IDENTIFYING RAPE MYTHS AND TRAUMA-INFORMED BELIEFS AMONG DETECTIVES INVESTIGATING SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES USING CONTENT ANALYSIS

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Doctor of Education Degree

Charleston Southern University
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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn more about the beliefs and practices of detectives responsible for investigating rape and sexual assault cases. Violence against women has long been a part of the ill-treatment of women in many countries and cultures across the globe through misogyny, discrimination, and objectification. The imposition of sexual assault and rape have been and are prevalent crimes against women and youth, and challenging this behavior is a consistent endeavor. When victims of these invasive crimes come forward to disclose what happened to them and to seek assistance, they are often met with doubt, blame, or disbelief by those whom they believe will help them – friends, family, social and health care services, or criminal justice professionals. Using archived data where thirty participants responded to an online survey, the research design used content analysis and priori coding to search for emergent themes through open-ended questions based on the exploration of rape myth acceptance and trauma-informed principles. This study demonstrated that there is a continued influence of rape myths held by detectives. The study was unique as it looked at rape myths and trauma-informed beliefs through individual views and organizational practices. This study promotes the need to continue to address unconscious and systemic biases that rape victims face that may leave them without the help they need. Ultimately, addressing the needs of victims courageous enough to come forward to report these heinous crimes can increase overall public safety.

Keywords: detectives, rape/sexual assault, rape myths, trauma, trauma-informed care, rape culture

Copyright Page (Optional)

Dedication

My Tribute

By André Crouch (1971)

How can I say thanks

For the things You have done for me?

Things so undeserved

Yet You gave to prove Your love for me;

The voices of a million angels

Could not express my gratitude

All that I am and ever hope to be

I owe it all to Thee

To God be the glory, To God be the glory, To God be the glory, For the things He has done

Acknowledgments

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge the presence and plans of the Lord in every phase of my life, including this journey. I am also grateful for those the Lord placed in my life to help and support me, beginning with my Committee Chair, Dr. Tonya M. Houston, who provided encouragement and spiritual guidance. I cannot thank you enough, Dr. Houston. My thanks to my other committee members, Drs. Krista Allison, Christine Hahn, and Elizabeth Wofford. You each brought knowledge and support, for which I am profoundly grateful. To Drs. Hahn and Emily Tilstra-Ferrell, thank you for including me in the initial research study. A special thanks to the members of my cohort and cohorts before me who provided encouragement and support as I began this journey under the tutelage of Dr. George Metz.

Finally, I acknowledge the love and support of family and friends, too many to name. To my daughter, Brianna, I set before you the example that all things are possible with God. Also, to my longtime, faithful friends Nancy Allen-Haskell, Ramona Smith, Gayla Wilder, Dr. Asabi Sauda Yakini, Elaine Peebles Brown, Catherine Johnson, Karen Swails, and many other friends too numerous to count and in memory of Dr. Rosie Thomas. My profound gratitude to my mentors, Rachel B. Champagne and Dr. Sharon Cooper, my spiritual leaders, the Rev. Darlene A. Body, One Accord Community Church (Atlanta, GA) and the Rev. Lakesha Bradshaw Easter, Covenant Presbyterian Church (Durham, NC).

"*God is faithful*" (1 Corinthians 1:9)

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Alarmingly, one in three women is subjected to physical or sexual violence in an intimate partner relationship or by sexual violence from a non-partner (WHO, 2021). Other factors, such as 37% of women living in poverty, are estimated to experience physical and or sexual intimate partner violence in their lives (WHO, 2021).

Kilpatrick et al. (1992) conducted one of the first national studies, which concluded that rape and sexual violence are horrific crimes that leave devastating consequences in their wake. While communities clamor for law enforcement to "do something," such as making arrests leading to convictions, only 24.9% of sexual assault reports made to law enforcement are investigated, and 1% lead to convictions (RAINN (a), n.d.). Furthermore, survivors who report to law enforcement describe negative experiences (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020). In addition to the trauma associated with sexual assault, there is secondary trauma associated with revealing or reporting the incident, which is exacerbated when victims are not believed and criminal investigations do not follow the due course (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020).

Those working with sexual assault victims learned from a foundational study that in the aftermath of sexual assault or rape, those victimized can find themselves hesitant to utilize existing support and safety measures such as medical care and mental health services (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). Others may not be aware of existing resources designed to help their recovery. There are conditions where victims are more likely to report to law enforcement, such as if they did not voluntarily consume alcohol, had anogenital or bodily injuries, were not students, and received the medical forensic exam within 32 hours of the assault (Downing et al., 2020).

Furthermore, increasing sexual assault reports provides an opportunity to hold perpetrators responsible, which may serve to decrease the prevalence of sexual assault (Patterson & Campbell, 2010).

The Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) was a beneficial framework for understanding factors that may contribute to low rates of criminal charges in sexual assault investigation and negative experiences among survivors-victims. In particular, this model emphasized sexual-violence-supportive norms that influence how sexual assault survivors are treated within the meso/exosystem, such as the criminal justice system. A critical sexual violence supportive norm that has been studied extensively in the sexual assault literature is rape myth acceptance, or the degree to which individuals hold beliefs rooted in false conceptions and stereotypes about rape that blame the victim and minimize the role of the perpetrator (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths are supported and upheld through rape culture, societal policies, laws, and messaging that support rape/sexual assault (Ryan, 2019). Given that detectives are not immune to the societal influences of rape culture, they may believe in certain rape myths that could interfere with conducting an objective and trauma-informed sexual assault investigation (Franklin et al., 2019). Many victim-survivors also hold their acceptance of the mythologies surrounding rape. They may perceive that they played a role or had responsibility in their victimization (Edwards, 2011), which highlights the importance of detectives being prepared to investigate in the face of both their own and a survivor's belief in rape myths. This study explored the phenomena of what law enforcement officers may think, feel, and believe about sexual assault victims through the premise of their acceptance of rape mythologies and how their perceptions may impact their investigations of sexual assault cases.

Background

Sexual assault is a highly underreported crime, with only about one-third of victims reporting to the police (RAINN(a), n.d.). According to Basile et al. (2022), the available data researchers have is most likely an underestimation due to the overall sensitivity to the topic. Rape victims are often reluctant to tell friends, family, or any helpers for fear of not being believed, being blamed and shamed (Lonsway & Archambault(b), 2020). Rape victims are particularly reluctant to report to law enforcement and have been known to suffer second injury from those charged with their safety and care (Lonsway & Archambault(b), 2020). Both men and women experience sexual violence, but it is a crisis overwhelmingly borne by women (Smith et al., 2018). Globally, men are predominately the perpetrators of sexual offenses, and women are most often those victimized (Lilley, 2023).

Historically, the issue of how rape and sexual assault victims are treated, whether societal or systematically, has always been problematic (Ahrens, 2006). Although significant strides have been made, there is a need to continue making improvements, especially in the criminal justice arena, especially, where law enforcement is involved.

Problem Statement

One in six women and one in thirty-three men will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetimes (RAINN, 2023). The prevalence of sexual assault is even higher among college students; however, these rape cases are underreported, and when they were reported, they rarely resulted in arrests or convictions (Orchowski. & Gidycz, 2012). Research overwhelmingly highlights the importance of victim characteristics and behavior influencing sexual assault case outcomes. Formative research established that an officer's perceptions of case legitimacy and

arrest decisions are shaped by the victim's behavior and moral character (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020; Vik et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that police officers often operate from a culture of skepticism, resulting in victim-blaming in sexual assault cases even before the report is received (McMillan, 2016). In particular, women experienced judgment from police and felt they were treated as perpetrators rather than victims, and this was reflected in police questioning about false reporting and asking questions that placed blame on the victim for her lifestyle or behavior (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020). Research by Maddox et al. (2012) suggests that police officers often make decisions about the truthfulness of sexual assault reports prior to a thorough investigation; increased victim blame by police during the investigation of sexual assault resulted in fewer investigative steps and decreased the likelihood of the case proceeding to prosecution. McMillan (2018) found that police officers had polarized views of false reporting in sexual assault cases, with some who believed false reports were widespread and others who thought they were infrequent.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study using content analysis was to understand the attitudes of detectives who are responsible for investigating criminal sexual assault cases. This qualitative study explored if rape myth beliefs and trauma-informed practices impacted how criminal investigations were handled to understand and gain insight into the mindset of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations. Hidden biases and prejudgments about victims can influence how officers treat victims, which was widely evidenced in studies examining intimate partner violence and sexual assault (Eliasson & DeHart, 2023). The exploration of rape myth beliefs and trauma-informed practices by detectives responding to sexual assault reports where rape myths were defined as a complex set of cultural beliefs and

attitudes that supported and justified sexual violence, mainly by shifting blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Zidenberg et al., 2021). Hopper et al. (2020) defines trauma-informed care by understanding common victim responses and conducting compelling victim interviews in a simple format based on scientifically sound principles.

This study used archived data from a southeastern metropolitan tri-county region in South Carolina. Content analysis is a recognized qualitative analysis approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and according to Stemler (2015), it was appropriate for this study as it compressed previously collected content into categories based on specific coding. This study retrieved data from surveys designed to elicit the voices of detectives about their perceptions of investigating sexual assault cases. The responses produced a large amount of qualitative data about rape myths and trauma-informed principles, which examined the data through content analysis using a priori coding deemed appropriate for the context of this study. This researcher used content analysis as the tool to search for themes that emerged through a series of open-ended questions sorted through a priori coding (Columbia University, 2023).

The Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) was the theoretical framework that guided this study because it explained how sexual assault affects not only the direct victim but also the role that all facets of society play in responding to sexual assault. The ecological model provided a look at how sexual assault can lead to self-blame by victims and how it can negatively impact victims' mental health, leading to depression, maladaptive coping, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Maladaptive coping behaviors can also be revealed, especially when victims are not believed or are not supported when they finally disclose the assault.

The ecological model also theorized how the legal system inflicts additional harm when victims are blamed for the sexual assault or when they receive minimal help. Known as *secondary injury* these subsequent injuries are imposed by systems whether formal (e.g., medical, law enforcement, legal) or informal (e.g., friends, family, loved ones) that are presumed or that are specifically designed to help. Orth (2020) defined the outcome as *secondary victimization,* an adverse social or societal reaction that victims experience as an additional victimization or injury, which can also lead to post-traumatic stress, depressive symptomatology, or other maladaptive behaviors. The model also identifies the concept of *rape-prone culture* and also includes institutionalized racism, cultural differences, and the acceptance of rape myths in responding to rape and sexual assault. These elements, according to Campbell et al. (2009), create a problematic sociocultural context for sexual assault survivors to recover. This study examined rape myth acceptance by detectives to determine how victims may be perceived when they disclosed an incident of sexual assault.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because it addressed the public health crisis of sexual assault, and the efforts needed to ensure survivors who access criminal justice services have conducive interactions to their recovery and the prosecution of perpetrators (RAINN, 2023). Improved law enforcement response to sexual assault can serve to increase reporting rates to law enforcement, increase prosecution rates, and ultimately decrease the prevalence of sexual assault (Avalos, 2016).

Research related to the mindset of police officers and investigators towards rape and sexual assault victims is minimal (Page, 2008). Continued research in this area is needed in order to gain a clear understanding of the barriers that victims face and ultimately develop strategies to

address these problems, helping to ensure that victims of sexual assault and rape receive the proper response they rightfully deserve. Additionally, much of the research and seminal studies about sexual assault were done many years ago, following the social and feminist movements of the 1970s and a number of these studies were cited in this study as they are the bedrock for continued research. In light of the current social justice movements such as #MeToo, there has been an upsurge in studying sexual violence, and this study has added value and significance to the field. This study was significant because results will help inform communities in their efforts to reform law enforcement's response to sexual assault. Communities interested in implementing a Start by Believing (SBB) campaign, a community initiative devised by Kimberly Lonsway and Joanne Archambault (Lonsway & Archambault, 2011), with the goal of encouraging law enforcement officers to begin their investigation of sexual assault cases with the idea of accepting what victims tell them and to allow their professional investigations to follow the evidence without working to achieve a preconceived negative outcome. Archambault, a retired sergeant in the Sex Crime Unit of the San Diego Police, was convinced that with proper training and multidisciplinary collaboration, there could be vast improvements in addressing sexual violence and, on these premises, established the organization End Violence Against Women (EVAWI, 2024). Lonsway was a member of the team of researchers who helped develop the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al., 1999), as a means of measuring the impact of rape myths on beliefs and attitudes. Archambault and Lonsway later initiated the campaign Start by Believing in 2011. The campaign targets the sociocultural factors at the macrosystem, and ecosystem levels as defined in the Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health. The design of this global campaign is to prepare formal (i.e., law enforcement, prosecutors, medical/forensic providers) and informal support systems (i.e., friends and family)

to respond effectively to sexual assault disclosures, ultimately enhancing survivors' well-being, increasing reporting rates, and help-seeking behaviors. The message of the campaign is straightforward: when someone discloses sexual assault, start with "I believe you," which is an expression of empathy, and then offer the survivor your support (Lonsway & Archambault, 2022; SBB, n.d.). The campaign includes community members (e.g., family members, friends, schools, public and civic organizations) and professionals (e.g., law enforcement, nurses, advocates, prosecutors, and clinicians) making personal pledges and promoting SBB messaging through various advertisement strategies (e.g., social media).

Further, an essential first step of the campaign is ensuring that professionals receive trauma-informed training in how to effectively respond to disclosures of sexual assault that is part of the SBB program. SBB has been launched in over 100 cities, and preliminary evidence supports that it increases reporting and help-seeking. For instance, in Kansas City, more victim advocates were called to accompany patients at sexual assault medical forensic exams, and there was an increase in reports made to law enforcement (Lonsway & Archambault, 2020). Two other cities documented an increase in reporting rates of sexual assault after launching SBB. Results from the current investigation could help inform how to facilitate the adoption of the Start by Believing concept in criminal justice organizations.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations?

