step 4, after all meaning units were transformed, those that represented essential constituents of the academic experiences of participants following the incident of sexual violence were used as the basis for describing the general structure of the academic experience of participants following the incident of sexual violence [17].

5. Results

Six female college students responded to the recruitment efforts. All of the students met the participant requirements and were interviewed. The interviews of these six participants provided sufficient redundancy to achieve saturation.

5.1. Demographics

The six participants were female, college student survivors of sexual violence who were currently enrolled at their university. Two of the participants identified as Mexican American or Latina, two as White or Caucasian, one as half White/half Latina, and one as Filipino American. Four participants were age 20, one was age 22, and one was age 28. Two participants were in their sophomore year of college, three were in their junior year, and one was in her senior year. The time that had passed since the incident of sexual violence to the time of the interview ranged from 2 months to 2 years. Table 1 displays participant information.

Table 1. Participant overview.

	Gender	Age	Self-Identified	Year in School	Time Since Incident	Year/Term Incident Occurred
P1	Female	20	Hispanic/Mexican	Sophomore	1 year	Freshman/fall
P2	Female	22	Half White/Half Latina	Senior	2 years	Sophomore/spring
P3	Female	20	Mexican American/Latina	Junior	Just over 1 year	Sophomore/fall
P4	Female	20	Filipino American	Sophomore	1½ years	Freshman /fall
P5	Female	20	White	Junior	Almost 2 years	Freshman/spring
P6	Female	28	Caucasian	Junior (not consecutive years in school)	2 months	Junior/ break between fall and spring

5.2. Results for Research Question

The authors identified eight essential constituents of the academic experience of these college student survivors of sexual violence following an incident of sexual violence. These essential constituents include the following: 1) negative emotional and mental health consequences; 2) shame and self-blame; 3) isolation from classmates and professors; 4) impaired ability to focus on academic tasks; 5) losing motivation and questioning academic goals; 6) finding ways to cope; 7) healing and reconnection; and 8) academic identity as more than GPA. These constituents are discussed in further detail in the following subsections. Participant quotes provide a context for a more complete understanding of each essential constituent. The eight essential constituents were used as the basis to create a single general structure that describes the psychological essence of the academic experience of participants following the incident of sexual violence.

5.2.1. Eight Essential Constituents

Negative Emotional and Mental Health Consequences

The negative emotional and mental health consequences for participants following the incident of sexual violence included experiences of shock, denial, confusion, fear, anxiety, and insomnia, along with other mental health challenges such as depression. For most participants, these consequences were most acute in the days and weeks immediately following the incident. Some participants found it difficult to get out of bed. For example, Participant 3 (P3) said, "My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed... I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go... And then I just wouldn't go." She also found herself "getting irritated with everything," and she began missing classes and work. P3 was not able to predict what would trigger her emotionally after she was sexually assaulted. Her depression would come and go in waves, such that one day she was "super fun and bubbly and myself," and the next day she would find herself not wanting to talk to anyone and "just crying the whole night." Participant 1 (P1) talked about falling into depression: "I was so used to doing so many things; and then after the incident, it was really hard for me to just get back up and do all the things that I used to do." Participant 5 (P5) talked about being in denial about what happened:

> For two weeks I was like, "n-n-no, that couldn't have happened." I just kept trying to grab the memories from my head as to exactly what happened. I couldn't focus on [school]. The only thing I could think about was what had happened.

P5 was seeing a counselor at the time to assist with her adjustment to college. Because she was not ready to process what had happened to her, initially she told the counselor a different version of events. Later, when she shared the real details, the counselor made P5 doubt what she knew to be true—that she had been sexually assaulted. This self-doubt contributed further to her sense of confusion and made it even more difficult for her to attend class or talk to peers or focus

on anything but the sexual violence.

Participant 6 (P6) described feeling in a "dark place" and not having the ability to pull herself out of that place in the initial days and weeks following the incident. The incident "brought up a lot of my panic disorder, and so I started having anxiety attacks just randomly." She was fearful about leaving her house and going places by herself:

> You feel like some outer experience is controlling your ability to function. It just sucks to not feel like you have control over your life... I would think that maybe he could get into my car and be in the backseat like you see in the movies; so I didn't feel safe parking on campus. He has another remote key to my car, so also he could just get in whenever; so, I don't know, I just ... I didn't feel safe on campus. I knew that he knew my schedule, as well; so it just made me not want to be there at all.

