Resisting Erasure: Critical Influences for Men Who Survived Sexual Violence in Higher Education

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DANIEL TILLAPAUGH

Significant attention has been paid to the issue of sexual violence on college and university campuses within the United States. However, much of this attention has reinforced the myth that only heterosexual cisgender women experience sexual violence. This study challenges this myth. In this article, I discuss this narrative constructivist inquiry study that included 15 cisgender and transgender men who survived sexual violence in US colleges and universities between 2005 and 2015. In particular, I focus on highlighting the critical influences that shaped these survivors' post-trauma lives. Four main themes emerged from the data; which include (a) situational variability; (b) institutional resources; (c) community; and (d) agency. Implications for professional practice and future research are shared.

In an editorial in *Time* in July 2014, John Kelly, a senior at Tufts University, shared his experiences of being raped twice during college. As the first man who survived sexual violence to testify before the United States Congress, Kelly (2014) expressed the anguish he suffered with his university’s inability to respond effectively to support him in his experience. In the United States, media reports on issues of sexual violence, defined as any unwanted sexual experiences (Banyard et al. 2007), at colleges and universities have been prominent for the past decade. Increased attention and enforcement of Title IX and governmental oversight has shone a spotlight on the issue at many colleges and universities. Administrators at colleges and universities have an ethical responsibility to report and counsel students who have been victims of sexual violence, and if administrators are ill-equipped to provide this type of support to all victims (particularly men, queer, and transgender students), they are not fulfilling their obligations.

Much of the current conversation around gender-based or sexual violence tends to reinforce the fallacy that women are the only victims of sexual violence on campus (Porter and McQuiller-Williams 2011; Turchik and Edwards 2012). In fact, this myth is incorrect. One in 71 men have been victimised by rape in their life while one in five men have experienced some other type of sexual violence (NISVS 2010). These rates very likely under-represent the reality of sexual assault given that men are less likely to report sexual violence (Turchik and Edwards 2012). In 2015, *The Washington Post* conducted a poll that found five per cent of college men had experienced sexual assault (*The Washington Post* 2015). However, conversations about men survivors of sexual violence (MSSV) are often absent from larger sexual violence prevention dialogues in higher education. In their work on the experiences of sexual victimisation of college students, Banyard et al. (2007) found that 33 per cent of MSSV told no one about their experiences. As a society, this lack of reporting, or silencing of survivors, plays a role in campus administrators, law enforcement, counsellors, and medical professionals being misinformed on issues related to men being sexual violence survivors (Banyard et al. 2007; Turchik and Edwards 2012).

Stories such as John Kelly’s are powerful counter-narratives to the more dominant narratives on sexual violence on campus which are stories about women survivors, yet a dearth of research exists on the experiences of MSSV in college. In fact, in a review of the current literature in 2016, only a handful of articles specifically looked at the issue of sexual violence and coercion specifically for college men (Banyard et al. 2007; Hartwick et al. 2007; Larimer et al. 1999; Porter and McQuiller-Williams 2011; Turchik and Edwards 2012). In the extant literature on men and sexual violence, much of the scholarship discusses the connections between sexual violence and coercion and alcohol use (Banyard et al. 2007; Larimer et al. 1999; Turchik and Edwards 2012) as well as gender roles and expectations (Hartwick et al. 2007). One critique of these articles is that they are either a quantitative study or a literature review; therefore, while survivors of sexual violence have disclosed their experiences, there have not been opportunities for these survivors to share their stories and have their voices heard. Given the connection that is often raised around
gender role expectations around masculinity, Kelly (2014) stated, 'The gender norms that allow men to rape at such staggering rates also creates ideals of masculinity that silence male survivors'. Therefore, it becomes imperative that studies, such as this one, give voice to those who have been silenced.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of men survivors of sexual violence (MSSV) during college. In particular, this article focuses on critical influences related to MSSVs' experiences of post-trauma.

**Methods**

For this study, I used narrative constructivist inquiry (Sparkes and Smith 2008). Narrative constructivist inquiry 'recognizes the significance of sociocultural narratives in the construction of people's lives' (Sparkes and Smith 2008: 297). Through the narratives or stories that individuals tell, they create meaning of their lived experiences, process their emotions or feelings, and come to understand the social phenomenon they experience (Sparkes and Smith 2008). In particular, the use of narrative constructivist inquiry infers a connection between the socio-political context in which one lives and operates and an individual's narrative. This is particularly important given that through these narratives, individuals may explore how they feel 'about a particular event, how it relates to their internal sense of themselves, their morality, and their sense of themselves as a person' (Crossley 2003: 289).