Sub-Questions

1. What are some rape myths detectives **believe** about sexual assault?

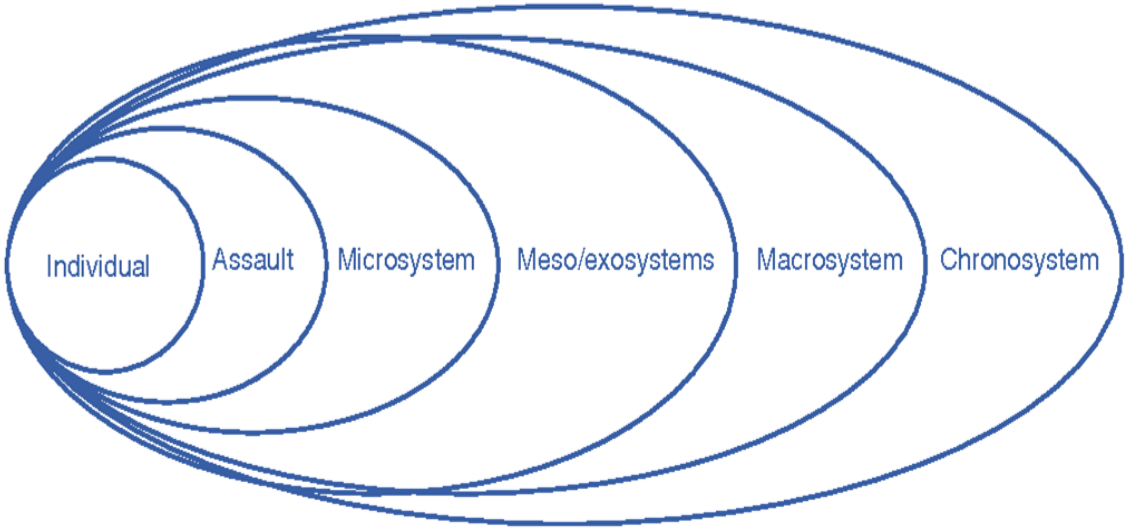
2. What are some trauma-informed **practices** that sexual assault detectives **believe** about sexual assault?

This study examined whether rape myths affected the investigation of rape cases (e.g., blame the victim, disbelieve the victim when alcohol or drugs are used, recantation, the victim's actions). Additionally, it explored trauma-informed behaviors or attitudes detectives have about investigating sexual assault cases (e.g., do they want to investigate these cases or the use of identified trauma-informed practices).

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

This researcher used the theoretical perspective of the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) to explore rape myths at the level of the ecosystem of criminal investigations of sexual assault. Campbell et al. (2009) developed the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) based on the ecological theory of human development by Bronfenbrenner in 1977. Campbell et al. (2009) suggested that sociocultural factors are nested in an arrangement of structures and impact the survivor's responses altogether. Further, the framework is evidence of the use trauma-informed principles in providing care in a manner that minimizes the infliction of secondary trauma at an organizational or systemic level. Campbell et. al. (2009) recognized secondary victimization as victim-blaming and minimal help that can lead to increased levels of psychological distress.

Figure 1. *Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health*

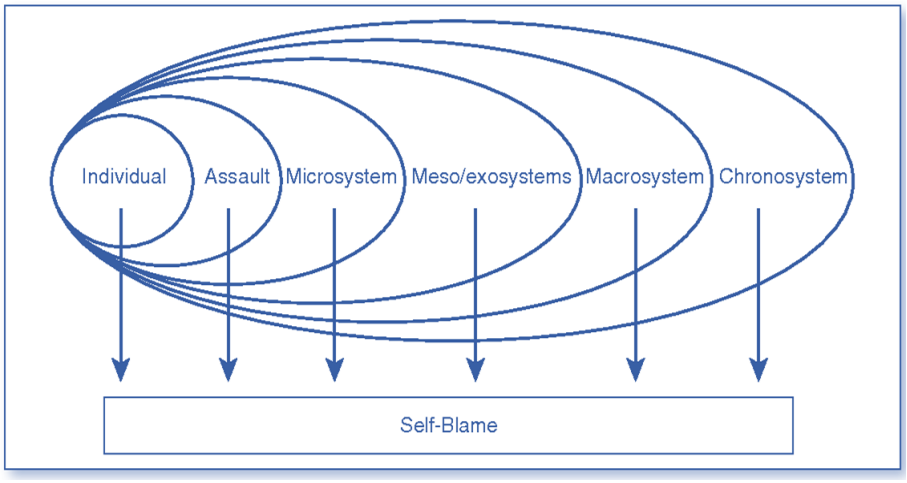


Notes: From Campbell et. al., 2009

- ***Microsystem:*** Refers to the institutions and groups that most immediately and directly impact the child's development including family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers.
- ***Mesosystem:*** Consists of interconnections between the microsystems, for example between the family and teachers or between the child's peers and the family.
- ***Exosystem****:* Involves links between social settings that do not involve the child. For example, a child's experience at home may be influenced by their parent's experiences at work. A parent might receive a promotion that requires more travel, which in turn increases conflict with the other parent resulting in changes in their patterns of interaction with the child.

- ***Macrosystem****:* Describes the overarching culture that influences the developing child, as well as the microsystems and mesosystems embedded in those cultures. Cultural contexts can differ based on geographic location, socioeconomic status, poverty, and ethnicity. Members of a cultural group often share a common identity, heritage, and values. Macrosystems evolve across time and from generation to generation.
- ***Chronosystem****:* Consists of the pattern of environmental events and transitions over the life course, as well as changing socio-historical circumstances. For example, researchers have found that political attitudes are associated with norms that promote sexual violence (Ortiz et al., 2021) and political events (e.g., overturn of Roe V. Wade) is associated with decreased utilization of medical care after sexual assault (Tilstra-Ferrel et al., in preparation).

Figure 2. *Self-Blame as a Meta-Construct That Stems All Levels in the Ecological Model*

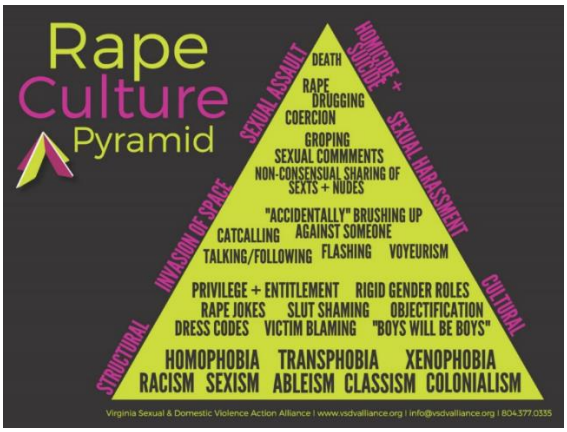


Note: *(Campbell et. al., 2009).*

In addition to the theorectical framework, the Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health, this study also examined the conceptual programmatic construct of the

Start by Believing campaign developed by Lonsway & Archambault, 2022 that includes communities and professionals working together to improve responses to disclosures of sexual assault. The Start by Believing campaign is based in trauma-informed care responses.

Figure 3. *Rape Culture Pyramid: VSDV Alliance*



Note: Virginia SVDV, n.d., *Version 5 Created by Jaime Chandra & Cervix (© September 2018)*

Definitions

- **Detectives:** a member of a law enforcement agency responsible for investigating serious crimes, e.g., assault, robbery, or homicide (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Smaller police departments may not have these specialized officers.
- **False Report**: A person makes a false sexual assault report to the police and does so deliberately or intentionally (Archambault et. al., 2022).
- **Law enforcement**: Law enforcement describes the agencies and employees responsible for enforcing laws, maintaining public order, and managing public safety (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021).
- **Rape culture**: Rape Culture is an environment where rape is prevalent and sexual violence is normalized or excused by the media and popular culture. The use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies, and the glamorization

of sexual violence, creating a society that disregards women's rights and safety (Southern Connecticut State University, 2022).

- **Rape myths**: Rape myths are defined as a complex set of cultural beliefs and attitudes that support and justify sexual violence, primarily by shifting blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Zidenberg et al., 2021).
- **Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA)**: stereotypic beliefs about rape that attempt to define what rape, its victims and who is to blame for the rape (Navarro & Ratajczak, 2022; Estrich, 1988; St. George, 2021).
- **Rape**: The legal definition of rape is defined as the "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (PERF, 2013).
- **Trauma:** personal exposure, witnessing of trauma to others, and indirect exposure through trauma experience of a family member or other close associate in accordance with the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), (Pai et al., 2017).

  "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, 2014, p.7).

- **Trauma-informed Care**: based on the **4 Rs**, it is a program, organization, or system that **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others; and **responds** by fully

integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization** (SAMSHA, 2014).

- **Sexual assault**: The term sexual assault is a broader and inclusive definition of any type of sexual activity or contact that is not consented to. It means any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by Federal, tribal, or State law, including when the victim lacks capacity to consent (Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), 2023).

Summary

Rape and sexual assault continue to be critical issues and problems that warrant continued focus and study. The prevalence of sexual violence continues to be high in America, with a violation every 68 seconds and every 9 minutes a child is assaulted. Meanwhile, 25 out of every 1,000 perpetrators ever end up serving time in prison (RAINN, 2023), leaving communities unsafe. Research shows that less than one-third of sexual assault cases reported to police result in an arrest (Alderden & Ullman, 2012).

The Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) proposes that sociocultural norms can lead to harmful consequences for sexual assault survivors at individual and system levels. A community-engaged framework was used in this research to examine sociocultural norms, namely rape myths, at the ecological level of the criminal justice system. The researcher engaged and listened to the voices of detectives, who are usually the first persons that victims interact with when they seek to engage with the criminal justice system. Law enforcement officers or detectives are responsible for conducting the investigation of sexual assault cases and providing the evidence to substantiate a court case. According to O'Neal & Hayes (2020), it is vital to explore the impact of rape myths on detectives' views about victims and sexual assault investigations. Detectives may become

concerned with potential outcomes at later stages of case processing, and they predict how the victim, the suspect, and the incident will be viewed and evaluated by prosecutors, judges, and jurors. Overall, rape culture-specific societal beliefs contribute to the justification of sexual violence against certain types of victims, and downstream orientations likely shape law enforcement's treatment of these cases (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020).

There has been limited research conducted through the lens of law enforcement, and this study seeks to hear their voices and any concerns they may have working with this victim population. As reported by O'Neal (2017), often, police officers are the first point of contact victims have with the criminal justice system, and initial contact is essential and is associated with case attrition. This current study proposed to provide information to increase the safety and believability of victims of sexual assault and rape and to improve the response to victims, particularly law enforcement officers. The results of this study will provide more understanding for all professionals about the issues that often impede victims from disclosing and reporting cases of sexual assault to law enforcement. Additionally, it can help inform detectives of attitudes and practices that might impede proper criminal investigation.

Reporting rape or sexual assault can be an intense and invasive process, and therefore, victims are reluctant to report for fear of being blamed, not believed, or fear of reprisal (Henninger et al., 2019). Rape and sexual assault continue to be critical issues and problems that warrant continued focus and study to include more about how sexual assaults are reported, how the acceptance of myths about rape and sexual assault impacts police investigations, and victims' self-perception.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

This study explored the current literature about rape myths and the impact on criminal investigation of sexual assault cases by detectives. This section introduced the theoretical framework for this study, the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell, 2009). This paper also introduced the trauma-informed concept of Start by Believing (SBB), a global awareness campaign by End Violence Against Women International in 2011, designed to address a narrow focus improved response to victim disclosures by professionals and the public in general (Lonsway, K. A., & Archambault, J., 2018).

This researcher also explored the overall impact that sexual violence has on the lives of its victims. There is a need for continued work in eradicating the blight of sexual violence in our communities. The historical study of "victimology" began in Europe after World War II, primarily to seek to understand the criminal-victim relationship. Early victimology theory posited that victim attitudes and conduct are among the causes of criminal behavior (Young & Stein, 2005), and blaming victims continues to be problematic for crime victims, most especially victims of sexual assault. The earliest written laws define *rape* as a property crime where the male head of the household is considered the victim. The first rape crisis centers opened in Washington, DC, in 1972 and San Francisco, CA in 1973. The latter center began with a mother whose 15-year-old daughter was raped in her high school and then mistreated by police officers and doctors. Her mother worked to offer help, so others did not suffer the same experience (May 2012). According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, rape crisis services exist in every state, led by state coalitions. Rape crisis centers provide a comprehensive array of services

designed to aid victims in their recovery and work with community systems on their behalf (NSVRC, 2023).

Rape and sexual assault are defined in the criminal statutes of each state in the United States. However, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) began using a revised definition of rape in 2013, where the word "forcible" was removed from the name of the offense (PERF, 2013). Initially, the term *forcible rape* was defined by the Uniform Crime Reporting Summary Reporting System (UCR SRS) as "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will." That definition had been unchanged since 1927 because it was outdated and narrow in scope (PERF, 2013). It only included forcible male penile penetration of a female vagina. The new summary definition of *rape* is "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (PERF, 2013). Then Director of the Office on Violence Against Women, Susan Carbon, acknowledged the importance of the change in definition, stating, "For the first time ever, the new definition includes any gender of victim and perpetrator, not just women being raped by men" (Carbon, 2012, para.3). The new definition also recognized the use of objects and recognize the situations where victims were unable to give consent because of temporary, permanent mental or physical incapacity, as in many drug- or alcohol-facilitated rapes (Carbon, 2012).