Shame and Self-Blame

Participants' feelings of shame and self-blame exacerbated their negative mental health consequences, prompted isolation from friends and professors, and held the participants back from seeking help. They felt ashamed because they blamed themselves for the respective incidents. They felt that they drank too much alcohol or did not say no clearly enough, or that they had shown affection before the incident that was mistaken for consent. They replayed the incident in their minds, thinking about what they could have done differently to try to prevent the incident of sexual violence, even when they knew intellectually it was not their fault. This sense of shame participants experienced was exacerbated by the negative reactions they received when they disclosed their sexual assault to others. Once they had received a negative response, they were less likely to trust others to respond well. This experience led to a sense of their needing to handle the situation on their own. For instance, Participant 2 (P2) blamed herself because she did not use her voice to say no; but she also shared, "I was afraid that if I were to say no, that he would have just kept going anyways; and that scared me more than just letting it happen." When P2 shared with her mom that she had been sexually assaulted, her mother "basically told me it was my fault and blamed me; and so from that, I blamed myself." P2 was aware that she needed help, but her shame and self-blame kept her from connecting with support resources.

A couple of participants described how friends discounted their experience, and that resulted in shame and self-blame. P5 felt ashamed when her friends insinuated that she was overreacting to her boyfriend sexually assaulting her. A friend of hers, who was also friends with the boyfriend who sexually assaulted her, responded by saying, "So? He's your boyfriend. You have to have sex with him. Stop complaining about it." The friend also told P5 she was overreacting, and that it did not matter that she was drunk because she "technically never said no, so it's fine." From that point forward, P5 decided not to tell anyone else about the assault. When Participant 4 (P4) disclosed to friends that she had been

sexually assaulted, she found that her friends "brush[ed] it off" because they were friends with the student who perpetrated the assault. They downplayed the seriousness of what happened by saying, "He's just a creep" or a "weirdo," which implied to P4 that either they thought she was overreacting or they did not believe her. P4 felt a sense of betrayal.

P1 described a painful incident in a course. In class, her professor was reviewing the Title IX statement on the course syllabus; the professor was intending to notify students that, if they disclosed an incident of sexual violence, he would have to report it to the institution's Title IX Coordinator. While talking about this obligation, he said, "It's a shame, though, about how some girls might report that and use it to their advantage, even though an incident may have not been true." The professor's statement made P1 particularly uncomfortable because friends of the person who sexually assaulted her were in the same class. She feared that hearing this from a professor might lead them to conclude that she made up the story that she had been sexually assaulted.

In another example, P3 described herself as a "proud Latina," and she did not want others to pity her because she had been sexually assaulted:

> It was definitely like faking it till I made it because as much as I wanted people, professors that knew me, to maybe kind of "know," to be more lenient, it was still like, "Well, no, I don't want to talk about it. I feel ashamed about it. I don't want pity. My pride is too high. I don't want that." So... because I just didn't want people to know, I just did my best to try to be the old me.

Isolation from Classmates and Professors

Following the incident of sexual violence, participants did not want to interact with their friends and classmates for fear that someone would notice a difference in them and figure out that they had been sexually assaulted. They were not ready to talk about what had happened to them. They needed space to process their emotions, so they limited interactions with others to allow them to focus on their own emotional and mental health needs. They became less likely to participate in study groups and reach out to a classmate to discuss questions about their coursework. Daily tasks such as getting to and from classes took all their energy and left them feeling exhausted. P3 stated that she was "stepping back, secluding" herself after the assault. Instead of walking to and from class with friends or classmates, she just focused on getting herself to class and back home. For P6, limiting interactions with others was critical to ensuring her safety. She was in the process of securing emergency housing in a confidential location to keep her away from the person who sexually assaulted her. P5 described feeling as if it was her against the world after her assault. People tried to help her, but she was not accepting the help. She would say she was fine, nothing happened, and ask people to leave her alone.

> I didn't want anything to do with anyone. Didn't want to run into anyone. I felt like somebody would somehow know that something with me had

> changed, and I didn't want them to know because I didn't want to talk about it, so I just hid... One of my classmates straight-up texted me, asking me if I died, because I hadn't attended class in like 2, 3 weeks. I eventually ended up trying to reconnect with some of my classmates, but I never really told them what happened, either, because I wasn't about to tell a bunch of strangers. They did their best to help get me back on my feet; but I wasn't really accepting their help, either. I didn't really want to talk to anyone or get help from anyone or have anything to do with anyone, because I was afraid that they would somehow find out what happened.