Given this study's purpose and the need to understand the experiences of men who are survivors of sexual violence and/or coercion in college, narrative constructivist inquiry provides a lens to examine the individual participant's experiences. This includes not only his feelings and emotions of such violence, but also the socio-political context involved. Additionally, while each of the participants may be connected by their experiences with violence, their particular situations are unique unto themselves. Narrative constructivist inquiry provides a helpful lens to understand similarities as well as distinct differences among the individual study participants (Sparkes and Smith 2008). The research question guiding this study is what were the critical influences for men who survived sexual violence in college and their healing after experiencing sexual violence?

**Recruitment of Participants**

Participants were recruited via social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit), posts through sexual violence survivor agencies and organisations, and through emails sent by higher education administrators and faculty to their students. The information distributed included a link to the study's recruitment website, and individuals self-nominated themselves to participate. The research criteria for this study required that participants (a) identified as cisgender or transgender men and (b) experienced sexual violence at a college or university within the United States between 2005 and 2015. Fifteen individuals were interviewed twice over the course of two months with in-depth questions about their experiences of sexual violence, their perceptions of sexual violence prevention programming on their campus, and their recommendations on how to better support MSSV in higher education. These interviews lasted between thirty to ninety minutes and were conducted by phone. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. As a means of verification by participants, participants were asked to review their interview transcripts for verification prior to data analysis.

**Participants**

The participants ranged in age from 20 to 33. Two of the men identified as transgender men while the other 13 identified as cisgender. Eleven of the participants identified as White, two as Hispanic or Latino, one as Black, and one as biracial. Eight of the men identified as gay, three as queer, two as bisexual, one as heterosexual, and one as 'straight or bi-curious'. Each of the participants reported at least one incident of sexual violence. Yet, two participants were violated repeatedly by their assailant multiple times over a sustained period of time.

**Data Analysis**

In analysing the data, I used Polkinghorne's (1995) concept of narrative smoothing, where I centered the research question and removed redundant or unnecessary information from the participants' transcripts by eliminating information not related directly to the research question. From there, I (along with two graduate student research assistants) engaged in initial line-by-line coding of all transcripts, identifying key codes around critical influences post-trauma. Additionally, we reviewed researchers' notes and created analytical memos throughout this process given the constructivist paradigm's emphasis on the relationship established between the researcher and the participant (Polkinghorne 1995). After the initial coding, we reviewed those codes from participant transcripts and researcher notes and began to categorise them to view broader patterns and themes. From there, we engaged in dialogue to test the four emergent themes.

**Findings**

Using the data obtained from the 15 participants in the study, four themes emerged as critical influences for the men following their experiences of sexual violence. These four themes were: (a) situational variability; (b) institutional resources; (c) community; and (d) agency.
Situational Variability

As with all survivors of trauma, there were some commonalities among the participants' experiences of violence and coping, but nuanced differences were reported; this is defined as situational variability. For each of the MSSV, this variance had an effect on how they made meaning of their experiences following their trauma. In particular, previous experiences of trauma, ongoing contact with the perpetrator, and the survivor's perception of trauma severity all played a significant role in how the survivors moved forward.

Previous experiences of trauma: Both Frankie and Greg experienced childhood sexual violence while Sam grew up in a physically and mentally abusive household. These experiences affected these men and how they made meaning of the sexual violence they survived during college. Greg's first boyfriend in college sexually assaulted him during his first year of college, which triggered repressed memories of sexual violence earlier in his life. He stated, 'I had like kind of pushed that down, repressed that ... And it all just like, just all the emotions that I had like refused to acknowledge before just slapped me in the face'. Frankie's sexual assault in college, coupled with the molestation he suffered as a child, ultimately resulted in him becoming more introspective about his sexuality and the intimate relationships he was seeking as a young adult. This introspection became important to his holistic sense of self and how his childhood sexual abuse set him on a path of unhealthy sexual behaviours.

Sam shared that he came to understand, with help from his therapist, that his childhood trauma resulted in defensive mechanisms that helped him cope with his trauma. In Sam's case, this self-awareness was important to begin minimising some of the unhealthy behaviours, including high-risk sexual behaviour and alcohol and drug abuse in which he had engaged. For both Frankie and Sam, previous experiences of trauma compounded the sexual violence they encountered during college; as a result, both men spent a great deal of energy in unpacking how their earlier traumas played a role in decisions they made as adults. The role of previous trauma is one aspect of situational variability, but ongoing contact with one's assailant also was an important factor for MSSV.

