

# “I Could Never Tell My Parents”: Barriers to Queer Women’s College Sexual Assault Disclosure to Family Members

Violence Against Women

1–17

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## Abstract

Queer women are at high risk of college sexual victimization, but they face barriers to formal support services. As a result, informal support is critical. This study uses data from 40 open-ended interviews to explore family members’ reactions to queer women’s disclosures and examine whether their family is a reliable source of informal support. Findings indicate that family reactions are often more harmful than helpful. In comparison to research focused on heterosexual survivors, we find family reactions to be more extreme and disparaging of queer survivors’ sexual identities. In fact, family members’ negative reactions may pose barriers to accessing formal services.

## Keywords

sexual assault, LGBTQ, family, informal support, informal resources

## Introduction

Sexual violence is extremely common among queer-identified college students and is severely underresearched. Queer women, in particular, face some of the highest risks of sexual victimization during college, with 19% of lesbian women and 32% of bisexual women reporting at least one instance of sexual assault to researchers (Cantor et al.,

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2015). Despite the prevalence of queer women's sexual victimization, there are few formal resources accessible to queer survivors. Queer women experience additional barriers when seeking formal resources for sexual trauma, such as uncomfortable experiences and sexual stigma when seeking help (Logie et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2016). Fear of these common negative experiences leads some queer survivors to avoid formal service providers altogether, especially when survivors are also people of color (Calton et al., 2015; Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013). Accordingly, informal support providers are particularly important for queer survivors following a sexual assault—in many cases, they may be the only sources of support. The current study seeks to explore whether queer women view their families as suitable and effective informal support providers after experiencing sexual assault in college.

## Literature Review

### *Disclosing Sexual Violence*

Most sexual assault survivors disclose the assault to someone within their informal network, including friends, family members, and significant others (Ahrens et al., 2009; Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Dworkin et al., 2016; Ullman, 2010). Negative reactions from informal support providers (e.g., blaming, controlling responses) exacerbate the harmful psychological consequences of assault (e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress) and can lead survivors to avoid seeking additional help (Ahrens, 2006; Orchowski et al., 2013; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Ullman & Relyea, 2016). Supportive responses to disclosures (e.g., emotional support, tangible aid, belief), however, can improve survivors' psychological well-being and coping (Borja et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2001; Orchowski et al., 2013; Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2013; Ullman, 1996). Despite the centrality of parents and other family members in the lives of emerging adults, many college sexual assault survivors do not tell their families about the assault (Guerette & Caron, 2007; Smith & Cook, 2008; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). Overall, there is little research explicitly examining college sexual assault survivors' disclosure experiences with their parents and other family members. Most research on parental disclosure has been in the context of child sexual abuse (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; McElvaney, 2015; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016) or adolescent sexual assault (e.g., Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013; Rickert et al., 2005).

A few studies of college students' decisions to disclose to parents or family members have found that survivors are more likely to disclose to their mothers and siblings than their fathers (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). If survivors do disclose to parents, they receive a mix of negative and positive reactions, and negative reactions from parents are extremely harmful to survivors (Guerette & Caron, 2007). Some research suggests that friends (especially women friends) may provide more of the emotional support that survivors often want and need in comparison to family members (Ahrens et al., 2009; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). In fact, some college sexual assault survivors avoid reporting the assault to the police or seeking medical

care because they do not want their parents to find out about the assault (Lindquist et al., 2016) and still rely on their families for providing financial assistance, housing, or healthcare. College students who have open relationships with their parents, especially around sex and sexuality, feel more comfortable and able to seek help from their parents after an assault (Smith & Cook, 2008). Positive reactions from family members can strengthen survivors' relationships with their families but negative reactions can lead to worse relationships, especially when the relationship was poor or strained before the disclosure (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012). Together, this work identifies that there are complex decisions and outcomes survivors' face when considering whether to tell their family about the assault. The role of a survivor's sexuality plays in disclosure decisions and outcomes with their family members is largely unknown.