Participants who were sexually assaulted in their first semester of college (P1, P4) were still in the process of meeting other freshmen and making friends at their university. They had yet to establish friend groups, which made the isolation even more emotionally challenging. P4 lived with two roommates in her dorm room, so it was difficult for her to find time to be alone. She shared that she had an expensive bill for Uber services that semester. She would take an Uber to get away from campus and walk around the city by herself to cry alone and process her thoughts and emotions. She did not want her roommates to see her upset. P1 described her experience:

> For me, I don't know if isolated is the right word; I was too nervous, I guess, to make new friends here at school because I didn't know who knew what; and I've heard other people just talk about knowing my situation. I didn't really do study groups or anything, and I felt like it was easier to focus on myself and my academics.

In addition to social challenges with classmates, participants also had to manage interactions with their professors. Because of the power differential between professors and students, participants experienced stress about how to manage these interactions. Participants were concerned about what the professor would think of them if they shared that they were sexually assaulted. Even to share that they were experiencing depression or anxiety, without revealing the source of the depression or anxiety, was challenging, given the stigma surrounding mental illness. On the one hand, participants felt that sharing what they were going through would help the professors understand the reasons behind the change in their academic performance and perhaps allow some leeway on deadlines for coursework. On the other hand, though, this type of disclosure required trust and vulnerability on the part of the students. P2 took the approach of letting her professors know something was going on without telling them any details:

> When I didn't feel up for it, I just wouldn't go. I would still reach out to them; but usually I would just send emails from afar and just say, "I'm going through a hard time. I can't show up."

P1 had difficulty communicating with her professors because she was afraid they would think she was making up excuses not to go to class. As a result, she never communicated with them about how much she was struggling academi-

cally. P3 and P5 had professors ask them directly whether they were doing okay following the incident of sexual violence. P3 described herself as a student who always has something to say in class; so when her level of participation and engagement in class changed, it was noticeable. The teacher made statements such as "You're not participating like you normally would," and this made her think, "Oh; I don't want to go to the next class because they're just going to call me out again... and I don't want people next to me to know." Participant 5 had a similar experience. She would always talk with her professors before and after class to maintain a relationship with them. After the incident, she stopped talking with them, and it was a noticeable change in her behavior:

> I kinda scurried in and out of the room when I did attend class. Because one of my professors was my advisor; he even talked to me. He was like, "Are you okay? You haven't been attending class. You always talk to me about class afterwards with any questions you have or anything you want to learn more about, and you haven't been doing that. Are you okay?" I definitely lied. I said, "Yeah, I'm fine" and just kind of scurried on through.

Impaired Ability to Focus on Academic Tasks

As participants experienced these negative emotional and mental health consequences, their performance on academic tasks was impaired. Participants found themselves staring at their laptops unable to complete an assignment, or sitting in classes and not absorbing any of the information being shared by the professors. Some participants described their lack of focus as due to their constantly thinking about the incident of sexual violence and the aftereffects. Others experienced more of a sense of being "checked out" mentally, in which they were not thinking about the incident, or anything else; they described more a sense of not really feeling present in their own mind. This was frustrating for participants because they were good students who expected to perform well on assignments, and they were not processing the course information in the same way they had before the incident.

Although capable of doing the work, P4 began copying work from her classmates rather than trying to do it on her own. Eventually, she was caught cheating on a homework assignment. "When I got caught for it, it really woke me up in the fact of I could have done this assignment easily. But I just wasn't into it for some reason. What is this thing that's distracting me?" She realized she had not been absorbing any of the content of her classes over the past year (since the incident), and she ended up changing her major.

Similarly, P5 said she "barely made it out" of the semester in which she was sexually assaulted. She described turning in an essay that was due right after the incident, and her professor commented on the change in performance because she "usually writes pretty good essays." She explained, "Everything else just seemed not important in the slightest because I was freaking out, trying to figure out, 'Am I pregnant from this?'... with all of these 'what ifs,' looking at a book for a test ... was just pointless."