Ongoing contact with perpetrator: Ongoing contact with their perpetrator(s) played a significant critical influence in the MSSVs' lives, often in difficult ways. Many of the MSSV expressed how challenging it was to run into their perpetrators on and off campus and how it contributed to issues of sociability. For example, Raul shared that after his third boyfriend in college had sexually assaulted him, he never disclosed this experience to any of his friends. As a result, after their break-up due to the violence social occasions became problematic because their friends were unaware of the situation. Raul ended up becoming distant from his friendship group because he wanted to avoid interactions with his ex-boyfriend. This type of avoidance of social situations was not unusual for many of the survivors; however, for some participants, avoidance was impossible.

Lucas experienced sexual violence committed by a classmate. After the assault, Lucas was obliged to attend classes with his perpetrator, where he experienced a high degree of distress. He stated:

Shortly after the incident ... the teacher indirectly called me out for not being, or not participating heavily in class. At that point, I realised that I needed help because in a three hour class, I was staring at the wall and attempting coping mechanisms to deal with the situation.

These feelings of distress were often characterised by depression, anxiety, or even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These experiences connect to the research on psychological consequences of MSSV (Larimer et al. 1999). This issue is also connected to the last subtheme of the survivor's perception of trauma severity.

Survivor's perception of trauma severity: The perceived severity of the survivors' trauma from their experiences of sexual violence played a critical influence in how MSSV moved forward in their healing. Participants with sustained violence by the same perpetrator (such as Flynn or George) as well as those who had multiple sexual violence experiences (such as Greg, Sam, and Will) often discussed the impact of the violence differently than others. George's experience was substantially different than that of other participants given that a campus administrator repeatedly assaulted him during a period of a year and a half. George was resigned to believe that the continuous violence he experienced was inevitable because of his perpetrator's power and authority. Flynn similarly encountered issues around his perpetrator's power and authority as his supervisor at work. Based upon the stares and comments he received from his supervisor, he became self-conscious and changed how he dressed at work. Flynn said, 'It got to the point where I would ... purposely wear baggy pants at work because [my supervisor was] just like always staring'.

For individuals who had been assaulted multiple times by different assailants, they often measured the severity of their experiences against one another. During our interview, Sam recalled a memory about his first sexual experience in college when his boyfriend at the time forced
him to have penetrative anal sex by saying, 'if you don't do this, you don't love me'. Sam stated,

And you know, no, I didn't know that it was coercion at the time. I thought that it was just normal interaction. It was my first time. And that's how people interact with each other, you know, it's just that is ... the way that I had learned that gay men interacted. And I thought it was normal.

Sam's first sexual encounter with another man was internalised as normal and had had a significant role in his ideas of what sex was supposed to be like. This also had had an effect on his views on how gay men related to one another in intimacy, so his other experiences of sexual violence were often minimised. This lack of awareness and education is also connected to the theme of institutional resources available to men as survivors of sexual violence.

Institutional Resources

Accessing institutional resources resulted in mixed reactions for the MSSV. In particular, those who reported their incidents found that process to be problematic. Some participants found solace in disclosures to faculty members or staff, particularly those working in violence prevention spaces or multicultural centres. Most participants had no idea about how to report their experiences of sexual violence or found the process confusing.

A few of the MSSV: Aaron, Henry, George, and Flynn, chose to report their sexual violence experience within their campus processes. Yet the process for doing so was unclear. Most of the men, even those who chose not to report, worried about how they would be perceived if they reported their trauma. Some MSSV who did report encountered a lack of understanding from campus police or campus administrators. For instance, Aaron filed a report to campus police as well as a dean who both were dismissive of his concerns and unsympathetic to his situation. In the end, there was no discussion by these campus administrators to provide Aaron with further resources and supports. While some participants struggled with negative encounters with campus administrators, others had positive experiences.

Many participants commented that they largely had positive or helpful interactions with campus administrators who were engaged in trauma support roles, including violence prevention program staff and counselling. Participants who accessed support through violence prevention program staff characterised these experiences as 'incredibly validating' and 'really helpful'. Aidan shared:

I was in with this nervousness of like, you can't share all of these details because it's gross and it's completely, you know, you're a bad person, and this is a weird thing to talk about anyway. I had all of these sort of feelings and thoughts. And I think that particularly the director had a way of validating me that I appreciated.