### *Queer Sexual Assault Victims*

Research on help-seeking among queer sexual assault survivors is limited, with most research focusing on the criminal justice system (e.g., Guadalupe-Diaz & Jasinski, 2017) and intimate partner violence (e.g., Bermea et al., 2019; Calton et al., 2015). These studies indicate that queer survivors can be reluctant to use formal resources, especially when associated with the criminal justice system, as these institutions have a history of homophobic structures and practices (Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013) that can "make it worse" and retraumatize LGBTQ survivors (Jordan et al., 2019). Queer survivors face discrimination, harassment, and violence from police when reporting and the legitimacy of their assaults are often questioned, making it difficult to obtain the resources desired (Calton et al., 2015; Guadalupe-Diaz & Jasinski, 2017). These experiences are likely intensified for queer people of color who also have to contend with institutionalized racism and additional pressures and stigmas based on the intersection of their race and sexuality (Chmielewski, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Meyer, 2012). These experiences with formal resource providers, especially within the criminal justice system, may discourage queer survivors from seeking formal resources.

Sexual assault survivors more commonly rely on informal sources of support, such as friends and family members (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). However, rather than a source of support, families are frequently a source of harm for queer youth due to familial disapproval of their sexual identities (Reczek, 2016). Queer youth may have negative experiences when they come out to their parents, which strains relationships (Roe, 2017; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Scherrer et al., 2015), although these relationships can improve over time (LaSala, 2010; Savin-William & Dube, 1998). Prior research on queer women's disclosure has primarily collected quantitative data and collapsed across sources of support (including a wide variety of formal and informal supports), but this work suggests that queer women experience greater negative reactions and fewer positive reactions from disclosure recipients than heterosexual women (e.g., Long et al., 2007; Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015, 2016). The emerging literature that does explicitly explore family responses indicates they are primarily harmful and drew

upon identity-specific rape myths (Schulze et al., 2019). Based on previous scholarship, it is clear that queer adolescents' relationships with their families are often tumultuous and that queer women may have more negative disclosure experiences than heterosexual women. The current study extends this work by examining the way family dynamics around a queer individual's sexual identity specifically impact sexual assault disclosure.

## Method

### *Data Collection and Participants*

The data from this study come from 40 open-ended interviews conducted by the first and second authors between July 2016 and February 2018 with queer-identified women who were sexually assaulted during college. We used a variety of recruitment techniques to ensure a sizable and diverse sample, including recruiting through community organizations in two states that provide services for either LGBTQ individuals or sexual assault survivors, online forums for LGBTQ academics, and more private spaces like bathroom stalls. Participants were invited to participate in a study about lesbian and bisexual women's experiences with college sexual assault.<sup>1</sup> Participants were informed that they would receive a \$40 gift card as compensation.

All participants identified as women, with one also identifying as genderqueer. All participants used she/her pronouns. Just under half of the sample identified as bisexual, 12 participants identified exclusively as queer, six as lesbians, three as pansexual, and one as demisexual. However, participants regularly expressed discomfort with the labels they used due to the scrutiny they received about their sexual identities in the aftermath of sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, we use the word "queer" to discuss participants collectively, as every participant self-identified using the term during their interviews and most considered it an umbrella term that could protect them from critique. Participants ranged from 18 to 31 years of age with a mean age of 23. The majority of the sample identified as White, four participants identified as of Middle Eastern descent, three as Black, three as Asian American, and two as White and Latina. Participants lived in 10 different states and three different countries at the time of their sexual assaults. They attended 25 different colleges, including public universities, liberal arts colleges, religious colleges, Ivy League universities, and a women's college.

We used open-ended interviews to explore queer women's experiences with sexual violence in college. We used a grounded theory approach and trauma-based interview methods to allow participants maximum control over the interviews (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We asked participants to detail their experiences disclosing their sexual assaults. We also asked participants to tell us about anyone who they intentionally did not tell about their sexual assaults and their reasons for choosing not to disclose to them. These questions came in the context of broader interviews in which participants described each of their sexual assaults and the impact they had on them, their relationships, and their sexual identities. We

allowed participants to decide which experiences they wanted to label as sexual assaults and discuss them during our interviews. Most commonly, participants disclosed their experiences with oral, vaginal, or anal rape (88%); however, participants also told other stories of sexual assault (e.g., unwanted sexual touching). Regardless of the type of sexual assault, all participants considered the impact of at least one act of violence severe. Participants reported sexual assaults perpetrated by cisgender men (85%), transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming people (12%),<sup>3</sup> or a mixed-gender pair (e.g., a cisgender man and a cisgender woman) (3%). Interviews lasted between 28 and 134 min, with a mean length of 64 min. Most variation in length is reflective of the number of sexual assaults a participant shared. Participants also completed a survey about their demographic characteristics and adult experiences with sexual violence (SES-LFV; Koss et al., 2007).