P6 described feeling confused about her "entire life" after she was sexually assaulted. "I guess I just got confused about my entire life, and where I wanted to go, and what I wanted to do, if anything, because I wanted to give up." She would procrastinate about completing her assignments, and sleep to avoid thinking about what she needed to do. Then she would wake up all through the night at odd hours and stay awake for no reason.

Two participants described their experiences with emotionally triggering content in their courses. These triggers could be related to a class discussion, or even smells and sounds that unlocked a memory or reminder of the sexual assault. P6 described feeling unsure about what would trigger her emotionally. She said there could be "any topic, and something, just one word, might trigger a feeling and so I just ... I can't focus." She would "have all these feelings inside" and no longer be able to hear the professor. According to P6, when she was triggered, "It's like I'm not there." Similarly, P4 described a course in which they were viewing a documentary and reading a novel about violence against women in cultures around the world. P4 decided she had to miss class on the days this topic was discussed.

Losing Motivation and Questioning Academic Goals

Following the incident of sexual violence, participants described losing their motivation and sense of academic purpose. Placing pressure on themselves to excel in academics meant participants could potentially face additional shame and negative emotions if they failed to meet their goals. By limiting academic risks, they could feel more in control of their academic work and be required to complete only academic tasks they knew they could handle. When participants did exert full effort toward their academic work, they were left feeling drained. They needed to conserve their energy to be sure they could complete their other academic tasks.

Losing motivation. P1 remembered some points in time where she would "feel really good" and put her full effort into her work, and then there would be times where she just was not capable of that same level of effort. She found that accessing her passion and putting her best effort into the work drained her too much. She opted to "stick to more like, I wouldn't say the bare minimum, but just enough work to get by. I do have that passion to put in all the work, but sometimes when I do it just drains me a little."

P2 described the change in her approach to completing her schoolwork this way: "Following the incident, I would just say my level of care and consideration for the work that I produced changed, whereas before, I would really want to give my professors my best." Before the incident, "I was proud of what I could show if I really put my work into it; and I wanted them to know me as my smartest self, my best self." After the incident, P2 started taking classes that she knew would not be as challenging for her. She registered for classes she knew she could pass, rather than registering for those that genuinely interested her. She opted for a service learning site that was familiar to her rather than one that would present a new challenge. "I was just choosing whatever I could to take the

easy route, and doing the least I could just because I didn't want to put in the effort because I just didn't find the significance in it anymore."

Questioning academic goals. In addition to limiting academic risks, participants reevaluated their choices of major and future professional path. They had lost confidence in their abilities and wondered whether they would be able to succeed on their chosen career path. P5 described second-guessing her choice of major. "What am I going to do if one of my clients comes to me and says, 'Hello, Doctor; I just got raped. Please help me get through it,' [when] I couldn't get through it?"

P3 had been passionate and excited about her major, and then, after the incident, she lost some of that passion and instead worried about whether she could even be successful in that field. "It just got to a point where it was just so difficult that a part of me did just give up on trying because I was like, 'I'm not succeeding. I can't do this.'"

P6 questioned whether she should continue with classes at all when what she really wanted to do was stay home and try to feel safe and secure. "I just felt unsure of myself. If I was even capable or if I even wanted, I guess, to go into the profession that I was going towards, because I wasn't sure that I could handle it."

P1 described her thoughts around changing her major. "When the incident happened, it happened in my first semester here at school. I did end up declaring [a major], but because of the incident, I started to struggle with some of my classes." She explained how she took an introductory course for her major and did not do well. She said, "so then it kind of pushed me down to think like, 'Oh, if I can't even get through this class, how am I going to want to major in it?' So I switched back to undeclared."

Thoughts about leaving school. P1, P4, and P5 considered leaving their universities following their incidents of sexual violence. P1 stated, "I did consider leaving. I wanted to leave mostly because, not for the academics, but just the social aspect." P1 was sexually assaulted by a male friend. Some of their mutual friends were upset with her for reporting the incident to the university. Despite these social challenges, P1 decided to stay at her university because of her professors. She felt that she had their support even if she did not tell them exactly why it was needed.