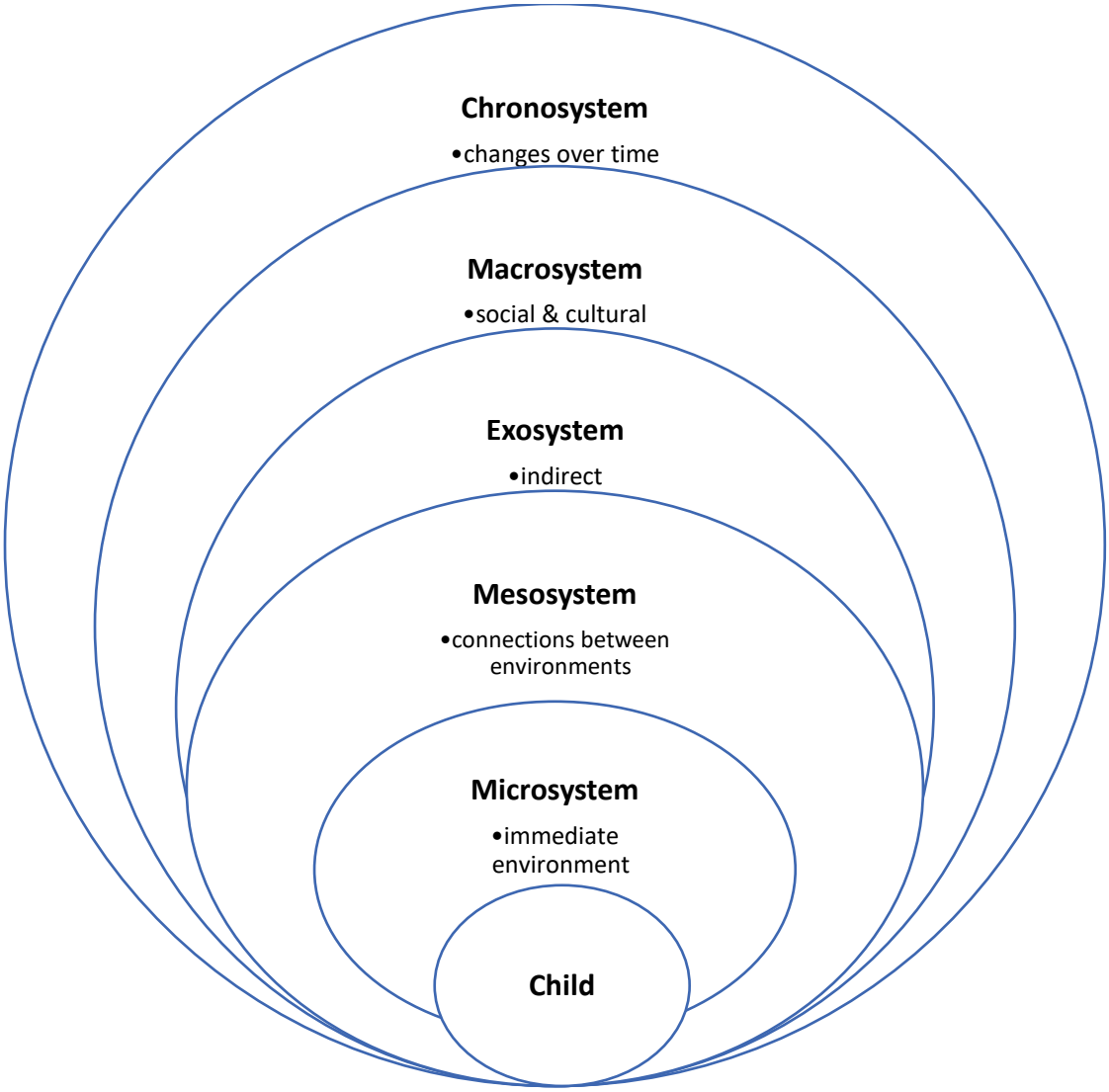
The South Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (SCCADVASA) identifies sexual assault as any forced or coerced sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent and includes rape and attempted rape, child molestation, groping, forced kissing, and sexual harassment or threats. Further, sexual assault is a crime of power and control (SCCADVASA, n.d.). One in four U.S. women will experience a completed or attempted

rape in their lifetime (Walsh et al., 2023). They also found that more than 50% of survivors will experience two or more rapes where both rape and physical violence co-occurred. While great strides have been made since the development of rape crisis centers, statistical information bears proof that more work is needed to remove barriers to victim care. More work is needed to improve society's overall understanding of the problem, "Sexual assault does not occur in social and cultural isolation: we live in a rape-prone culture that propagates messages that victims are to blame for the assault, that they caused it and, indeed, deserve it" (Campbell, 2009, p. 4).

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health. This study used the Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health as well as offered a conceptual program construct called Start by Believing, that was used to guide communities in establishing an environment that supports and encourages victims of sexual assault to come forward and for friends and professionals to start by believing their disclosure. The theoretical framework, The Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health was designed to examine the psychological impact of adult sexual assault through the societal progression with the perspective to understand how factors at various social levels contribute to post-assault sequelae or pre-existing trauma (Campbell et al., 2009).

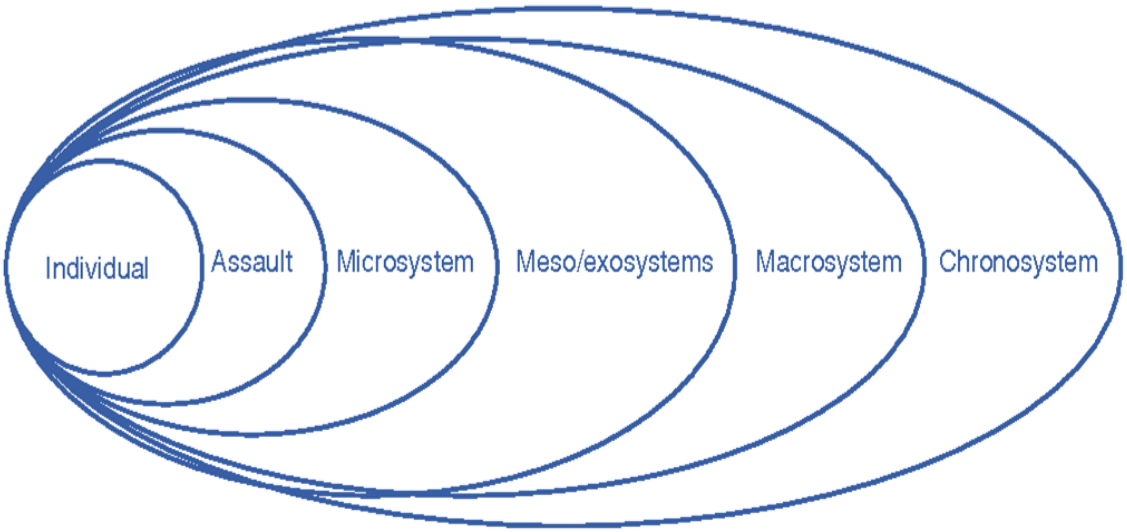
Figure 4. *Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Theory*



Note: Kortz et al., 2023

Campbell's theoretical model was based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Childhood Development to understand the complex systems that influence human development (Cherry, 2023). The ecological chart demonstrates how at each level, victims are impacted throughout society, and sexual assault and rape are deeply embedded through all societal levels (see Figure 5. An Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health).

Figure 5. *An Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health*



Note: Campbell et. al., 2009

Like the Bronfenbrenner model that it was based on the model that used similar systems to demonstrate how they linked. A critical point of the research into the Ecolgocial Model of the Impact of Sexual assault on Women's Mental Health revealed:

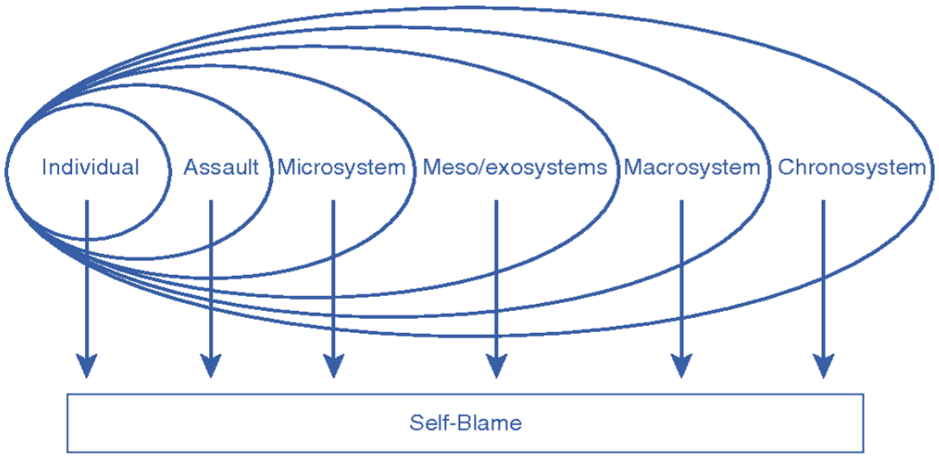
> Women's victimization is cumulative, and the response from the social world is cumulative, both of which affect how any one incident of sexual violence will affect women's mental health. (Campbell et. al., 2009, p. 4)

Table 1. *Key Findings: The Impact of Multilevel Ecological Factors on Sexual Assault Victims' Psychological Sequelae)*

Ecological Level	Major Findings
Individual-level factors (victim and assault characteristics)	• Mixed findings on the impact of sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, race, income, education, employment), assault characteristics (i.e., victim-offender relationship, injury, alcohol use), and biological factors (i.e., cortisol levels) on postassault well-being. • Personality traits such as neuroticism predict PTSD among sexual assault survivors. • Poorer preassault mental health predicts multiple negative outcomes, such as depression and anxiety. • Avoidance coping strategies predict multiple negative outcomes, such as longer recovery time, depression, and PTSD. • Perceived life threat during assault and perceived dangerousness of assailant predict negative outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomatology.
Microsystem factors	• Positive social reactions and support from informal providers (e.g., family, friends, significant others) predict less mental distress post-assault. • Negative social reactions from informal support providers predict multiple negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress.
Meso/exosystem factors	• Legal System: Secondary victimization (i.e., victim-blaming, minimal help) predicts higher symptomatology such as PTSD and depression. • SANEs, rape crisis centers, and other community mental health programs help mitigate the negative effects of other medical systems (e.g., emergency rooms) and predict less mental health distress post-assault.

Ecological Level	Major Findings
Macrosystem factors	• The rape-prone culture, institutionalized racism, cultural differences in responding to rape, and acceptance of rape myths create a difficult sociocultural context for sexual assault survivors to recover.
Chronosystem factors	• Cumulative trauma and revictimization over the lifetime predicts negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.
Self-blame: Multilevel meta construct	• Self-blame is associated with PTSD and depression at the individual level. At the micro and meso/exo levels, receiving blame exacerbates self-blame and is associated with PTSD symptomatology. At the macro level, internalized sociocultural beliefs affects victim's self-blame. At the chronosystem, victims of cumulative trauma have been found to have greater self-blame and higher levels of trauma.

Figure 6. Self-Blame as a Meta-Construct That Stems From All Levels in the Ecological Model



Note: Campbell, et. al., 2009

Self-Blame. The Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health describes the holistic impact of sexual violence, not only on the direct victim but on all of society. The issue of blame is identified in the model. The model identifies the impact that self-blame has on victims. Reich et al. (2021) found that self-blame is often characterized as a reason for accepting responsibility for the occurrence of the rape or for failing to prevent it from happening. When a rape victim receives an adverse social reaction to a disclosure from either a personal acquaintance or a professional, it can lead to the development of a psychopathology for victims (Reich et al., 2012; Dworkin et al., 2019).

In the aftermath of a sexual assault, victims face many decisions, including whether and how to seek help. Most victims (58-94%) seek informal help from friends and family (Lonsway et al.,2022). Only a small percentage of victims report rape to law enforcement, as demonstrated by a seminal study, Rape in America (Kilpatrick et al., 1992). The most common reason survivors give for not reporting is fear of reprisal (68%), but a similar proportion said they did not report because they feared they would be blamed for their sexual assault (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). DePrince et al. (2018) found that sexual assault victims receive more negative reactions and less helpful information from their friends and family than they get from law enforcement or community-based services.

Start by Believing

Victims of sexual assault need understanding, care, and compassion from professionals. The Start by Believing (SBB) campaign addresses these issues (Lonsway et al., 2022). It seeks to raise the consciousness of law enforcement and communities, offering victims acceptance when they make their initial disclosures. In April 2011, End Violence Against Women International launched the Start by Believing Campaign to change the way society and professionals respond

to sexual assault with a particular focus on providing training to police officers who investigate sexual assault and rape cases (Lonsway & Archambault, 2020). The inspiration for the campaign was based on the research and professional experiences showing that – unlike other crimes – disclosures of sexual assault victimization are generally seen as "false until proven true," where victims are viewed with skepticism until they can prove they are "legitimate" victims and their experience counts as "real rape" (Lonsway & Archambault, 2018, p. 3). The campaign draws from the psychological literature on attitude formation and behavioral change designed to target a single behavior among professionals and the public. Lonsway and Archambault (2018) designed the Start by Believing campaign intending to improve the response to disclosures of sexual assault victimization with an orientation of belief rather than doubt, blame, or shame. A visual depiction (see Figure 7. Conceptual Impact of Start by Believing) was devised by the researcher to offer a basic description of SBB's goal.

Figure 7. *Conceptual Impact of Start by Believing (SBB)*

Note: Sands Belle, 2024

The Prevalence of Sexual Violence

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN, n.d.) described the sexual violence as an all-encompassing term that is non-legal and refers to specific crimes such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse (CDC, n.d.). The CDC (2022) reports that sexual violence is any sexual activity when consent is not obtained or freely given. Sexual violence is a severe public health problem in the United States that profoundly impacts lifelong health, opportunity, and well-being. Sexual assault is alarmingly prevalent in the United States, and RAINN reports that every sixty-eight seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. On average, there are 463,634 victims (age 12 and older) of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States (Department of Justice, 2020). Women and girls experience sexual violence at high rates. Overall, one in six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8 % completed and 2.8% attempted). According to RAINN (n.d.), one in 33 men will be victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.

A seminal study, *Rape in America: A Report to the Nation*, was one of the first national longitudinal studies about rape and sexual assault. Through the writings of Kilpatrick et al. (1992) came the profound statement, "…rape in America is a tragedy of youth…" and statistics continue to substantiate that statement. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, victims experienced their first attempted or completed rape between the ages of 11 and 17 years of age (Basile et al., 2022). Nationally, the majority of sexual assault victims are under the age of 30, and the majority (54%) are in the 18-34 age group (RAINN, n.d.). Sexual assault on college campuses is prevalent and a reoccurring problem, especially for female undergraduates. Findings from campus surveys suggest that between 20% and 24% of female

students have experienced sexual assault (Salim et al., 2022), pointing out the need to address this issue with youth.

Sexual assault is described as a common and pervasive form of trauma. Sexual assault is associated with increased risk for all forms of psychopathology assessed, and stronger associations were observed for post-traumatic stress and suicidality (Dworkin et al., 2018). The likelihood that a person suffers suicidal or depressive thoughts increases after sexual violence (Dworkin et al., 2018). Gilmore et al. (2023) found that persons who identified as a sexual minority or gender minority consumed more drinks per week, had more severe post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and reported higher levels of suicidality. The study also demonstrated that first-generation college students, students with more severe sexual assault histories, and students with more severe PTSS had higher current suicidal intent (Gilmore et al., 2023). This information continues to validate the need to address the high rates of sexual violence in young people.