In addition to the support from violence prevention program staff, other participants found more campus-based informal resolution programs to be helpful. Greg shared that his college had a community concern program for 'informal resolution[s]'. He was able to file a report outlining the concerns around a peer who had engaged in coercive and inappropriate behaviours toward him on multiple occasions. As a result of filing the complaint, the student was spoken to and 'since then, he has not done those things'. These types of experiences were helpful for some participants in negotiating their post-trauma lives because they started to feel some sort of control back in their lives. In many ways, this sense of control was achieved through the MSSV's support networks and community, which will be discussed next.

Community

All of the participants spoke meaningfully about the importance of community following their sexual violence. Friends often were named as key supports. Through their disclosures to others, some participants found that their friendships were tested or challenged. This is supported in the body of literature on MSSV; Walker et al. (2005) reported that MSSV often became emotionally distant from others and withdrawn from close family and friends. Henry stated, 'I found out who my friends were'. He shared a story about a friend who had actually been engaged in some collaborative research with Henry's perpetrator, and 'he removed his name from all the projects that he had with [my perpetrator]'. That level of support was particularly moving for Henry; he stated, 'I will never ever forget that'. However, not all of the participants felt as if they had the type of support networks that they wanted.

Therapy was another critical influence for the MSSV. Many of the MSSV found counselling an essential aspect of healing and coping with the aftermath of their trauma. After the first interview for this study, Greg decided to seek out a counsellor because 'I don't think that I had sat down and thought of it all at the same time before'. He felt as though the therapeutic process was beneficial because it allowed him to 'just work through some of the emotions that were left behind and some of the anxiety that it's left me with, which has been a very positive influence'. While most participants did not participate in support groups or group counselling, some participants desired to do so. For instance, Raul shared that he was 'having trouble finding
a support group'. He felt as though 'if men were a part of the conversation ... that perhaps ... the information [of programs and support groups geared to men who are sexual violence survivors] would be easier to find'.

While counselling served as an important element in some survivors' lives, finding partners who were empathic and sensitive to their identity as survivors also became critical. Many of the men acknowledged that they experienced triggers when engaging in intimate sexual behaviour after their experiences of sexual violence, which is supported by previous research on MSSV (Mezey and King 1989). George admitted that having his long-term boyfriend helped him feel more comfortable, particularly when he is triggered because, 'I can address it, and I'm comfortable enough with [my boyfriend] to address it with him and let him know he hasn't done anything wrong'. Similarly, Sam maintained that his relationship with his partner helped him end some unhealthy coping mechanisms, particularly high-risk sex and drug use. He stated:

There was something about the way that I saw myself, reflected in the way that he saw me, that I was able to find validation within myself. That is, if I could love me half as much as he loved me, then I could treat myself better.

This realisation by Sam about the importance of self-validation also had quite a bit to do with finding one's agency, which will be discussed in this next section.

**Agency**

Reclaiming a sense of control and finding one's voice as a survivor of sexual violence were highlighted as critical influences for the MSSV. Gaining a sense of control was exhibited in different ways for many of the participants. In some cases, MSSV gained control by walking away from reporting their sexual violence and eliminating negative interactions with campus police (Aaron) or campus administrators (Henry). For others, control meant having the need to be clear about boundaries with other people. Henry shared how he had to stop dating a woman because her desired expectations for their relationship exceeded the boundaries he had created to feel comfortable in an intimate relationship.

Controlling the disclosure of one's sexual violence survivor identity became important for all of the men. At first, many of the men felt a great deal of shame around their survivorship, but as they continued to disclose to others, that shame dissipated and ultimately often became empowering. Many of the men shared their stories to help educate others that men could be survivors of sexual violence. Aaron wrote an anonymous article in his campus's student newspaper during Sexual Assault Prevention Week detailing his experience. Similarly, Wade wrote a blog post sharing his story and highlighting the absence of discussion around sexual violence outside of men as perpetrator and women as victims. Aidan spoke about the power of channeling his feelings around his sexual violence through his spoken word poetry. Both Sam and Mark often would talk about their identities as survivors when speaking on campus to help shift the public perception and awareness that men can indeed be survivors.

**Implications**

There is a need for re-examining and reforming the ways that administrators and faculty in higher education promote sexual violence prevention. Currently, in the United States, many of the conversations on sexual violence in higher education centre women as victims (Harris and Linder 2017). If discussions of men and transgender survivors are not included in these conversations, this needs to be addressed immediately and integrated in all levels of the work. Micah spoke to this issue, stating:

You always hear the one in five statistic [for women]. And what they don't include is 1 in 16 men. Or you know, 50% of trans folks. That's sort of never on the board. And so that is always, for me, really triggering – as in feeling erased from the conversation.