P4 also shared that she thought of leaving her university "all the time, even now." She was sexually assaulted in the dorms, so she had to move off campus to escape the reminders of her assault. She felt that the only way she could continue at school was to live alone. The individual who had sexually assaulted her was in two of her classes. It was her first semester in college, and she felt pressure not to "make a big deal" about what he had done to her because they shared the same friend group. P4 kept "moving on" through her first semester of college with a "constant wall up." She was afraid to speak in class or engage with classmates in any way that could make her feel vulnerable. She said, "I didn't feel like I wanted to connect to my professors at all because part of me felt still mad at the school, and just mad at everybody, just mad at the world."

P5 also considered leaving her university. She had been sexually assaulted in her own dorm room and "wanted to get as far away from everything as possible. ... I didn't want to have to see the building, want to walk by the room that it happened, didn't want to see the people who knew my ex."

Finding Ways to Cope

Over time, participants realized they had to find ways to cope with the aftereffects of the incidents of sexual violence if they wanted to remain in school. They had to contact professors, study for assignments, write papers, and reengage with classmates. This process was different for each participant, occurred over different timelines, and required support from others.

Formal support. For some participants, accessing formal support resources, such as counseling, helped them to heal following the incident. P3 utilized counseling services at her university, though she was hesitant at first because she felt ashamed that she needed counseling. She was afraid of the stigma associated with using counseling services despite the fact that she often had recommended the services to other students. At the encouragement of her professor, however, she agreed to make an appointment for counseling.

P4 worked with a university counselor and said, "I do still go to counseling. And it's not really just about what happened to me. But it's how what had happened to me is still intertwined with everything."

P6 had already been connected with support resources before the incident of sexual violence, so she decided to disclose the incident to her caseworker after it happened. Once she disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted, she was referred to a counselor who specialized in healing from sexual violence. The counselor worked at a community agency but would come to her campus to meet with students. P6 also had an academic support worker who assisted with getting her books, reaching out to professors, and being there for her when she needed to talk. The support staff reached out to a professor on behalf of P6, which helped her to feel confident enough to speak with the professor on her own.

Informal support. For the participants who did not utilize formal support resources, such as counseling or a victim advocate, the support of friends was essential to their healing from their incidents of sexual violence. P5 described her experience of regaining trust in others and how that helped her recover academically. She said she began trying in her classes and studying for exams about a year after the incident. "I essentially decided I wanted to start trying somewhere in the middle of the second semester of sophomore year—about a year after, because I had friends who were helping me through it." Those relationships helped her "take my mind off of it a little bit so I can start focusing on schoolwork again, instead of just how much I couldn't trust anyone anymore."

P2 also credited the support of friends with helping her to recover. She said, "It feels good, but it definitely took a whole 2 years and a lot of support around me; ... I really owe it to the people around me to have helped put myself back up, as well as myself."

Healing and Reconnection

As participants healed from the incident of sexual violence, they were able to reconnect with classmates and friends, and they regained a sense of control in their lives. For P5, her academic recovery was due to the support system of her friends. She had a new boyfriend and no longer stayed in contact with friends who supported her ex-boyfriend after the incident of sexual violence. As she reconnected with a new set of friends and a supportive partner, P5 was able to renew her focus on academics. "It's definitely better. I'm definitely actually trying in my classes now. ... I'm able to try in my classes, study for exams. It's definitely gotten a lot better. It took like a year."

The participants reminded themselves of the academic goals they had set before the incident, and they could see a future in which they could be successful in their academic pursuits. P1 described how attending her university had been a long-term goal since high school. "I didn't want to let something really control my whole life, so that's why I've been trying to just stay out here and finish."

P4 also shared that, as she healed, she was determined not to let the incident change the path she had created for herself. She stated, "Before that incident even had happened, my education, my career plan, was always there. And I'm not gonna let that change because of what he did to me." She described that "my grades are a lot better. And that's just because I'm more into my classes. ... And my internship now is because I reached out, and got my own mentor, and got myself on track."

The process of healing and reconnection was unique for each participant, and the timeline varied. For P5, it took about a year for her to reengage academically. P6 was interviewed about two months after this current sexual assault. She felt that her experience recovering from an incident of sexual violence in the past, as a teenager, helped her to move through the stages of healing more quickly than if this had been the first such incident she had experienced.