### *Analysis Approach*

During our analysis, we used Dedoose qualitative coding software. We began by coding broadly for any description of a sexual assault disclosure to a family member or a reason a participant chose not to disclose to a family member. We then used open coding to identify themes in their experiences. After all three authors recognized that familial beliefs about sex and queer sexualities featured prominently in these concerns, we coded for any excerpt that included explicit reference to the participant's sexual identity (e.g., a parent responding poorly when a participant came out as a bisexual) or their family's broader beliefs about sex or queer sexualities. The three authors engaged in extensive discussions and wrote many analytical memos about how sexuality played a role in the decision to disclose and family members' reactions to disclosures, eventually producing the themes discussed in the findings of this paper. We reviewed each other's codes, discussed the excerpts, and reached a consensus about the codes applied. Throughout our analysis, we use pseudonyms and omitted potentially identifying information to maintain the confidentiality of participants. In nearly all cases, we chose the participants' pseudonyms, but we allowed participants to choose their own pseudonyms if requested. We made small edits for clarity.

Our own identities and experiences have shaped our analytical choices. All three authors identify as members of the queer community and have extensive professional experience in survivor-supportive anti violence work, including working as victim advocates, researchers, and educators. For example, our collective training has emphasized the importance of viewing survivors as reliable narrators of their own experiences.

### **Findings**

In general, the survivors in this study did not consider their families to be strong sources of support. Nearly all participants ( $N=35$ ) deliberately chose not to tell at least one member of their family—most commonly their parents—about their assaults. Over a quarter of participants ( $N=13$ ) did not disclose to any family members. They

worried about receiving negative reactions, particularly if their families held conservative values around sex. They also had unique fears about disclosing to their parents due to conflicting values and strained relationships relating to their marginalized sexual identities. When survivors did disclose—whether by choice or due to circumstances beyond their control—reactions from family members were largely negative and, in many cases, more extreme than anticipated or previously observed in academic literature based on samples including heterosexual survivors. Negative responses also commonly included harmful comments about a survivor's queer sexual identity. In the sections to follow, we describe how survivors made the decision to disclose and their experiences with disclosure, as well as how survivors' sexualities featured prominently throughout both components of the disclosure process.

### *The Decision to Disclose*

When deciding whether or not to disclose a sexual assault to a family member, queer survivors ( $N=23$ ) explicitly centered their family members' broader beliefs about sex and queer sexualities, as well as their responses to the survivor's own queer sexual identity if she had already come out. Survivors worried not only about family members' immediate negative reactions to their sexual assault disclosures but also the impact on the way their families would view their queer sexual identities in the future.

*Familial Attitudes Toward Sex and Sexuality.* Similar to heterosexual survivors (Smith & Cook, 2008), queer survivors hesitated to disclose a sexual assault to a family member who held conservative views about women's sexual practices. For example, Rebecca, an Asian bisexual woman, laughed when asked why she didn't disclose her sexual assault to her family, saying, "The first time [my mom] found condoms in my bag, she was like, 'No sex ever.' Or I think she said, 'No sex 'til 21,' which I still think is a weird age to give someone. Yeah, I don't tell her about any sexual stuff." Similarly, Samantha, a White queer woman, explained why she had hoped her father would never find out about her sexual assault with, "My dad is just weird about sex. He comes from a very—I don't know. Whenever we watch a TV show, he coincidentally goes to get a snack during a birth control commercial." Elly, a White queer woman, answered the most simply with, "I don't really want my parents to be involved in my sex life." The survivors in this study feared their sexually conservative families would respond in ways researchers have long recognized as negative reactions to sexual assault disclosures (Ullman, 2010).