Related Literature

For this literature review, the topic examined through three primary topics: Sexual Assault Outcomes in the Criminal Justice System; Rape Myth Acceptance Among Law Enforcement; and Law Enforcement, Individual and System Dynamics. The Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) was infused throughout each topic area to explain how it addressed each topic.

Sexual Assault Outcomes in the Criminal Justice System.

This study highlights various aspects of the theoretical model to substantiate the importance of this work and how it intersects with victims' experiences from the initial phase

throughout the criminal justice system. This section highlights the prevalence and outcomes associated with sexual assault, the reporting patterns by victims to law enforcement, and the experiences of victims seeking justice through the criminal justice system.

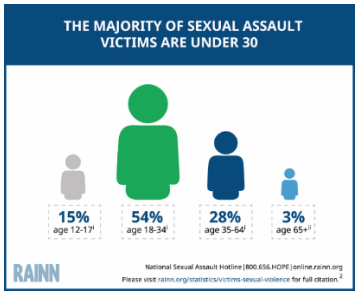
Sexual assault does not occur in social and cultural isolation. A rape-prone culture propagates messages that victims are to blame for the assault, that they caused it and indeed deserve it (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Campbell et al., 2009). Following the assault, victims are often left to negotiate post-assault help-seeking resources and find a pathway to recovery within multiple, frequently hostile environments. If survivors turn to their family and friends for social support, how will they respond? They may also have been influenced by negative cultural messages (Campbell et al., 2009). The Ecological model is designed to demonstrate that the trauma of rape extends far beyond the actual assault, and society's response to this crime can also affect the victim's well-being.

Approximately 26% of U.S. women have experienced completed or attempted rape, defined as unwanted or nonconsensual vaginal, oral, or anal penetration (Basile et al., 2022). Rape is the most common trauma leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among women, with a prevalence of up to 50%. It is considered an overwhelming condition associated with an increased risk of suicide, drug- and alcohol dependence, neurological- and vascular problems, as well as extended time away from work (Bragesjö et al., 2020). These results highlighted the urgency of providing immediate and appropriate intervention.

Rates of sexual assault in the United States have been alarming and consistently high for decades (RAINN, 2023). Estimates are that 36.3% of women and 17.1% of men will experience sexual assault in their lifetime, ranging from unwanted sexual contact to completed rape (Smith et al., 2017). The negative impact of sexual assault is far-reaching, contributing to trauma-related

disorders, substance dependence, and suicidality (Dworkin et al., 2018). Sexual violence (S.V.) is a pervasive problem impacting millions of people in the United States, often first occurring in adolescence and young adulthood (Basile et al., 2021). The physical and mental health consequences of rape are severe and far-reaching, and the first level of the Ecological model identifies many of these aspects. Walsh et al. (2023) notes that the dual experience of sexual and physical violence is associated with increased mental and physical health problems.

Figure 8. *Younger People Are at the Highest Risk of Sexual Violence (RAINN (c), 2023)*



- Ages 12-34 are the highest risk years for rape and sexual assault.
- Those age 65 and older are 92% less likely than 12–24-year-olds to be a victim of rape or sexual assault, and 83% less likely than 25–49-year-olds.

Young women are especially at risk:

- 82% of all juvenile victims are female. 90% of adult rape victims are female.
- Females ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.
- Women ages 18-24 who are college students are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence. Women of the same age who are not enrolled in college are 4 times more likely to experience sexual violence.

Millions of men in the United States have been victims of rape.

1. About 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.
2. 1 out of every 10 rape victims are male.

Inequities in Sexual Victimization. The findings of Basile et al. (2022) highlight the importance of understanding the circumstances for which victimization increases, such as racial and ethnic minority groups. Further, Basile et al., 2022 warn that the relationship between victimization and historical trauma, structural inequities, and health must be understood in order to decrease such disparities. Alaskan Native, American Indian, and multiracial men reported unwanted sexual contact at a rate of 1 in 3, compared to nearly 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men overall reporting sexual coercion during their lifetime (Basile et al., 2022). Other key findings of Basile et al., 2022:

- More than 2 in 5 American Indian or Alaskan Native and multiracial women were raped in their lifetime.
- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 9 men reported being harassed in a public place at some point in their lifetime, with 10% of women and 3% of men reporting harassment in the 12 months prior to taking the survey.
- 1 in 4 Black and Hispanic women, 1 in 3 Asian or Pacific Islander women reported being sexually harassed in a public place in their lifetime.
- 21% of TGQN (transgender, genderqueer, nonconforming) college students have been sexually assaulted, compared to 18% of non-TGQN females, and 4% of non-TGQN males.

In addition to the previously related findings about the impact of rape and sexual assault on communities based on their ethnicity or sexual orientation, there are also financial

consequences that have monumental public health and economic costs. Individual rape victims encounter an estimated lifetime economic cost of $122,461. Overall, the lifetime economic cost of rape across all U.S. victims is nearly $3.1 trillion (Peterson et al., 2017). According to RAINN (2023), efforts need to be in place to ensure survivors who access criminal justice services have interactions that are conducive to recovery and the prosecution of perpetrators, as well as address the public health crisis caused by sexual assault.

The Mental Health Impact of Sexual Assault. The individual level of the ecological model covers the impact of sexual assault on women's mental health following sexual assault. Prominent researchers and activists have extensively studied the impact of sexual assault since the early years of victim advocacy in the 1970s. In 1974, Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom introduced the concept of Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), describing it as the acute phase that occurs as a result of forcible rape or attempted forcible rape. Burgess (1985) felt there needed to be an assessment, understanding, and evaluation of the reactions and feelings of the victim following a rape. Following a rape, Burgess and Holmstrom identified a two-phase reaction they labeled acute and long-term (Burgess, 1985). The first phase was an acute stress reaction. The second phase was the victim's attempt to reorganize and regain control over their lives. Over the years, providing a clear and concise definition of trauma has been challenging for theorists. In 2013, the 5th edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), released by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), introduced a reorganization and categorization of the definition of trauma and stress-related disorders in which the new partial explanation of trauma defines it as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence (Jones & Cureton, 2014). Rape is the most common experience associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among women (Möller et al., 2014), and an early study by Kilpatrick &

Acierno (2003) focused on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because it is the most consistently documented consequence of crime. The study concluded that, overall, men were physically assaulted more often than women, but women were victims of sexual assault more often than men. Rates of lifetime PTSD in response to sexual assault range from 30 percent to 80 percent, depending on the type of sexual victimization; rates of PTSD that result from physical assault range from 23% to 39%. Women develop PTSD in response to physical or sexual assault at about the same rate, but men rarely develop PTSD as a result of physical assault; however, they regularly develop PTSD in response to sexual assault such as rape.

Further, Kilpatrick and Acierno (2003) found that younger people were at increased risk of victimization and more likely to develop PTSD as a result of their victimization. One of the biggest takeaways for those providing treatment for sexual assault victims was understanding that past victimization is the most influential risk factor for future victimization. Existing research has shown that completed rape, perceived life threat during assault, and injury due to assault are associated with increased risk of PTSD (Kilpatrick & Acierno, 2003b). Continued research into PTSD is significant to understanding and treating trauma.

Other common behaviors victims face after experiencing a sexual assault are suicidal ideations and suicidal behaviors (Gilmore et al., 2020). Individuals with sexual assault histories, certain demographic variables (e.g., age, sexual orientation, ethnicity), and psychological symptoms such as depression and PTSD are associated with increased rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Gilmore et al., 2020). Given the pervasiveness and impact of sexual violence, it is critical to continue studying this issue and developing ways to help survivors.

Reporting to Law Enforcement. Kilpatrick et al. (1992) conducted one of the first national studies and concluded that rape and sexual violence are horrific crimes that leave

devastating consequences in their wake. While communities clamor for law enforcement to "do something," which usually means making arrests that lead to convictions, only 24.9% of sexual assault reports made to law enforcement are investigated, and 1% lead to convictions (SAMHSA(a), n.d.) Furthermore, many survivors report negative law enforcement experiences (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020). In addition to the trauma associated with being a victim of sexual assault, there is the secondary trauma associated with revealing or reporting the incident that is exacerbated when victims are not believed, and criminal investigations do not follow their due course. In addition to understanding the direct impact of sexual trauma, more attention must be given when victims are not accorded the proper criminal investigative procedures.

Lonsway and Archambault (2020) wrote that rape victims are particularly reluctant to report to law enforcement, and they have been known to suffer second injury from those charged with their safety and care. After a sexual assault, victims face many decisions, including if they should seek help or not. It is speculated that most victims (58%-94%) seek informal help from friends or family members and not from professional service providers (Lonsway et al., 2020). Concernedly, a smaller percentage of sexual assault victims access formal support. About 5%-20% report to law enforcement, and less than half seek medical care (27%-40%), and estimates are that 16%-60% of sexual assault victims access mental health services. Adolescents may be less likely to access formal support (8%-13%) (Kilpatrick et al., 2003).

National statistics reveal that college students are highly vulnerable to sexual assault; however, they rarely report to law enforcement, and if they do, their cases rarely result in arrests or convictions (Fedina et al., 2016). Victims are more likely to report to law enforcement if they did not voluntarily consume alcohol, if they had anogenital or bodily injuries, if they were not students, and if they received a medical forensic exam within 32 hours after the assault

(Downing et al., 2020). Among sexual assault victims, reasons for non-reporting to police include fear of retaliation, believing police would not help, thinking the assault was a private matter, thinking the assault was not significant enough to warrant a report, and not wanting to get the perpetrator in trouble (Planty et al., 2013). As the preceding information explains, self-blame and doubt by victims are significant adverse outcomes, as described in the ecological model.

Law enforcement is in a unique position to function as gatekeepers for justice in sexual assault cases because it is their responsibility to investigate these cases. When law enforcement deems cases to be baseless, they are classified or coded as "unfounded." The high rates of unfounded sexual assault cases are based on the perceptions of police officers (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Increasing sexual assault reports, according to Patterson & Campbell (2010), provides an opportunity to hold perpetrators responsible in hopes of decreasing the prevalence of sexual assault.

Social Support and Disclosures. Following a sexual assault, this level of the model focuses on the help-seeking behaviors of victims and how they are received from their identified social support networks and available community services. In the aftermath of a sexual assault or rape, victims can be hesitant to utilize existing support and safety measures. If they take advantage of social service support or medical care, they still might be reluctant to seek the help of law enforcement. Victims who did not report the crime to law enforcement provided reasons such as "it did not occur to them," "they solved it on their own," "had no proof or witness," "believed the police would not act," "feared retaliation," "felt ashamed," or "feared the violence would worsen" (Ceelen et al., 2016).

Negative Reactions to Sexual Assault Disclosures. McCart et al. (2010) suggest that distinctions are commonly made between formal and informal sources of support in the help-

seeking literature. Formal helpers, they write, include trained professionals, such as law enforcement officials, mental health workers, and physicians. Informal helpers include members of informal social networks, such as family and friends. Patterns of reporting among women are more complicated when characteristics of the victim-offender relationship are taken into account. For example, studies indicate that women victimized by a known offender (e.g., spouse, boyfriend, friend/acquaintance) are much less likely to report the crime to the police compared to women victimized by a stranger.

An initial study conducted by Ahrens (2006) identified three reasons rape victims chose to remain silent after receiving a negative response to their initial disclosure. First, the adverse reactions they receive from professionals led victims to question whether future disclosures would be advisable. Secondly, unresponsive, and harmful reactions from friends or family reinforced feelings of self-blame; and finally, adverse reactions from either source reinforced uncertainty about whether their experiences qualified as rape. Experiences such as these effectively serve to silence victims.

According to the website sponsored by the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN (n.d.)) reported that only 5.7 % of incidents end in arrest, 0.7% result in a felony conviction, and 0.6% result in incarceration. Even when suspects are arrested, prosecutors may decline to file charges and end further investigation. Other cases fall apart because of how long it took to investigate the case (Webster, 2019). Even when law enforcement conducts a solid investigation, prosecutors can decline to go forward. Morabito et al. (2019) cites a lack of cooperation by victims. Victims may feel they are not being treated respectfully by police or prosecutors. Alternatively, they may lack the resources necessary to continue participating in the

numerous interviews, which could mean time off from work, childcare costs, and other expenses and issues (Webster, 2019).

Trauma-informed Care. Insights about the impact of trauma followed the Vietnam War and led to the professional understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The greater understanding of trauma in the lives of veterans of war extended to informing a comprehensive understanding of trauma in civilian areas, such as abuse, neglect, and other traumatic events (Wilson et al., 2013). Wilson et al. (2013) proffered the question that if professionals paused to consider the role of trauma and lingering traumatic stress in individual lives, how would they behave?

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) convened a working group, SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, to address the widespread harm and costs created by trauma and to acknowledge trauma as a public health problem (SAMHSA, 2014). The group developed definitions for the concept of individual trauma and the principles of a trauma-informed approach. The Three E's of Trauma are the **Event**, the **Experience,** and the **Effect**.

> "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA, 2014, p.7).

Table 2. *Key Assumptions of Trauma-informed Principles (SAMHSA, 2014)*

SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

1. SAFETY	Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve, whether children or adults feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and interpersonal interactions promote a sense of safety. Understanding safety as defined by those served is a high priority.
2. TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY	Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust with clients and family members, among staff, and others involved in the organization.
3. PEER SUPPORT	Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing their stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing. The term "Peers" refers to individuals with lived experiences of trauma, or in the case of children this may be family members of children who have experienced traumatic events and are key caregivers in their recovery. Peers have also been referred to as "trauma survivors."
4. COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY	Importance is placed on partnering and the leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among organizational staff from clerical and housekeeping personnel, to professional staff to administrators, demonstrating that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making. The organization recognizes that everyone has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach. As one expert stated: "one does not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic."
5. EMPOWERMENT	Throughout the organization and among the clients served, individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon. The organization fosters a belief in the primacy of the people served, in resilience, and in the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to heal and promote recovery

	from trauma. The organization understands that the experience of trauma may be unifying aspect in the lives of those who run the organization, who provide the services, and/or who come to the organization for assistance and support. As such, operations, workforce development and services are organized to foster empowerment for staff and clients alike. Organizations understand the importance of power differentials and ways in which clients, historically, have been diminished in voice and choice and are often recipients of coercive treatment. Clients are supported in shared decision-making, choice, and goal setting to determine the plan of action they need to heal and move forward. They are supported in cultivating self-advocacy skills. Staff are facilitators of recovery rather than controllers of recovery. Staff are empowered to do their work as well as possible by adequate organization support. This isa a parallel process as staff need to feel safe, as much as people receiving services.
6. **CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES**	The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender identity, geography, etc.)' offers, access to gender responsive services; leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections; incorporates policies, protocols, and processes that are responsive to the racial, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals served; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.