For some, the changes that occurred within them as students felt permanent; and though they were able to readjust to their academic life, they did so as a different type of student. P3 and P2 described the changes they experienced as more permanent. P3 spoke of trying to be like her "old self" after the incident. She described the aftereffects of the sexual assault as "still lingering," in that she never really recovered her confidence. "I wish it was over with, but it's not. I know it's different times for everybody. So it's just kind of like it still lingers in a way." She described herself as being different in school, "and I feel like I'm a bit slower, and I think that brings down my confidence in classes." She also indicated how the difference plays out personally, "but then also, definitely aside from academic, definitely personally, I do feel a little bit different just in the things that I do or say or how I deal with stuff..."

P2 said the student she was her freshman year "never really returned" after the incident of sexual violence. She accepted the changes that had occurred and found peace with the new type of student she had become following the incident:

Now we're just ready for the next step after college and moving on from

> there. ... I really have never gotten back to that freshman year self who just wanted to be on top of everything and wanted to care about everything and wanted to give my best. That person just never really returned. I've adapted to who I am now ... who I am in school, at least ... my academic self. I would just say that she never came back after it happened. Now we're just working with a different type of person.

Academic Identity as More Than GPA

A college student's GPA is a critical marker of academic success. For participants who were receiving financial aid, maintaining a specified GPA was required to receive their funding. P4 said that keeping her scholarship was "why I really kept it together." For P3, her GPA fell below a 3.0, and she lost a scholarship she had been receiving. She had to take out a loan to cover the difference. When she lost her funding, P3 was "shaken up," and she rededicated herself to her studies. She was able to make all A's in following semesters to raise her GPA back above a 3.0, but that did not change the fact that she had already lost her scholarship.

Participants recognized that their academic identities were tied to a number that would forever remain on their academic transcripts as an inaccurate reflection of their academic abilities. For participants who usually did well in school, even a small decline in GPA would serve as a reminder of the permanent damage that resulted from the incident of sexual violence. P1 described her sense of awareness regarding her GPA. "My GPA from my first school year—last year, ended with like a 3.0. It kind of made me feel a little bad because it was pretty low for me; but then I looked back and I realized that I was handling a lot." She went on to explain,

> Well, I know I'm trying to do my part, but I know the world won't see that in a way; and I can't explain to everybody, and I wouldn't want to really explain to everybody, why I didn't do so well. That's a little overwhelming.

In summary, the data revealed students experienced a multitude of outcomes, essential constituents, in their academic life following an incident of sexual violence. These outcomes include negative emotional and mental health consequences; shame and self-blame; isolation from classmates and professors; impaired ability to focus on academic tasks; losing motivation and questioning academic goals; finding ways to cope; healing and reconnection; and academic identity as more than GPA.

5.2.2. Statement of the General Structure

The following summary paragraph, based upon the eight essential constituents, describes the psychological essence of the academic experience of participants following the incident of sexual violence.

Following an incident of sexual violence, a college student survivor of sexual violence experiences negative emotional and mental health consequences, including shock, denial, confusion, fear, anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Their

attention is pulled away from academics toward concerns of personal safety and health. They replay the incident in their mind, wondering what they could have done differently, despite knowing intellectually it was not their fault. This sense of self-blame is the basis of the shame they feel. The student does not want anyone to know what happened. They genuinely fear how others will respond if they disclose the incident. They know they should get help, but they do not want to talk about it. The student retreats into isolation to protect themselves and they cannot trust others to help. At the same time, the student knows that if they want to remain in college, they will have to return to class and interact with classmates and professors. They put up an emotional wall and only speak in class when doing so is essential to passing their courses. The student has difficulty focusing and concentrating on academic tasks. They feel emotionally drained if they put their full effort and passion into academic work, so their motivation wanes. They start to question their ability to succeed at anything and worry about failing in their chosen career path. They think about quitting school and realize they must find a way to cope with the aftereffects of the sexual violence if they want to graduate from college. The college student survivor of sexual violence may cope on their own, through friends, or through formal support resources. Over time, they begin to heal and start to regain trust in others and feel more in control of life. As they heal and rebuild their support network, the college student survivor of sexual violence may no longer be the same student they were before the incident of sexual violence; but they find a new way to engage in academic life. The student is aware of the impact of the incident of sexual violence on their GPA, and they must accept that their GPA may no longer accurately reflect who they are as a student.