In contrast to heterosexual survivors, queer women's concerns about their families' views about sex appeared to have an added dimension based on their personal experiences with family members' conservative sexual ideologies during their coming out experiences. For example, Amanda, a White bisexual woman, explained, "In general, and especially after coming out to my family, I don't feel like I can talk to them about anything around sexual identity or sexual orientation and I fit [the

assault] under that umbrella.” Victoria, a White bisexual woman, expressed a similar concern:

I didn’t even bother to try and even talk to my parents about it ‘cause when I was, in their mind, bisexual in junior high that it was just an attention thing and they had done the same thing to me before when I had been diagnosed as depressed, so I was really not gonna be sharing any of this with any of my family members.

Relatedly, survivors who felt unable to come out to their families based on their conservative attitudes toward queer people felt strongly that a sexual assault disclosure would be similarly unsafe. Sarah, a White bisexual genderqueer person, explained her decision to keep her sexual assault a secret from her parents with:

I’m not even out to them as bisexual. I don’t think that they would believe that I’m bisexual because they’re only aware of the relationships I’ve been in with men. I don’t think they believe bisexuality exists anyway. And I don’t talk about my gender identity either because there are only two genders according to them. They’re extremely racist, homophobic, transphobic, so I just don’t really have much a relationship with them.

These fears about family’s negative responses to all discussions of sexuality lingered even after a survivor’s relationship with her family improved following a tumultuous coming out experience or an original difference in beliefs. As Brittany, a Black queer woman explained:

I remember, like, when I was younger, we had, like, trust issues or whatever you want to call it. And I was finally like, “I’ve gained their trust!” Or whatever you want to call it. And then I come home and, like, all of these things would lose their trust immediately, so probably not going to say anything.

Queer survivors’ negative experiences around their families’ harmful perceptions of marginalized sexual identities led them to anticipate equally negative reactions from their families when discussing other stigmatized sexual topics like sexual violence. As a result, queer survivors appear unlikely to disclose sexual assault voluntarily and are fearful of the way sexual assault disclosure could harm already fragile familial relationships.

**Protection of Sexual Identities.** Participants also worried that their sexual assault experiences could delegitimize their sexual identities in the eyes of their family members. Gisella, a Middle Eastern queer woman, had come out to her family shortly before she had been raped. To defend her newly public sexual identity, she decided to keep her sexual assault a secret:

[My assault] is not the reason why I’m gay. I know it’s not. I wrestled with this concept... If I were to tell more people or be more vocal about [my assault], if I were to be like those people [who are] like, “I’m a survivor!” [and] be super open about it—which I would like

to be because I do consider myself an activist in other ways—but I don't like to do that because I am more openly gay, so I feel like people would just make this connection [between my identity and assault] and I don't feel comfortable with that.

Lily, a White bisexual woman, had similar concerns about her mother's ability to grapple with a bisexual identity or the reality that she had consented to kiss the man who later sexually assaulted her. Instead, she came out as a lesbian and kept her sexual assault a secret. She described the decision with:

- LILY: I also didn't want to tell my mom I did something with a guy because I really feel like ... there are things I did, like, that I chose and there are things that I didn't choose and that were done to me. So I didn't want to tell her that either that, like, I did something with a guy. That was a big barrier also.
- RESEARCHER: Why was that? Why didn't you want her to know that?
- LILY: Because I didn't—I just wanted to be a lesbian. I just wanted that to be easy. I didn't want her to question it and I didn't want it to be anything else.

For both Lily and Gisella, protecting the legitimacy of their sexual identities mattered more than seeking help from family members following a sexual assault. The prospect of their families continuing to question their sexual identities as the result of their sexual assault disclosures felt more overwhelming than managing their sexual assaults without familial support. As a result, most queer survivors in this study preferred not to disclose their sexual assaults to their families.

### *The Disclosure Experience*

Despite their hesitancy to tell their family members, some of the survivors did disclose to their families; however, this decision was often not in the survivor's control (e.g., a police officer visited a shared home, another family member disclosed without the survivor's consent). Forced disclosures were common among participants in this study ( $N = 12$ ) since families are deeply enmeshed in the lives of emerging adults, regardless of the quality of their relationships. Only a third of participants ( $N = 15$ ) freely chose to disclose to family members, although most still expressed they had been reluctant to make that decision. Regardless of the reason for the disclosure, the participants' experiences with disclosing to their families were in line with their expectations. Reactions from family members were largely negative ( $N = 25$ , 93% of participants who disclosed), although, in many cases, more extreme than anticipated or previously observed in the academic literature that is based on samples of primarily heterosexual survivors. As feared, participants' families also used their sexual assault experiences to delegitimize their sexual identities.