Trauma-informed Organizations. SAMHSA (2014) further clarified that people working in organizations or systems providing care to traumatized people must provide trauma-

informed care, also known as a trauma-informed approach, which is simplified by the Four R's: **Realizes, Recognizes, Responds,** and **Resists Re-traumatization.** According to SAMHSA,

> "A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist **re-traumatization**." (2014, p. 9).

SAMHSA also identified ten domains (below) of organizational change as elements to consider when establishing a trauma-informed organization:

Figure 9. ***The 10 Domains for Organizational Change***

Note: SAMHSA, 2014

Implementing trauma-informed organizational assessment should involve stakeholders and clients at all levels in the development change process (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 12). Rape victims can benefit from when reporting to police, particularly when organizations implement trauma-informed strategies. Police interviewing skills can prevent survivor revictimization while eliciting helpful crime statements. However, rape myth acceptance and police culture may pose obstacles to a trauma-informed approach (Rich, 2018).

The Neurobiology of Trauma. The neurobiology of trauma is considered a trauma-informed strategy that has been taught to multi-disciplinary teams of law enforcement officers, victim advocates, medical/forensic, and prosecutors through Comprehensive Victim Interviewing techniques (EVAWI, n.d.). Hopper et al. (2020) explain this concept as a combination of various branches of brain science as it relates to sexual assault, and it helps to explain the response of victims during the assault, how the memory of the assault is encoded and stored in memory, and how the memories are later recalled. Neurobiology helps to explain human experience, thinking, emotions, memories, and behavior in terms of brain structures and processes (Hopper et al., 2020, p. 5). According to Hopper et al. (2020), law enforcement culture believes that interviews must occur as quickly as possible, assuming that people have their best recall immediately after an incident. Trauma-informed care begins by understanding common victim responses and conducting compelling victim interviews in a simple format based on scientifically sound principles (Hopper et al., 2020). Sexual assault is a highly underreported crime whereby one-third of victims contact law enforcement to report, primarily because they are afraid of not being believed (Dewald & Lorenz, 2022). Those who move forward with reporting the crime are often met with extreme scrutiny and questioning of their credibility by law enforcement, and they are also assessed for whether a sexual assault occurred, unlike in other crimes (Dewald & Lorenz,

2022). Hopper et al. (2020) suggests that officers do not understand the "neurobiology of trauma" which explains the reactions and responses of victims during a sexual assault, how victims encode and store the experience in their memory, and how they recall these memories. Having an understanding of how trauma impacts individuals can help officers understand that what they perceive as false reporting or lies may simply be a trauma response.

Rape Myth Acceptance Among Law Enforcement

Improving law enforcement response to sexual assault could serve to increase reporting rates to law enforcement. However, the acceptance of rape myths by police officers lead to poor outcomes for victims in the criminal justice system. Avalos (2016) wrote that male officers are more likely than female officers to hold to certain rape myths such as many rape complainants are lying: “Consequently, the police failure to believe rape victims and failure to investigate their cases has a disproportionate impact upon women, because police do not take effective action against crimes involving sexual offenses against women” (Avalos, 2016, p. 8).

The meso/exosystem level of the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Health framework examines how the legal system can create secondary injury for victims. In a national sample of women, only 10% to 18% of women reported their rape to law enforcement (Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Jessup-Anger et al., 2019). The tendency of some police officers to question victim allegations can discourage them from reporting and reduce victim participation with investigators (O'Neal, 2017), which subsequently reduces the likelihood of arrest in sexual assault cases.

Rape myths, which are present at both the individual and institutional/societal levels, are one way in which sexual violence has been sustained and justified throughout history (Edwards et al., 2011). Research suggests that numerous factors are related to rape proclivity and the

occurrence of sexual aggression, one of which is the acceptance and perpetuation of rape myths (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Edwards et al., 2011).

The effects of rape myth acceptance are experienced worldwide. According to the Pan American Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2021), all countries report alarming numbers of sexual crimes, which makes sexual violence a worldwide problem affecting women, one of the most vulnerable groups in society (Murray et al., 2023). A victim's clothing, lifestyle, and the place where the sexual aggression occurred are often used to evaluate cases of sexual violence and attribute responsibility to the victim or blame the aggressor (Murray et al., 2023). Studies worldwide report up to 58.8% prevalence. These figures reflect the transversality of the problem, affecting women from different social conditions (Murray et al., 2023). Most studies about rape have been conducted in the USA, while studies about modern rape myths have primarily occurred in Europe, with a minimal number of studies in Latin America. One of the most studied beliefs is system justification related to rape myths and responsibility attributed to the victim (Murray et al., 2023).

In a rape case, police officers, jurors, and judges usually receive information about two opposing parties: the potential perpetrator and the alleged victim. It is their behavior (e.g., prior alcohol consumption), their characteristics (e.g., status, attractiveness), as well as their relation to one another (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, or intimate partners) that influence the verdict rendered by jurors or research participants (Süssenbach et al., 2015). Some authors suggest that rape myths function as a cognitive process that helps people organize and interpret information about rape (Eyssel & Bohner, 2010). Findings by Eyssel & Bohner (2010) revealed that the mechanism underlying the biasing effects of RMA may be the subjective feeling of entitlement to judge.

The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), developed by Payne et al. 1999 measures degrees of rape myth acceptance. Although it was very reliable, its language needed to be updated, such as colloquial phrases and sexual slang on college campuses. There was also a need to address the subtle or covert myths, and this led to an updated measure for assessing subtle rape myths that have evolved (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). The updated IRMA used the terms "girls" and "boys" rather than "women" and "men" because the later phrasing made the students think of older adults out in the community. They also switched to other terminologies, such as "hooking up," and removed the phrase "cry rape" to reflect current cultural changes (McMahon & Farmer, 2011).

Informed by the prevalent myths about rape, rape victims, and rapists, most people have engrained views concerning what the typical rape scenario looks like. The "traditional rape script" described by Ryan (2011) typically includes a stranger rapist who violently assaults a virginal young woman in an alley or other public place at night. This conceptualization of what a rape is permeates the media representation of sexual assault, as well as popular discourse (Klement, 2017). The perpetrator's characteristics, according to Klement (2017), are described as crazy, deviant, loner, stranger, and use violence. The victim's characteristics are described as young, innocent, and alone. The situational characteristics are generally at night or in an abandoned place, and, finally, the victim's post-assault behavior, for example, if they were emotionally unstable or compliant with the police (Klement, 2017). Ryan (2011) summarized a study to examine the relationship between rape myths and sexual scripts by asking study participants to construct stereotypical seduction and rape scenarios. These scenarios had blitz themes involving a stranger, outside at night, and physical violence. Seduction scenarios, like

acquaintance rape reports, had the common themes of alcohol and a prior relationship between the two actors (Klement, 2017).

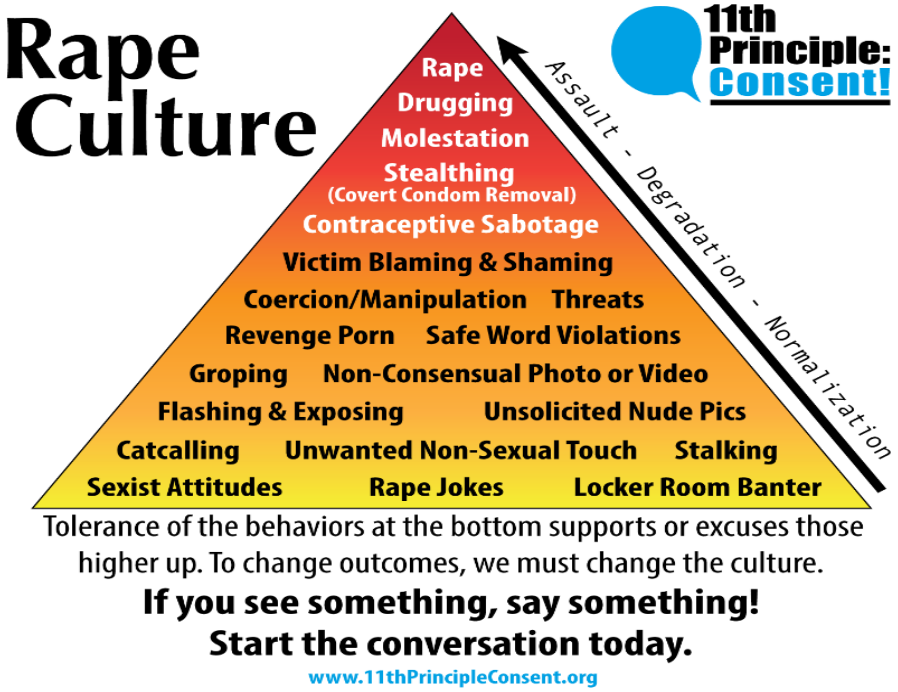
Some myths blame the victim for the assault (e.g., "women often provoke rape through their appearance or behavior") and myths that express disbelief in claims of rape (e.g., "most charges of rape are unfounded"). Furthermore, other types of myths serve to exonerate the perpetrator (e.g., "rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control") or claim that only certain types of women are raped (e.g., "usually women who do things like hang out in bars and sleep around that are raped"). At the core of the types of myths is the overall negation of the crime of rape (Eyssel & Bohner, 2011).

Whereas women often endorse particular types of rape myths, men generally exhibit higher RMA scores than women—within community settings (Grubb & Turner, 2012), student samples (Hayes et al., 2013), and in particular, within male-dominated settings such as college fraternities (Hayes et al., 2016), prison environments (Debowska et al., 2016), religious groups (Barnett et al., 2018) and the military (Carroll et al., 2016).

This qualitative research study examined if the endorsement of rape myths impacted how detectives conducted sexual assault investigations. Rape myths are defined as false beliefs and concepts about sexual assault (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994) that create problems for victims. This research was conducted among investigators in law enforcement in an urban community associated with outcomes relevant to the success of sexual assault investigations (i.e., preference for investigating sexual assault crimes, perception of false reporting, and likelihood to refer to other agencies) (Avalos, 2016). Ultimately, this will serve to inform the type of rape myths that need to be addressed and corrected among investigators in order to improve the process of sexual assault investigations.

The model's microsystem and meso/ecosystem levels highlight the need for positive social reactions and support from informal providers, identified as family, friends, and significant others. The response of the legal system, as well as other systems, can positively or negatively impact victims. The theoretical framework through the meso/exosystem identifies secondary victimization where victims are blamed, resulting in minimal help and support. This section of the study will also look at the endorsement of Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) in conjunction with investigators' attitudes about sexual assault investigations. It will also discuss macrosystem factors, such as rape culture and cultural differences in responding to sexual violence.

Figure 10. *Rape Culture the 11th Principle: Consent!*



People with high rates of rape myth acceptance (RMA) view victims more negatively and perpetrators more positively. Rape myth acceptance has been used to examine and learn how

disclosures of sexual assault are received and interpreted by law enforcement officers, for which this study will look closer at the outcomes.

The concept of rape myths was first introduced in 1974 and was referred to as 'sexist myths' or 'fallacies' by Schwendinger and Schwendinger, who discussed the most common false beliefs about rape (Hudspith et al., 2021). In addition to internal dialogue that can psychologically cripple sexual assault victims, they face external prejudiced ideology comprised of a set of culturally agreed upon victim-blaming attitudes (Bhuptani, 2020). The term "rape myth" first emerged in the late 1970′s after researchers began to recognize that people often expressed beliefs about rape and sexual violence that were untrue (Lilley et al., 2023, p. 3). In the seminal writings of the feminist scholar Susan Brownmiller, she discussed "male myths of rape," also referring to them as "distorted proverbs" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 312). Lonsway & Fitzgerald (1994) defined *rape myths* as beliefs "that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women." The introduction of the concept of rape myths by renowned sociologists Schwendinger and Schwendinger and feminist scholar Brownmiller explain that a set of false cultural beliefs underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women (Edwards et al., 2011).

Groundbreaking scholars such as Burt (1980) demonstrated that rape myths are "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). When there is high rape myth acceptance (RMA) among college students, police, and potential jurors, victims are viewed more negatively and perpetrators more positively (St. George, 2021). Individuals who accept rape myths tend to blame victims for rape, minimize perpetrator responsibility, and deny the prevalence and harm caused by rape (St. George, 2021). Additionally, when victims have high RMA, they were less likely to report their rapes to law

enforcement (Heath et al., 2013; St. George, 2021), which emphasizes the need to dismantle rape culture.

A myth is a story or tale told to illustrate a point or explain how things are, and rape myths are no exception. Rape myths address stereotypes about victims and perpetrators as well as the contexts in which an assault could occur (Süssenbach et al., 2015). *Rape myths* are defined as descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape, and an early study of rape myth acceptance (RMA) investigated what factors influenced rape myth attitudes, such as sex-role stereotyping and the acceptance of interpersonal violence (Navarro & Ratajczak, 2022).

What rape myths attempt to do is define what rape is, who can be raped, and who is to blame if a rape occurs. A very prominent myth is that of the "real rape" stereotype or typecast that suggests that rapes are more harmful and victims more credible when the perpetrator is a stranger, has a weapon, and when the female victim resists, sustains an injury, and reports the crime immediately (Estrich, 1988; St. George, 2021). If someone operates on these beliefs as if they are factual, it is called "rape myth acceptance."

The stereotype of "real victims" suggests that some victims are more credible or blameless than others. This stereotype suggests that victims "provoke" rape by the way they dress or how they behave (e.g., drinking) and whether the perpetrator was a stranger and used a weapon (St. George, 2021). Women who dress and act inconsistently with traditional feminine gender role expectations cannot be "real victims" because they are believed to have precipitated their rapes, wrote St. George (2021). The onus for preventing rape, according to rape mythology, is on women who must avoid provocative dress and behaviors (McMahon & Farmer, 2011), an ideology intrinsic in rape culture mythology.