6. Discussion

6.1. Key Findings

This exploratory study builds on the literature that has examined the impact of sexual violence on college students. Several research studies have demonstrated that experiencing an act of sexual violence is associated with lower college GPA and increased likelihood of withdrawal from the university [7] [8] [9]. Lower college GPA negatively impacts acceptance to upper-division and graduate programs and can result in both immediate financial impacts through loss of scholarships and other funding, and longer-term financial impacts if the affected students are no longer able to pursue higher paying professions. Researchers [9] conducted two studies to examine the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance and found that sexual violence predicted GPA at graduation, even when other established predictors of academic performance were taken into account. Additionally, exposure to more types of sexual violence predicted poorer college academic performance. The researchers also found that sexual violence was the only factor related to why those students in the study who left college did so [9].

In the current study, a detailed description of participants' thoughts about their GPA reveals that most of them were quite aware that a drop in their GPA could mean a loss of funding (scholarships and financial aid). The results of this study also reveal the emotional impact of having a lower GPA following an incident of sexual violence. For these participants, their academic identity was misrepresented by a GPA that did not accurately reflect their true academic abilities. They were left with a permanent reminder of the negative impact of the incident of sexual violence on their academic experience.

When asked whether they thought of leaving their universities, the three participants who were sexually assaulted in their first year of college said yes. For the remaining participants, the incidents of sexual violence did not occur in their first year of college. When asked the same question, two participants said they considered a temporary leave of absence with an intention to return to their university, and one participant did not consider leaving her university. This finding may offer limited support for the findings of researcher [8], who found that students who experience an incident of violence during their first year in college are more likely to leave the institution than students who experience an incident of violence at other academic levels. For two participants who were sexually assaulted in the first semester of their first year of college, their decision to stay at their universities was related to the academic opportunities available to them. Both participants cited the social aspects of their college experience as what made them want to leave their schools.

Research has suggests that most survivors of sexual assault experience symptoms of PTSD immediately following the assault, and that most survivors also experience a decline in symptoms over time [24]. Participants in the current study experienced intense negative psychological and emotional consequences following the incident of sexual violence, with a reduction in symptoms over time. Depending on when in the academic term the incident occurred, students reported both different and differing levels of impact on their academic performance. Although initially after the incident of sexual violence participants attempted to cope on their own, they eventually sought help in the form of talking with friends and family, or with a formal support resource such as a counselor. Participants described the support they received from friends as a critical aspect of their healing process. When the incident of sexual violence occurred later in the semester, students had completed the bulk of the work for the course, and thus the most severe negative emotional and mental health consequences they experienced affected fewer course assignments.

Research by [25] suggests that survivors of sexual assault feel a sense of vulnerability and begin to constrict their daily activities, staying at home, and avoiding situations that resemble the setting of their assault. Participants for the current study talked about the sacrifice of collaborative learning opportunities and potential relationships with other students and faculty after their incidents of sexual violence. They described not attending classes, going places by themselves instead of walking with friends, and refraining from engaging in social events

and campus activities. Other changes in their daily life included the inability to focus when they were doing their schoolwork and when they encountered emotionally triggering content in their courses. They would feel overwhelmed with emotion and find they could not pay attention to their professors during class. Participants described the difficulty they had retaining information as they read an assignment or tried to write an essay. Their daily activities were challenged and constricted. Initially after the incident, some of these students stopped attending classes, with no communication to their professors regarding why they were absent. Others contacted their professors to let them know they were going through a hard time and had to miss class, but they did not share any details. For participants who regularly contributed to class discussions, the change in behavior was more noticeable.

Research has shown that traumatic incidents such as sexual assault are events that are understood as "happening to" a person and thus are conceptualized and interpreted in a manner that suggests the person, or self, was affected or changed in some way by the incident [26]. This description held true for participants as they described their "old self" before the incident as a different person than who they were after the incident. Participants described changes in their academic pursuits such as considering changes in majors, registering for easier courses, or selecting less challenging field-work opportunities. As quoted previously, participant P2 stated, "I really have never gotten back to that freshman-year self who just wanted to be on top of everything ... care about everything and ... give my best. That person just never really returned."

6.2. Limitations and Delimitations

The current study employed a qualitative lens and descriptive phenomenological psychological research methods. Limitations of the study are related to the small number of participants. College students with different identities and life experiences than those of the participants in this study may have different academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence. While the findings of the study are not generalizable, [16] has recommended the use of qualitative research methods to "follow up" on the findings of quantitative studies and "help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models" which allows for a more "complex, detailed understanding" of the topic being examined (p.48).