*Extreme Reactions.* In general, the participants reported almost exclusively negative reactions from their families. They were commonly blamed for the sexual violence they endured and their families often wanted to keep their sexual assaults secret or ignore them altogether. Although blaming, controlling, and minimizing responses are common after disclosures of sexual assault (Ullman, 2010), these responses were more extreme than heterosexuals' experiences. The impact was devastating for these queer women survivors.

One of the most common emotional reactions was anger. For example, Jessica, a White lesbian woman, described her mother's upsetting over-the-top reaction: "When, my old boss that sexually assaulted me [sent] his statement back, [my mom], she—I'm not kidding—she got every glass in the house and broke it in the garage." In some cases, the anger expressed turned physically violent. Marya, a Middle Eastern woman, met insults and physical violence after disclosing her first sexual assault to her family:

My mom hit me, my—my dad was yelling at me.... That affected me a lot, cause how they reacted, [it] triggered that I was at fault, that I did something wrong.... My mom would call me cheap. She called me a lot of profane words, she just heard that I was a dirty girl—she thought I was being sexual. My brother would always say that [my family] didn't believe me, that they didn't think that it was rape and my sister said that I basically trashed her name because of what I did, that I ruined her reputation, so [it was] very traumatic in a sense.

Although survivors like Jessica and Marya had anticipated that their families would have emotional reactions to their sexual assault disclosures, they had not foreseen the amount of anger they would face.

The participants' families also tried to exert extreme amounts of control to keep the violence secret after a survivor's disclosure. In some cases, family members posed barriers to participants' attempts to seek other resources (e.g., supportive friends, the police, and mental health facilities). As an example, Cassandra, a pansexual Latina woman, faced a strict curfew after her disclosure that severely limited her autonomy. To cope, she explained, "I'd have to lie more to be able to leave the house because they didn't want me going anywhere and they were being really controlling." Kaitlin, a White bisexual woman, also felt restricted by her family when she wanted to report her sexual assault to the police, but her mother actively discouraged her from doing so, resorting to pleas and bribery. In her words:

[My mom] basically told me 'You can be angry at the that the worst mistake that I could make would be to try to go after him for this or try to you know get any kind of justice for this because it would be very unlikely that I would win.... And I think she was so afraid for me that she ended up offering me money to—she said she'll pay me whatever I want just to not pursue this, which only added to how dirty I felt about everything.

Similarly, Sydney, a White bisexual woman, faced an additional barrier in seeking help for suicidal ideation when her mother pleaded with her not to admit herself to the hospital. As she said:

I had no motivation to get up in the morning. I could sleep all day, I stopped eating. I lost 30 pounds—25 pounds within like a 3-week period like, just completely unhealthy. And then my mom—I told her what happened because I was like, “Things aren’t going well for me right now, like I really need help, I need to go to the hospital” because I was like, “I’m about to do something to myself.” [My mom said] like, “I’m here to take care of you. I don’t want you to go to the mental hospital because I don’t want that on your record” like, “You don’t actually need it.”

Families—and parents especially—have a strong influence on survivors. In Sydney’s case, she took her mother’s advice, which proved dangerous. Sydney’s suicidal thoughts worsened, culminating in a suicide attempt. In each of these cases, the participants’ families’ extreme controlling behavior and preference for keeping the sexual assaults secret harmed the survivor and made it even more difficult for them to seek help.

In other cases, families would manage their children’s sexual assaults by ignoring them altogether. For instance, Ciera, a White bisexual woman, had disclosed her sexual assault to her family through a public blog post that her parents refused to acknowledge:

I would sometimes mention that you know like, “When I was assaulted...” And [my dad] was like “You were assaulted?” And I was like, “You read all about when I was assaulted,” and I just don’t think it registered for him. He was like, “Oh yeah, I guess,” and it’s like, ugh, validate my experiences!

These reactions left participants feeling invalidated with a limited or nonexistent support system.