Burt (1980) published one of the first research studies about rape myth acceptance defining these myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" that serve to create an atmosphere that is "hostile to rape victims" (Payne et al., 1994, p. 28). The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) was the first widely used measure created based on her definition of rape myths "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p.217; Edwards et al., 2011). Recently, additional studies have been conducted addressing the use of the instrument, examining its cultural efficacy with participants in Pakistan (Kazmi et al., 2023).

Common Rape Myths

1. “Real rape” occurs between strangers and usually involves some form of violence.
2. “Real rape” victims fight off their attackers, often have injuries which prove they’ve been raped and report the rape immediately afterwards.
3. False allegations of rape are common and usually occur after a woman has had consensual sex but later regrets it.
4. Allegations of rape between people who know each other are usually the result of some miscommunication or misunderstanding and ought not to be considered rape.
5. Being raped by someone you know is less traumatic than being raped by a stranger.
6. Women invite rape by the way they dress, how they act, how much alcohol they consume or how many sexual partners they’ve had.
7. Only gay men are raped; heterosexual men are not.
8. Rape only occurs because men cannot control their sexual urges once ignited by a woman.

Contrary to widespread belief, a reported eight out of ten rapes perpetrated against women and girls across middle- and high-income Western countries are committed by a person known to the victim. In contrast, stranger rapes account for a small proportion of recorded rape offenses (Lilley et al., 2023). However, it is essential to note that data suggests an entirely

different victim-offender profile among male rape victims, with stranger rapes against single men being much more prevalent (Murphy et al., 2022; Lilley et al., 2023).

Payne et al. (1999) documented reasons why people believe women lie about rape: they get caught having an affair; they regret having sex; women are trying to get back at men for a perceived slight; or some women are emotionally unstable. Despite the prevalence of the belief that women lie about rape, recent research estimates that the actual rate of false rape allegations is on par with other violent crimes (Lonsway, 2010). Regarding victim-offender relationships, crime data continues to display that perpetrators of sexual violence are frequently intimately acquainted with their victims. Rape myths can operate implicitly as well as explicitly (Edwards et al., 2011). Implicit messages and beliefs from the media and popular culture may help to bolster acceptance of rape myths.

The Impact of a Rape Culture and Systemic Racism. The macrosystem factors in the theoretical model acknowledge influences such as rape culture, socioeconomics, and racial discrimination as significant findings in the impact of a woman's psychological health following sexual assault. Contemporary rape culture is characterized by the interplay between rape myths that minimize rape and myths that catastrophize rape (Tilton, 2022). While women are, on the whole, unlikely to be taken seriously, White women are much more likely to be taken seriously than Black women, and White women are especially likely to be taken seriously when accusing Black men (Crenshaw, 1991; Tilton, 2022) and such disparities have been barriers for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities and have to be addressed for minority victims to engage in the criminal justice system equitably.

Over-policing in communities of color is a well-known tactic that has a severe adverse impact on these communities. What is less well known is that over-policing is accompanied by a

corollary—a pervasive and systemic under-policing of violence against women of color. According to Avalos (2023), the refusal to see women of color as victims of crime who are worthy recipients of justice and to minimize the severity of violence committed against them are habits that are deeply embedded in the American system of justice.

More than 50% of rape victims will experience two or more rape. Rape and physical violence are co-occurrences, and multiple experiences of sexual and physical violence are associated with elevated mental and physical health problems (Walsh et al., 2023). Predictors of revictimization, according to Walsh et al. (2013), are associated with victims who earn less than $10,000 annually and have a history of assault, uniquely predicting an increased risk of physical or sexual victimization.

In 2017, the sexual intimidation of women received significant attention through the hashtag #MeToo after the announcement of a series of sexual harassment scandals in Hollywood. Activists using #MeToo were sometimes criticized by politicians, opinion makers, and columnists, suggesting that victims (often) are partly responsible for sexual harassment (Maes et al., 2019). Studies have been conducted exploring the role of the media as a contributor to the acceptance of rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes among adults. However, little is known about the media's contribution to sexist attitudes among adolescents (Maes et al., 2019).

According to Yap (2017) rape myths pull people in both directions. Minimizing rape myths encourage dismissive responses to rape. Such myths suggest that women routinely lie about rape, that rape victims somehow deserved what happened to them, or that they were asking for it anyway. Conversely, there are catastrophizing rape myths. These myths suggest that rape occurs late at night in dark alleys, and is committed primarily by inhuman monsters, especially Black or seriously mentally ill men (Yap, 2017).

Rape myths are also prevalent in the media and directly affect consumers' attitudes towards rape. For example, results from a content analysis of prime-time television dramas found that 42% of storylines depicted a woman "wanting" to be raped, 38% depicted a victim lying about rape, and 46% featured women "asking" to be raped (e.g., by being scantily dressed) (Brinson, 1992; Edwards et al., 2011).

Media rape scripts often paint pictures of rapists that support myths and do not correspond to what is known about the modus operandi of rapists. In 1979, Dr. Nicholas Groth and H. Jean Birnbaum developed the typologies of rapists based on their review of arrests and convictions of persons incarcerated for forms of sexual violence (Archambault & Keenan, n.d.). An early typology of sex offenders was put forth by Groth & Birnbaum (2001) 1. the Power Rapist (Power Reassurance and Power Assertive); 2. Anger Rapist; and 3. Sadistic Rapist/Ritualistic Rape. Having an understanding of sex offender typology provides context for understanding the reactions and responses of victims of rape and sexual assault.

Ryan (2011) wrote that when asked to describe a typical rape, people respond with elements such as: 1. a stranger-rapist, 2. A surprise attack, 3. The use of extreme force, and 4. extreme resistance from the victim. This type of script is contradictory to research that shows that the majority of victims are women who are raped by men they know and with whom they are even in relationships with, and that alcohol and coercion are more prevalent than violent force (Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Klement, 2017).

Law Enforcement: Individual and Systemic Dynamics

Many victims do not report sexual violence to law enforcement even though the outcome could significantly improve. Low reporting rates have been associated with three dominant

issues. A seminal study (Golding, 1999) revealed the short-and long-term psychological and physical health problems generated by sexual assault and supported by the works of Kilpatrick & Acierno (2003). Secondly, Ceelen et al. (2016) wrote that in unreported crimes, offenders are not held accountable, they pose a continued threat to others, and third, there is a misallocation of already limited resources determined by inaccurate information.

Perceptions of False Reporting. Research suggests that police officers often decide victims' truthfulness before conducting a thorough investigation (Murphy-Oikonen, 2022). A wealth of research demonstrates how rape mythology can also impact juror judgments and decision-making within rape trials. Court observation research and analysis of rape trial transcripts suggest defense lawyers habitually exploit rape myths in an attempt to influence juror perceptions of rape complainant's credibility by relating specific cases and complainant conduct to general "real rape" stereotypes (Temkin et al., 2018; Lilley, 2023).

Specifically, jurors who endorsed rape myths to a greater extent were found to be more likely to disbelieve the veracity of the complainant's version of events while rating the defendant's testimony as more believable than jurors who scored low in rape myth beliefs. Heightened rape myth acceptance scores were also directly associated with not-guilty verdict decisions, both pre-and post-deliberation (Willmott et al., 2018; Lilley, 2023).

In addition to this, rape myth acceptance has demonstrated problematic consequences upon juror decision-making and, ultimately, verdict decisions, suggesting problems with jurors' ability to evaluate evidence impartially. Given that extensive research shows that individuals high in rape myth acceptance are more likely to return not guilty verdicts, rape cases (especially non-stranger, ambiguous cases such as IPRs) suffer greater attrition rates compared to any other type of criminal offenses (Lilley et al., 2023).

The acceptance of rape myths perpetuates the inclination to blame the victim because these myths are often used to dismiss the severity of cases. Others might believe it was not rape if a weapon was not used, or the victim did not fight back, or if the victim agreed to some form of intimacy (Gravelin et al., 2017). Although not systemic across all agencies, research has documented general shortcomings in victim-centered police response to survivors. These have been, in part, the result of misperceptions regarding the effect of trauma and the ways that first responders expect a crime victim to behave. When expectations have not been met, police have questioned survivor credibility, which has produced secondary victimization (R. Campbell, 2008; Franklin, 2019). Officers had expectations that "reliable" victims dress conservatively (Sleath & Bull, 2012), have a reputable job (Page, 2008), and present a consistent narrative of events (Alderden & Ullman, 2012).

Research demonstrated the callous nature of police responses when victims present with flat affect, do not have demonstrable injuries or torn clothes, fail to make timely reports, or do not exhibit emotional distress or expressive behavioral signs of pain (Franklin, 2019). In situations where expectations of being timely, consistent, and having the ability to tell their story sequentially for reporting are not met, the victims' motives and "truth-telling" are questioned. Police suspect false allegations (Venema, 2016) or allege the victim may be seeking attention, and their credibility diminishes (Maddox, 2012; Franklin, 2019).

Reexperiencing traumatic events, flashbacks, and nightmares is common among people with PTSD. These include intrusive thoughts and distressing dreams that impair a survivor's ability to function, interrupt decision-making, and inhibit normal behavior at work, school, or in interpersonal relationships. In addition, avoidance and emotional numbing have encouraged survivor efforts to circumvent any event, person, or place that triggers recollection of the original

trauma. Related to interaction with the criminal justice system, survivors have delayed formal reporting to law enforcement due to maladaptive coping behaviors, such as avoidance of talking about the incident—a consequence of PTSD (Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Disjointed recollection is a common consequence of PTSD. Often, the memory encoding process is disrupted during traumatic experiences, which can result in amnesia or fragmented memories (Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Franklin et al., 2019). People living with PTSD internalize traumatic events, which have produced negative emotions, such as shame and guilt, which may frequently evolve into behaviors such as lack of eye contact, increased agitation, and purposeful avoidance (Lee et al., 2001; Mason & Lodrick, 2013). These behavioral displays can influence how survivors disclose victimization and affect how police interpret or "trust" their disclosure (Franklin et al., 2019).

Social support can provide sexual assault victims with essential resources to cope with the experience and feelings post-assault and may offer varying pathways to recovery. It is important to note that there are two main types of social support: formal and informal (Lonsway et al., 2022). When victims of sexual and domestic violence take the first step to report a crime formally, the responding officer will conduct an interview and take the victim's statement, asking for details to include in the incident report. Police officers have been referred to as the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system (Murphey-Oikonen, 2022). Research has found significant attrition rates for sexual assault cases, finding that as few as 20% of reported sexual assaults were closed by arrest (Morabito et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2023). Research has shown that some police decisions in sexual assault cases appeared to be based on rape myths and stereotypes surrounding "real rape." These misconceptions can lead to expectations held by officers regarding how a victim should behave (Franklin et al., 2020). For example, research has demonstrated that some police officers believe victims should be able to provide consistent,

detailed accounts of their victimization, including a chronological recollection of events immediately before and during an assault (Campbell et al., 2015).

Improving law enforcement response to sexual assault could serve to increase reporting rates to law enforcement, increase prosecution rates, and ultimately decrease sexual assault prevalence (Avalos, 2016). In 2011, Lonsway and Archambault (2020) developed the Start by Believing Campaign to encourage communities to change the way they respond to sexual assault. Disclosures by sexual assault victims often elicit responses of doubt and blame rather than compassion and support (Lonsway & Archambault, 2020). Adverse reactions have detrimental effects on victims, and their harmful impact compounds as negative or adverse reactions increase (Lonsway & Archambault, 2020; Campbell, 2008).

O'Neal (2017) contends that the intense law enforcement focus on credibility is arguably the result of existing in a social climate—widely referred to as rape culture—that often justifies sexual assault based on particular complainant and incident characteristics. Most studies are based on responses to vignettes; however, O'Neal's (2017) study was conducted by reviewing actual incident reports. A clear understanding of how law enforcement officers understand and view credibility in rape victims is important because they are often the first point of contact victims have with the criminal justice system (O'Neal, 2017).

In a significant study, Leverick (2020) found overwhelming evidence that prejudicial and false beliefs held by jurors about rape affect their evaluation of the evidence and their decision-making in rape cases. For the first time, an evaluation of both quantitative and qualitative research was drawn upon to examine the role of rape myth acceptance. In the quantitative research, rape myth scales were significant predictors of jurors' judgments about responsibility, blame, and the verdict. While in the qualitative research, the mock jurors expressed views about

how "real" rape victims would behave and what "real" rape looks like (Leverick, 2020). The study viewed attitudes towards rape victims into four broad categories:

- Beliefs that blame the victim/survivor
- Beliefs that cast doubt on allegations
- Beliefs that excuse the accused
- Beliefs about what "real rape" looks like

Much research has shown how important criminal justice figures, especially police officers who play a significant "gatekeeping" role are often misguided by this belief. Spohn and Tellis (2019) refer to “downstream orientation” (p. 388) where in this case police anticipate how solicitors will react to the case. This behavior occurs at every phase of the criminal justice system. Research by Maddox et al. (2011) investigating police perceptions of IPR (intimate partner rape) discovered that 40% of officers believed a victim to be more credible if she reported her attack immediately afterward (Lilley, 2023). Rape myths serve to both predispose and bias judgments about who may be lying and who is telling the truth (Willmott et al., 2021).

Stereotypes and myths about rape and sexual assault have detrimental effects on the perception of victims in cases of sexual violence. This impact has been shown repeatedly in mock-jury studies (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Temkin and Krahé (2008) vividly document that rape-supportive stereotypes and antivictim attitudes are widely shared by members of the criminal justice system and the general public. From this, the field has learned that the judgment processes of lay persons and criminal justice professionals are often biased in a way that usually disadvantages assault victims (Krahé, 1992; Eyssel & Bohner, 2011).

Rape myths can trap women in sexually violent relationships by enforcing rigid, traditional gender roles that ostracize victims as failures to embody feminine ideals. Furthermore,

rape myths that undermine the veracity of IPR allegations and "real rape" stereotypes can prevent women from labeling their own experiences as rape (Lilley, 2023).