Study delimitations include that the participants had to be currently enrolled in college so they could speak about their academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. Students who had decided to quit school following an incident of sexual violence may have had a different academic experience than those who remained in school.

6.3. Contribution and Innovation of the Research

The current study was the first to interview college student survivors of sexual violence about their academic experience following an incident of sexual vi-

olence. Existing studies that have examined the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance of college students have utilized quantitative research methods to measure associations between variables. Those studies provide evidence that sexual violence is associated with poorer academic performance and increased likelihood of leaving the institution; however, as [25] stated, associations between variables "do not fully capture the dynamic and complex processes" that occur for individuals following an incident of sexual violence (p. 368).

In the current study, interviews were utilized as the method of data collection to capture subtle features of the participants' academic experiences that may not be shared spontaneously in response to questions or instructions on a survey [19]. Results of the study provide a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which sexual violence negatively impacts the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence.

6.4. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for ways in which universities may be able to improve support resources for college student survivors of sexual violence. The eight essential constituents revealed in the study can be used as the basis for educating university faculty, staff, and students about the impact of sexual violence on students' academic experience.

University faculty and staff can provide better direct support for student survivors if they understand the aftereffects of an incident of sexual violence for those students. Some faculty may be more willing and better able to provide appropriate academic accommodations if they understand the challenges individual students are facing. This includes the use of supportive language when speaking to and about the issue of sexual violence. Participants shared examples of instances in which friends of participants, a counselor, or a professor impaired the healing of a participant as a result of their lack of fundamental education and training on the issue of sexual violence. Other university employees who directly interact with students, such as Residence Life staff and other student-support employees, may be more inclined to offer alternative housing arrangements, adjust a student's course schedule, or issue directives that require no contact between the survivor and the accused individual.

Another important area for education that emerged in the study relates to developing the skills to recognize when a student would benefit from a referral to support resources. The participants in this study described how much they were struggling, and that fellow students and professors noticed something was wrong with them. Education for university employees and students should include tips on when and how to refer students to support resources. Students do not have to disclose a sexual assault for others to notice that something has changed in their behavior.

There is a need for students to access and receive assistance from academic support resources without disclosing their incident of sexual violence. Partici-

pants shared that they were hesitant to access formal support resources for reasons of shame, self-blame, and fear of a negative response. Student-support offices could emphasize in their promotional materials that students can receive academic support and assistance without being questioned about why they need the resources. For example, students can share that they are having a difficult time and discuss their anxiety, depression, and insomnia rather than having to disclose that those symptoms arose following an incident of sexual violence. Over time, as trust is built, student survivors may be more likely to want to talk about what happened to them. Even if the students choose not to share what happened, the negative impact on their GPAs could be lessened, and they could be more likely to persist through graduation with the additional academic and emotional support.

The outcomes from the current study also provide guidance regarding the types of academic support that might benefit college student survivors of sexual violence. In addition to the medical and psychological support resources, the development and promotion of academic support resources for college student survivors was revealed as a potential avenue for connecting survivors with support resources. A student survivor who is not interested in health-related resources may be open to academic support, such as assistance communicating with professors and requesting extensions on coursework deadlines. The benefits of being offered academic assistance are clear to students, and the effects are immediate. Ideally, once students see the helpfulness of the academic support, they may reconsider accessing other university support resources, as well. Other than the one participant who received a robust set of support resources (advocacy, counseling, and academic support), participants in this study who received counseling were still left to manage their academic challenges on their own.

Finally, the current study revealed the importance of quality relationships between first-year students and their faculty, and also the importance of connecting first-year students with exciting and engaging academic opportunities. The two participants in the current study who were sexually assaulted in their first semester of college considered leaving their universities. Their decision to stay at their universities was based upon the academic opportunities available to them, and on their relationships with their professors. This finding should be shared with faculty and academic leaders as further evidence of the importance of academic engagement for first-year students. This outcome is also important for support staff, to recognize the need to further support and encourage opportunities for academic engagement in their work with first-year students.

6.5. Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study provide the basis for gaining a deeper understanding of the academic experience of students who stayed enrolled at their institution following an incident of sexual violence. Future research could examine the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence who withdrew from their college or university. The academic experience of these students

compared to that of students who survived an incident of sexual violence and remained enrolled may offer unique insights into the retention of college student survivors of sexual violence.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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