**Questioning Identity Legitimacy.** Commonly, survivors’ sexual identities also came under scrutiny as part of their experiences of disclosing sexual assault to their families. Their queer sexual identities were both blamed for their sexual assaults and delegitimized by the violence they endured. As an example, Samantha, a White queer woman, described, “When I came out to my parents, they were like, ‘Is this because you make bad choices with men?’ And I was like, ‘Okay ... Um, I really don’t think that’s how that works.’” Samantha’s family saw her sexual assault as another “bad” sexual decision, but also as a reason to discount her sexual identity. These comments were painful for survivors and made it difficult for them to rely on their families for support in the future. As Cassandra, a Latina pansexual woman, explained:

[Disclosing] really damaged the relationship I had with my parents.... When I told them what happened, I tried to come out to them as well. I was like, “Oh yeah, by the way, I also started to have, like, some intimate experiences with a girl.” And they were like, “Oh yeah. Well, of

course you would go through that phase after what you just experienced.” And so I just dropped it ‘cause I realized I didn’t want them to be nagging me for the rest of my life and I still wanted to be able to sleep over at girls’ houses, so I didn’t press it.

In this way, disclosure of sexual assault presents an additional risk to queer survivors that heterosexual survivors do not face: their families may also become dismissive or otherwise unsupportive of their sexual identities.

Survivors whose assailants were also queer-identified faced more explicit homophobia when disclosing, as their families blamed the violence that occurred on the assailant’s queer sexuality. Ashley, an Asian pansexual woman, eventually disclosed her rape committed by a masculine-presenting lesbian woman to her father. She described:

He just started calling [my rapist] a stupid bull dyke and all this stuff that was obviously awful to me ‘cause I almost felt like I had to protect that part of [her]—that identity that she held. I’m like, “You can be angry at the person, but you don’t need to be a piece of shit and be discriminatory.” You know what I mean? ... That was really horrible.

Ashley’s father’s comments were not only derogatory toward her assailant, but also to her own queer identity. Comments disparaging the queer community more broadly were hurtful to queer survivors and harmed their relationships with their families. In general, survivors whose families made homophobic comments (e.g., derogatory slurs, disparaging or delegitimizing queer sexual identities) reported distress after their disclosure experiences.

Only two participants had entirely positive experiences in disclosing sexual assault to a family member. In each case, the family member had previously reacted positively to the survivor’s coming out and had embraced the survivor’s sexual decisions. Alexis, a White lesbian woman, explained how easy it was to disclose her sexual assault to her aunt who already had been a source of support for her queer sexual identity:

[Disclosing] was good—particularly with my aunt. She and I are very, very close and she already knew a lot about kind of my mental and emotional place, both with my sexual orientation [and] with my relationship with men in general, so it was very easy for her to know everything that was going on and to provide me with the love and support I needed.

Survivors whose families fully embraced their sexual identities could depend on their families as crucial support following the violence they endured. However, few survivors in this study had this experience, instead, they overwhelmingly experienced their families’ reactions to their disclosures as additional harm in the aftermath of sexual violence.

## Discussion

This study explores whether queer women feel they can depend upon their families as informal support providers following an experience of sexual assault in college. The

stakes for queer communities are particularly high, due to the additional barriers, queer survivors face when seeking formal support (Calton et al., 2015; Guadalupe-Díaz & Yglesias, 2013; Logie et al., 2012), leading them to depend almost exclusively on informal support systems. Using data from 40 queer women's interviews on their experiences of college sexual assault and its impact on their relationships, we find that queer survivors are reluctant to disclose their sexual assaults to their parents and, when they do, they often find their families' reactions more harmful than helpful. In many ways, the queer survivors' experiences of sexual assault disclosure are similar to the negative experiences reported by survivors of all sexual identities (Ullman, 2010); however, they were more extreme, particularly as their families responded with anger and attempted to control the survivors' actions to keep their sexual assaults secret. These findings indicate that queer survivors' families might be especially likely to blame them for the violence they have endured and see their assaults as an extension of what families unsupportive of their children's queer sexualities consider shameful sexual behaviors.

Queer survivors' experiences were also shaped explicitly by their sexual identities—and their families' discomfort with them. Survivors voiced reluctance in disclosing their sexual identities to family members who generally expressed discomfort discussing sex or sexual orientation. Survivors who had negative experiences coming out to their family members or felt that their family members did not see their sexual identities as legitimate were particularly unwilling to disclose their sexual assaults to their families. The experiences of many survivors who did disclose their sexual assaults confirmed the validity of those fears—their families often used their disclosures to question or deny their sexual identities or the morality of queer identities more broadly. On the rare occasion that a survivor did have a more positive experience, the support they received came from a family member who had already been aware of the survivor's sexual identity and had also offered support during the process of coming out. In this way, queer survivors' experiences disclosing their queer sexual identities and disclosing sexual violence to family members are linked.