Survivors are paying close attention to the conversations of sexual violence on their campus. If campuses are not engaging in gender expansive practice, survivors internalise that erasure and are troubled by being rendered invisible.

Likewise, higher education administrators need to review campus policies and procedures. Many institutions in higher education, particularly within the United States, centre cisgender women as survivors; therefore, there is a need to change the language of our policies to reflect the realities of all survivors. These issues are highly problematic because it upholds the hegemony around sexual violence to see only cisgender women as victims whereas this research clearly points out that there are many survivors outside of that population. Additionally, administrators need to be proactive in having students understand the various steps of the process of reporting sexual violence. If this is not understood by students or requires multiple iterations of communicating their experiences, they may be less likely to report and not find the supports to help them following their trauma.
Higher education administrators need to implement programs and services designed for men as survivors. Counselling played a key critical influence for many participants. However, counselling services are often under-resourced in higher education, and as a result, senior administrators must consider providing additional resources to strengthen collaborations between counselling and sexual violence response and education staff. Additionally, the establishment of support groups may be particularly helpful for men as survivors, particularly to overcome some of the stigma that often is internalised of being alone as a MSSV.

Administrators and faculty should also challenge systemic hegemony within campus environments. Hegemonic masculinity is deeply entrenched in many colleges and universities through programs, policies and structures. By thoughtfully examining how hegemonic masculinity plays out on their respective campus, administrators and faculty members may uncover the ways genderism, sexism, racism, and other oppressive systems affect the lives of students, particularly MSSV. Also, this work may help bring awareness to campus officials and administrators about their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes and be more inclusive of all survivors of sexual violence.

Future Research

Given that this is one of the first qualitative studies examining the experiences of college men who survived sexual violence in a number of years, more research is needed to expand our knowledge and the discourse among campus faculty and administrators. In particular, future research is needed to examine MSSV and the ways in which gender narratives, scripts, and performances influence how they make meaning of their identity as survivors of sexual violence. Gaining insights on this phenomenon would be important, particularly to assist higher education professionals in supporting MSSV more substantially. Additionally, it would be helpful to understand the long-term implications of sexual violence for men; therefore, a longitudinal study would be beneficial for those working on college and university campuses. One limitation of this study was the low number of transgender men and men of colour who self-nominated themselves to participate in this research. As a result, additional work that centres the experiences of these men and their experiences of sexual violence would be critical. Lastly, much of the current research has been framed in gender differences between men and women survivors. However, this type of work upholds a gender binary that further erases survivors who may be transgender or gender non-conforming. As a result, more studies that centre gender and view sexual violence through an inclusive gendered lens would be an important contribution to the field.

Conclusion

In our final interview, Aidan stated, ‘I think that I am still struggling to validate myself as a survivor … But I think that I am slowly getting there’. Aidan’s comments are reflective of many of the participants in this study. The process of finding their identities as survivors is an ongoing process, and the critical influences affecting their lives following their experiences of sexual violence play a role in that identity development. For higher education professionals, understanding these key influences becomes important in terms of providing resources and action-oriented strategies in possibly assisting these survivors more adequately. In honour of the courage shown by each of these men in sharing their experiences, higher education professionals must do whatever possible to learn from their stories and help end the erasure and marginalisation experienced by MSSV during college.

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EXODUS

In the dark quilt of witching hour ravens
stir black on midnight blue a full moon
lights their way Bomb tired bullet weary
most wait for thistles of daylight The sun
rises on a sea of masks set in grief a
blanket a bundle a child clutched to chests
Some with not a person left in this world

LIZZ MURPHY,
BINALONG, NSW

Astronomy Domine

I still hold that I was the one
who made you listen first.
You bought tickets
to the tribute, years later,
but I’m claiming this one for now.

Driving you home, the music was
my call. This, you need to hear.
Sitting in silence, no audacity
to break high hopes, we met
between bars and lifts.

Yes, you replied. Yes. This is it,
the maker’s mark. Point of origin.
The contact will remain,
floating down the traffic lights
on the edge of sound.

Naming planets under breath,
each is a stepping stone
in the channel. No ice.
We’ve crossed the flow, satellite
passing hand to eye.

We draw to your door, let you go,
and the sound remains. Sitting back
until the song fades down, cutting the engine
before the next begins.
Now there are no such signs.

SIOBHAN HODGE,
PERTH, WA