Efforts have been made to update and revise instruments such as the, The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS) (Payne et al., 1999) and the Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) scale (Gerger et al., 2007) developed to measure rape myth acceptance. Kazmi et al. (2023) conducted the first study in Pakistan, seeking to validate the Illinois Rape Myths Acceptance Model culturally. They conducted an online survey of persons (312 females and 200 males) who reported receiving a rape disclosure from a friend. In analyzing the results, they concluded that those having lower scores on rape myths acceptance (being less likely to endorse rape myths) were significantly associated with positive attitudes towards rape victims. Similarly, being female, having a graduate or above level education, not blaming the victim, having a prior history of sexual victimization, offering support for friends experiencing sexual assault, and being liberal were significantly associated with positive attitudes towards rape victims. Kazmi et al. (2023) further concluded that having experienced sexual victimization leads individuals to show empathy to rape victims and thus may influence them to provide support for such victims.

Finally, the findings of Kazmi et al. (2023) showed that the Illinois Rape Myths Acceptance Scale is a valid means for measurement of rape myths in Pakistan as established through the acceptable model fit indices. With the use of validated scales, they propose to gain a better understanding of rape and the factors related to it, which could be used to inform practices and policy decisions (Kazmi et al., 2023).

The Fallacy of False Reports. Historically, the perceived rate of false rape allegations has ranged from 5%-90% (Lisak et al., 2010). However, the actual rate is estimated to be 2%-

10%, which is about the same, or lower, than the false allegation rate of other violent crimes (Belknap, 2010; Lisak et al., 2010). The myth that women lie about being raped can lead (a) to women to choosing not to report sexual assault when they experience it, (b) police officers choosing not to investigate a rape allegation, or (c) a prosecutor choosing not to take a rape case to trial (Klement, 2017, p. 2).

Archambault et al. (2022) clarified that the criminal offenses associated with false reporting have different names and penalties across the country, carrying different penalties. However, they included filing a false report, providing false information, false statements, false swearing, obstruction of justice, interfering with a law enforcement investigation, and disorderly conduct. Some departments added other charges, such as fabricating or tampering with evidence, misuse of emergency communications systems (911), and fraudulent so they could claim Crime Victim Compensation (Archambault et al., 2022). Most of these crimes are misdemeanors, but some are felonies, depending on the specific offense and the state.

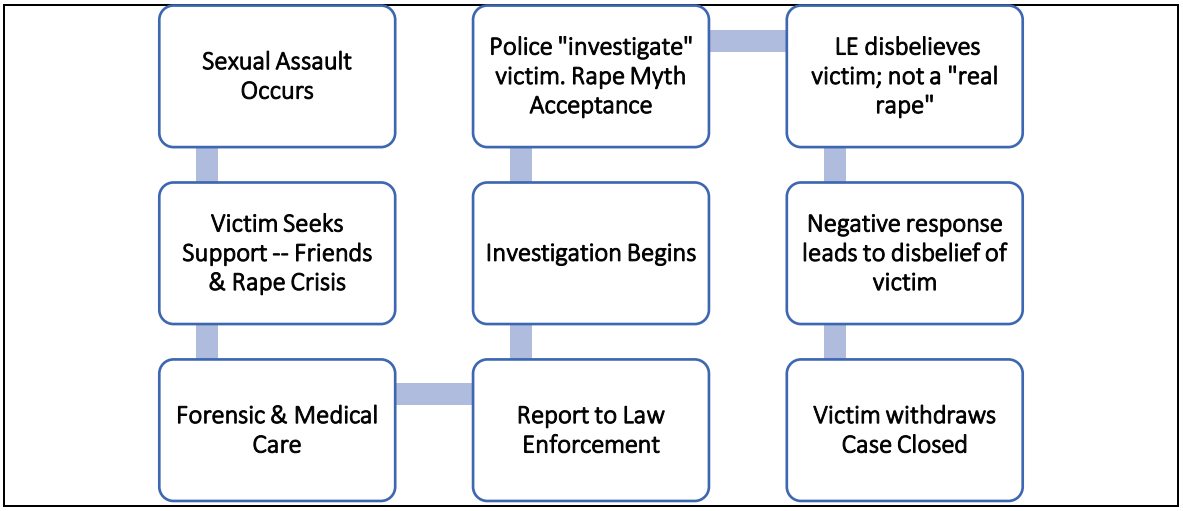
Victims have found themselves in a "double bind" because if they want to have their cases investigated, they must engage with the criminal justice process and provide investigators with information and evidence – including information about their behavior that may be embarrassing or even illegal (Archambault et al., 2022). These factors have led investigators to doubt the victim's credibility and the report's legitimacy. Further, there is heightened suspicion when victims behave in ways the investigator does not understand or expect such as the victim providing statements that are inconsistent, implausible, or untrue (Archambault et al., 2022). These types of seeming contradictions can be explained through understanding trauma-informed interviewing.

Bhuptani (2020) studied the association between blame (victim-blaming social reactions to disclosure of rape and self-blame) and psychological distress as explained by shame. Barriers to disclosure can be perceived or actual. Sexual assault and recovery are embedded in a multilevel social context that shapes how victims may judge themselves and are evaluated by others (Kennedy & Prock, 2018).

There was a need to explore the attitudes, knowledge, and thought processes of law enforcement officers that may affect a victim's perceptions of negative interactions and unsatisfactory outcomes within reported sexual assault cases (Walsh et al., 2023). Victims can experience secondary victimization: "victim-blaming attitudes, behaviors, and practices engaged in by community service providers, which further the rape event, resulting in additional trauma for rape survivors" (Venema, 2014, p.873). Research also documented that negative responses to a sexual assault disclosure can create an additional, measurable, and decidedly harmful effect on victims – over and above the trauma of the sexual assault itself (Lonsway & Archambault, 2018).

Formal and Informal Disclosures. Lonsway and Archambault (2022) studied the benefits victims can receive from the support of loved ones, such as when family members and friends meet the disclosure with positive forms of information, emotional support, and assistance. Rape survivors who speak out about their assault experiences are often punished for doing so when they are subjected to negative reactions from support providers (Ahrens, 2006). There is considerable evidence that survivors who received negative reactions to disclosure experienced worse post-assault outcomes, including increased post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, and substance use (Dworkin et al., 2019; Salim et al., 2022).

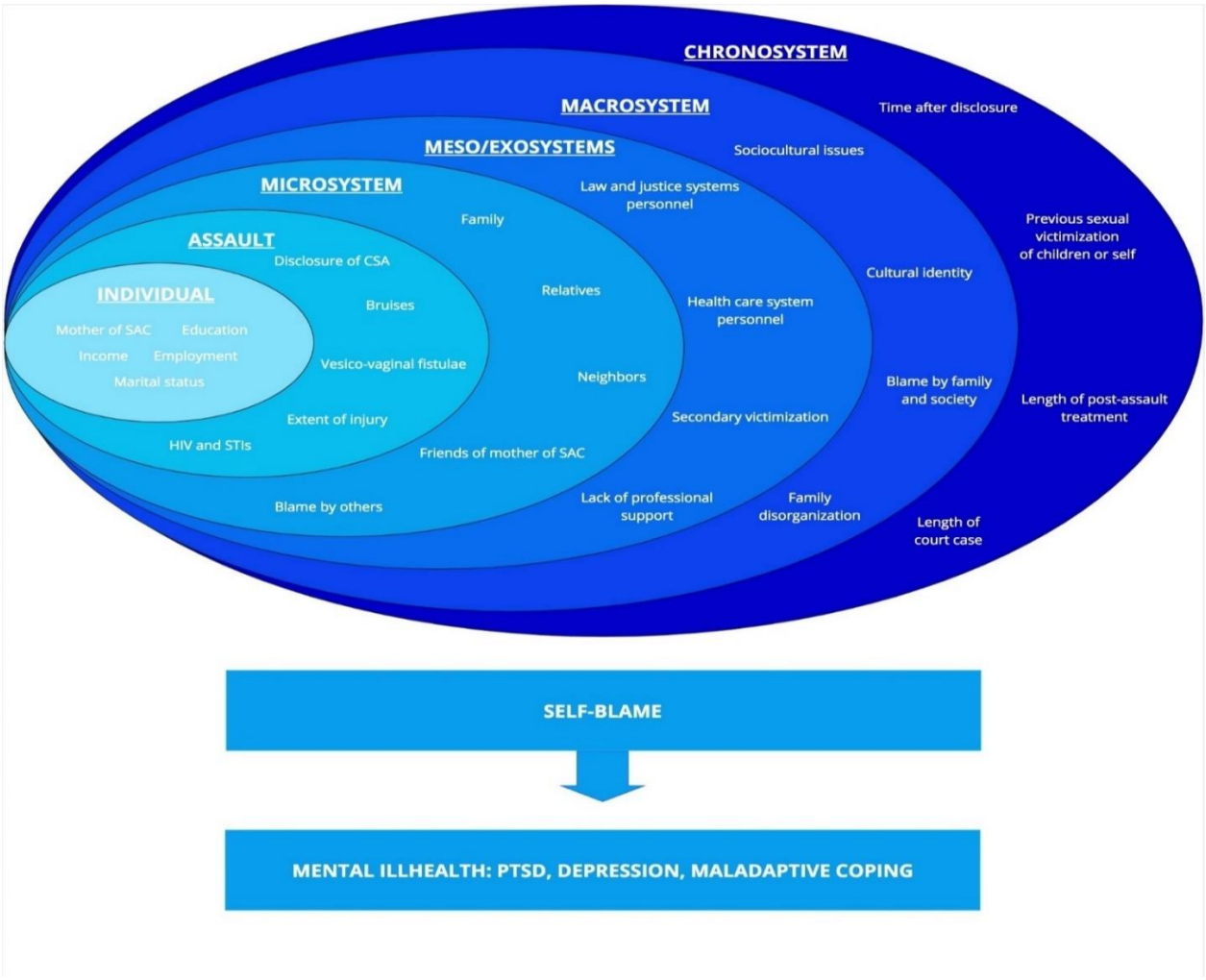
Figure 11. *A Conceptual View of Negative Responses to Sexual Assault*



Note: Sands-Belle, 2023

Police perceptions of a victim's self-presentation style can have an impact on secondary victimization, case processing, and public safety. Trauma survivors may present to police with flat or restricted affect, emotional numbing, and disjointed recollections. Often, police personnel have misperceived manifestations of trauma as indicators of reliability and credibility (Franklin et al., 2019). Police responses to victims have received scholarly attention and public scrutiny, for example, untested sexual assault kits in major U.S. cities. The Joyful Heart Foundation led the End the Backlog initiative in 2016 to raise awareness about the backlog of untested rape kits (End the Rape Kit Backlog, n.d.).

Figure 12. *The Consequences of Self-Blame as a Meta-Construct That Stems From All Levels in the Ecological Model*



Note: Campbell et al., 2009

The final phase of the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health highlighted embedded elements of self-blame by victims that can lead to significant mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other maladaptive behaviors.

Summary

In summary, the literature review provided an essential perspective of an identified gap in relevant and recent research about the impact of rape myths, whether conscious or unconscious, on the belief or disbelief of the disclosers made by rape victims. This significant gap was especially concerning if there are to be improvements in the response to sexual assault victims, and significantly reducing sexual violence. Moreover, this issue was extremely important as survivors disclose their experiences and reach out for supportive services from family, friends, social service agencies, or the criminal justice system. They must be met with a proper response in order to mitigate additional trauma. There continues to be a need to examine myths that lead to preconceived ideologies about rape victims and how to override or dislodge this thinking. This need is especially true within the criminal justice system, particularly with law enforcement officers who are at the entrance to that system. If officers do not believe that a victim has, in their view, experienced a "real rape," the case does not move forward in the criminal justice system. Blaming victims for their actions and what they did or did not do can contribute to self-blame and a victim's own acceptance of rape myths (Gravelin et al., 2017). It is crucial that the voices and experiences of victims are heard and that each case is investigated on its own merits. (Venema, R 2016).

The study used the community-engaged framework based on the Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health, which included a broad spectrum of categories and contributors, including law enforcement. Participants in this study are law enforcement officers who completed a survey that included self-report responses to open-ended questions. Open-ended responses were coded for endorsement of rape myths using items from the Tri-County Needs Assessment Sexual Assault Questionnaire (TCNA-SA).

The endorsement of rape myths by police officers contributed to secondary trauma or revictimization (Campbell et al., 1999; Maier, 2008), which refers to cases where police sometimes responded to victims with skepticism, thereby creating a second injury. When victims experience secondary (injury) trauma, they have reported increased feelings of self-blame (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020; Ullman & Filipas, 2001) and reduced engagement with police (Bostaph et al., 2021; Lorenz et al., 2021), again, increasing case attrition. A recent meta-analysis by Lapsey Jr. et al. (2021) found that victim cooperation was the strongest predictor of arrest in sexual assault cases, reiterating the need for positive police-victim interactions.

The value of the findings in this study can yield an understanding of the sociocultural norms that may function as barriers to the investigation of rape and sexual violence. It can also help well-intended detectives understand their thought processes about these cases and provide them with alternative concepts that are formulated in principles of trauma-informed care. Offering specialized training in trauma-informed interviewing, emphasizing the critical concepts of Start by Believing, could be professionally and personally beneficial.

In Chapter Three of this study, the researcher discussed the methodology involved in conducting the research through a qualitative research design using content analysis was used so that other researchers can successfully replicate the study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

This study identified the endorsement of accurate or helpful beliefs based on the principles of trauma-informed care, as well as beliefs that are false or unhelpful, described as rape myths about sexual assault among detectives. The researcher used a qualitative content analysis design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to analyze the data using a prior coding. In qualitative research a priori coding is a method that uses pre-defined codes before beginning the analysis. This approach is especially useful as the researcher sought to validate the theoretical framework based on previous literature (Hirsh, 2021). This study involved detectives who investigated cases of sexual assault and rape within a defined geographical area. Not all law enforcement agencies involved in this study were large enough to have specialized detectives therefore, uniform officers conducted the investigations. For the sake of continuity within this study the term “detectives” was used to describe any law enforcement officer responsible for investigating sexual assault cases.

This chapter described the procedures used in this study and provided a brief background of the data source. The design was discussed, including the interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions that informed the study, also reviewed are the research questions, the description of the setting, the participants, and the procedures, followed by the survey questions. The procedures section addressed the researcher's role, instruments, data collection, and analysis. Finally, a description of how trustworthiness was established, ethical considerations, and the delimitations of the study, and concluded with a chapter summary.