The findings from this study demonstrate a potential barrier to queer survivors' access to formal resources. We observed examples of extreme negative reactions to survivors' disclosures to family members, including survivors' parents explicitly discouraging participants from seeking resources, including mental health professionals and police reports. These messages can be especially salient coming from family members (Guerette & Caron, 2007) and may create additional barriers to survivors' capacity to seek formal resources. Similarly, queer survivors' strong desire to *not* disclose their sexual assaults to their families might also pose a barrier to seeking formal resources. Since some resources might make survivors more vulnerable to forced disclosure (e.g., using medical or mental health services that bill a parent's insurance), queer survivors might avoid resources that could pose a threat to their confidentiality. Accordingly, the findings from this study reinforce the importance of providing confidential resources to survivors and making the limits of confidentiality agreements clear at the onset of services, as well as in online and other advertising materials. Doing so not only makes formal resources more accessible to survivors who seek privacy but

also serves to protect survivors from potentially harmful reactions from family members, which appear more likely and extreme for queer survivors than heterosexual survivors. This is particularly crucial for young adults who often are still dependent on their families for financial support, housing, or healthcare, all of which make survivors vulnerable to a violation of confidentiality and subsequent loss of autonomy. As demonstrated by this study, survivors are experts in their own familial relationships and can often accurately predict whether disclosing to a family member will be helpful or harmful. Practitioners should practice confidentiality as a way to respect survivors' expert knowledge on what will best guide their own healing.

Within formal resources, we recommend developing resources to address the harm caused to queer survivors by sexual assault disclosure to family members. In particular, extreme negative reactions from family members (e.g., threats, violence) and the questioning of a survivor's sexual identity can be particularly hurtful. Services directed at secondary survivors who had negative reactions might be effective at improving the conditions in which a survivor manages their trauma, particularly if a survivor still lives at home or relies on familial support. Ideally, queer-inclusive services would also provide support for survivors who are unable to disclose to their families, which can be painful in itself and can hinder survivors' abilities to seek out resources that require parental knowledge.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The current study provides an important initial exploration into queer women's experiences disclosing sexual violence to family members, but it has notable limitations. There are few positive experiences with familial disclosures discussed in depth in our dataset, making it difficult to articulate what types of support queer survivors found especially beneficial from their family networks. More research is needed on survivors' positive experiences with disclosure to understand what promotes healing. Our study also focuses on college sexual assault survivors who might have different experiences disclosing to family members than queer-identified teenagers or older adults. Since teenagers are typically still legally dependent on their parents, it is especially important to understand their experiences of familial sexual assault disclosure and its impact on their experiences as survivors.

### **Conclusion**

The current study explores queer women's experiences with the disclosure of sexual victimization to family members. Through the analysis of 40 open-ended interviews, we find that queer survivors' experiences with familial disclosure are more usually harmful than helpful. Family members' negative reactions to disclosure are often more extreme when responding to queer survivors with many negative reactions having some relationship to a queer survivor's sexual identity. It is essential for formal support providers to respect queer survivors' decisions about whether or not

to disclose to family members and to offer services to combat the harm caused by negative family reactions.

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### Notes

1. Originally, we also included language like “queer” and “survivors” in recruitment materials to be more inclusive of our study population, but some older cisgender gay men who served as gatekeepers at LGBTQ community organizations refused to share our recruitment materials when those terms were used. As a result, we omitted them.
2. At the time of submission, the first and second authors have an in-progress manuscript on this subject.
3. Participants did not always know the exact gender identity of their gender nonconforming perpetrators. Many believed the public presentation of their precise identities had changed since the sexual assault, but expressed that seeking more information to accurately represent their perpetrator's gender identity could be unsafe. This category includes four sexual assaults perpetrated by people who identified as cisgender women at the time of the sexual assault, but shortly after came out as transgender men. For more information, see Bedera and Nordmeyer (2017).

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