Design

This study used archived data from the community-needs assessment study and explored the attitudes (false or unhelpful), and the endorsement of beliefs (accurate or helpful) among detectives who investigate sexual assault. This archived data was used to explore perspectives and dispositions of detectives of sexual assault. The responses by detectives to six open-ended questions about sexual assault investigations was categorized into a codebook that used a priori coding based on ten themes. Four themes were used to capture rape myths consistent with the subscales from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, and the six principles of trauma-informed care as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014). The identification and classification of helpful and unhelpful beliefs about sexual assault endorsed among detectives might inform strategies to improve any problems during the investigation of sexual assault cases, which is important because previous research on beliefs about rape and sexual assault investigations often uses self-reporting scales (e.g., rape myth acceptance scale). This study used open-ended responses and compared the responses to self-reported scales. Detectives trained in sexual assault investigations may recognize that certain myths should not be endorsed, therefore, they might be less inclined to report them, even if they do accept the rape myth to a degree. Similarly, identifying trauma-informed beliefs in response to open-ended questions provided an opportunity to capture the perspectives of detectives that may inform future approaches to strengthening sexual assault investigations. This study used a subset of the data collected through a community-needs assessment that focused specifically on the responses of detectives who investigate cases of sexual assault, which will be discussed in the following section.

Of the original study, 30 professionals identified as detectives and they represented 42.8% (n=30) and their information was analyzed for this study. Overall, this group averaged 7.36 years in law enforcement services (SD = 7.16, with a range of less than one year to 33 years). Approximately half (52.2%) reported that they spent between 0-20% of their work time dedicated to investigating sexual assault cases.

The design of this qualitative study used a content analysis, a method of compressing large text into defined categories based on clear rules of coding (Stemler, 2001) to research the responses of law enforcement officers or detectives in the investigation of sexual assault cases. This study analyzed secondary data to identify specific endorsement of rape myths and trauma-informed beliefs (the central phenomenon) among detectives in a tri-county region of South Carolina (participants). For the current study, the researcher examined responses to six open-ended questions completed by detectives to answer questions concerning their opinions of sexual assault investigations (i.e., strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes) and perceptions of false reporting. This study used the a priori qualitative coding approach to identify and code rape myths and trauma-informed beliefs. This qualitative content analysis study used a priori coding to provide an understanding of the lived experiences and viewpoints of detectives responsible for investigating sexual assault and rape cases. It is imperative that the perspectives of law enforcement officers is heard (Mourtgos et al., 2021) in order to gain insight into addressing issues that might prohibit sexual assault victims from self-disclosure.

The researcher expected to identify themes in qualitative data regarding both helpful beliefs that are trauma-informed and unhelpful beliefs that are consistent with rape myths ideology such as the belief in "real rape" that occurs between strangers, "real victims" fight their attackers and have physical injuries, women invite rape by how they dress, act, or what they are

doing. It is expected that various unhelpful/inaccurate beliefs (i.e., rape myths) will be endorsed among the sample, including beliefs related to minimizing rape when specific characteristics are present (e.g., alcohol, known perpetrator, and nonconsensual touching that does not involve penetration). The researcher expected that helpful/accurate beliefs about sexual assault would be endorsed, such as trauma-informed perceptions about sexual assault (e.g., survivors who have impaired memory, feelings of shame, or fear) (Anderson & Overby, 2020). This present qualitative study using content analysis was essential as it provided rich descriptions of social or human phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in this case, detectives. Hearing the perspective of persons responsible for investigating sexual assault cases was crucial to understanding factors that facilitate and interfere with successful investigations of sexual assault.

The central and sub-questions in this study set the parameters for how the data was analyzed for understanding the attitudes of detectives. The characteristics of the qualitative design were appropriate for the study, and it provided a detailed description which conveyed the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher anticipated that the qualitative data would yield rich information to help understand more about detectives' attitudes and practices. The six open-ended questions about the attitudes of detectives that investigate cases of criminal sexual assault, and their use of trauma-informed practices were included in this chapter.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations?

Sub-Questions

1. What are some rape myths that detectives believe about sexual assault?
2. What are some trauma-informed practices that sexual assault detectives believe about sexual assault?

Setting

The site of this study was within the tri-county metropolitan area of Charleston, South Carolina, comprised of Charleston, Berkley, and Dorchester counties. The combined population of the tri-county region is 830,529 people within two major cities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) and other smaller municipalities. Women comprised 51.5% of the population, and the distribution of the population by race was primarily White (69.13%), followed by Black/African American (25.1%), and Hispanic/Latino (6.6%). There were nine law enforcement agencies with corresponding jurisdictions based on counties, municipalities, military, and universities, ranging from 22 to 450 sworn officers responsible for investigating sexual assault cases (Charleston Sheriff's Office, n.d.).

Participants

There were thirty (n=30) participants identified as detectives that participated in this study. The pool of participants were extracted from archived data therefore this researcher did not have access to any identifying information such as their name, age, race, or gender. All detectives indicated they worked within the identified geographical setting. All participants were assigned a number for the ease of data analysis.

Sampling

This study focused exclusively on the work of detectives within the tri-county region that investigated sexual assault cases. This segment was of particular interest because the

perspectives of police officers received minimal attention to their challenges in processing sexual assault cases (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Law enforcement responses were selected because few studies offer a professional multi-disciplinary approach and include professionals' voices, especially this segment of professionals. This study was interested in hearing perspectives from the law enforcement community and asked open-ended questions. A total of 30 detectives completed the survey of six open-ended items. There were approximately 158 points of data analyzed in this study.

The researcher extracted descriptive data about the percentage of time the participants reported they worked investigating cases of sexual assault to allow for some context for their responses to the central and sub-questions posed in this study. The detectives answered the question, "What percentage of your work time is spent working with sexual assault victims (or on sexual assault cases)? 36.7% reported that they spent 0-10% of their time investigating sexual assault cases. Conversely, 30% of the detectives reported that they spent 61%-100% of their professional time investigating rape and sexual assault cases.

Procedures

The procedures section outlined how the researcher gathered the information for this qualitative study using content analysis. Content analysis was appropriate as it compressed previously collected content into categories based on a priori coding Stemler (2001). The researcher worked with an interrater to code the responses of the participants and then used Excel software to analyze synthesize the data. Consent to proceed was granted through the IRB process.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher is employed within the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, specifically working on the National Mass Violence Center, and other projects associated with addressing Intimate Partner Violence (dating violence, sexual assault, and domestic violence). The researcher has an extensive history of developing, directing, and managing direct service programs and advocacy for victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, and families of homicide victims. She has an extensive history of working within various aspects of the criminal justice system.

The role of the researcher was to manage any ethical concerns and assumptions associated with exploring the attitudes and beliefs of detectives investigating cases of criminal sexual assault through the lived experiences of these professionals.

Instruments

The instrument for this study was a survey of six open-ended questions about perspectives of criminal investigations of sexual assault intended for law enforcement detectives. The identified questions were designed to obtain and analyze more information about their perceived strengths ("What makes investigating sexual assault cases easier?") and challenges ("What makes investigating sexual assault cases difficult?") in investigating sexual assault cases. The survey also inquired about their preferences for investigating sexual assault cases ("What do you like or dislike?"). Two items asked about their views about the elements of false reporting of sexual assault cases ("How can you tell if someone is making a false report?) as police believe that 20-53% of rapes are false (Dewald & Lorenz, 2022). Detectives were asked to state what they believed was the percentage of cases reported to their department were false cases of sexual assault. The statement "reports of sexual assault that were not actually sexual assault" was used

instead of the term "false reporting" (Venema, 2016) in the survey so that participants were not biased or felt inhibited in providing their opinions.

The six opened ended questions were guided by the theory of principles of trauma-informed care and rape myths acceptance (SAMHSA, 2014; Goodman, 2017; Archambault & Lonsway, 2018; Murray et al., 2023).

Data Collection

This study extracted from archived data stored on a secure platform, REDCap (Harris et al., 2009) hosted by the Medical University of South Carolina and it was entered into an Excel spreadsheet for data analyses. The six identified questions categorized the data. Each participant was assigned a unique number, and their responses were correspondently recorded.

Surveys/Questionnaire

The following questionnaire was used in this survey:

Tri-County Rape Myths & Trauma-informed Beliefs Questionnaire for Detectives Investigating Sexual Assault Cases

We are interested in your opinions about sexual assault investigations. Please share your opinions to the following questions:

1. What do you like about investigating sexual assault cases?
2. What do you dislike about investigating sexual assault cases?

We understand many factors can impact the success of a sexual assault investigation. Please share your opinions on factors that influence an investigation.

3. What makes sexual assault cases difficult to investigate?
4. What makes it easier to investigate sexual assault cases?

We are also interested in your opinions about reports of sexual assault to your department. Your honest opinions on this topic can help us to improve investigations of sexual assault cases.

5. How can you tell if someone is making a report of sexual assault that is not actually a sexual assault?
6. What are some common characteristics of reports made to your department that are not actually sexual assault?

Thank you for participating in this community needs assessment! The purpose of this questionnaire is to help improve responses to sexual assault disclosures.

Data **Analysis**

Rape Myth Acceptance

This qualitative study used content analysis based on a priori coding defined by Medelyan (2023) as pre-established codes developed before interaction with the data, which is deductive coding. This methodology was used to analyze participant responses to six open-ended questions that would ultimately answer the research questions in this study. The coding was based on subscales from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS) (Payne et al., 1999), 1. "She asked for it." (SA) 2. "He didn't mean to" (MT); 3. "It wasn't really rape" (NR); 4. "She wanted it" (WI); 5. "She lied" (LI); 6. "Rape is a trivial event" (TE); and 7. "Rape is a deviant event" (DE) but for the sake of this research only four of the subscales were used as categories for coding. The IRMAS has proven to be credible (Payne et al., 2002) and has also been found to be culturally valid (Kazmi et al., 2023).

Figure 13. ***Rape Myth Subscales Used in this Research.***

Rape Myth	Subscale items from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale
She asked for it	• If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened. • When girls go to parties wearing revealing clothes, they are asking for trouble. • If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped. • If a girl hooks up with a lot of guys, eventually she is going to get into trouble if they blame the survivor for her actions during the SA
It wasn't really rape	• If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it really can't be considered rape. • If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape. • If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape. • If a girl doesn't say "no," she can't claim rape - if they blame the survivor for her inactions during the SA
He didn't mean to	• When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex. • Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away. • Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control. • If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally. • If both people are drunk, it can't be rape. • It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing.

She lied	• A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it. • Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys. • Girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets. • A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped just have emotional problems. • Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim that it was rape

Trauma-informed Care Principles

In addition, to the analyzing data according to rape myth acceptance, the participant responses were coded based on the six fundamental principles of the trauma-informed principles as defined by SAMHSA: 1. Safety, 2. Trustworthiness and Transparency, 3. Peer Support, 4. Collaboration and Mutuality, 5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice, and 6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues.

Participants' responses were categorized by this researcher and another coder, E. Tilstra-Ferrell, into a codebook based on a priori coding using a total of 10 themes based on four sub-scales from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) and six from the trauma-informed principles. These categories were selected to ascertain potential biases and strengths in professionals' perspectives on sexual assault identified as themes. It is warranted to conduct further analyses of this data, specifically looking at rape myths and trauma-informed beliefs centered on the viewpoint of detectives (Franklin et al., 2020; Lapsey et al., 2021). This study used the six categories of trauma-informed principles to code for expressed elements of trauma-informed care as demonstrated or understood. The identified principles that were used and their definitions are listed in the following table, and the categories were not mutually exclusive.

Table 3. Principles and Definitions of Trauma-informed Care

PRINCIPLES	TRAUMA-INFORMED DEFINITIONS
A. SAFETY	Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve, whether children or adults feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and promotes a sense of safety. Safety is a high priority.
B. TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY	Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust with clients and all involved in the organization.
C. PEER SUPPORT	Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing their stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing. The term "Peers" refers to individuals with lived experiences of trauma.
D. COLLABORATION & MUTUALITY	Importance is placed on partnering and the leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among organizational staff, demonstrating that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making.
E. EMPOWERMENT	Throughout the organization and among the clients served, individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon. The organization fosters a belief in the primacy of the people served, in resilience, and in the ability of individuals,

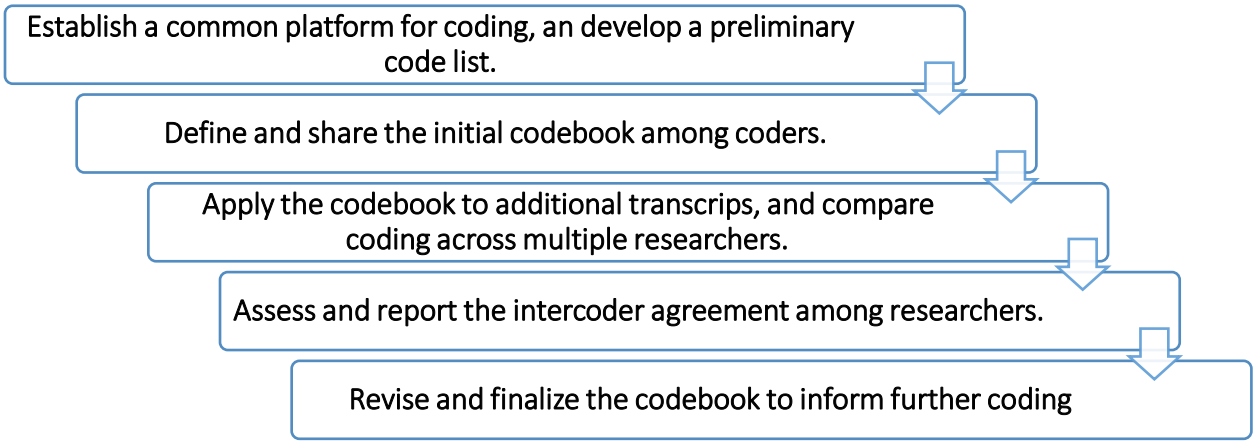
	organizations, and communities to heal and promote recovery from trauma.
F. CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, & GENDER ISSUES	The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender identity, geography, etc.) offers, access to gender responsive services; leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections; incorporates policies, protocols, and processes that are responsive to the racial, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals served; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.

Trustworthiness

Inter-rater reliability (IRR) measures the consistency between coders using the same assessment tool (Duwe, 2017). This researcher, Aurelia Sands Belle (ASB), and Emily Tilstra-Ferrell (ETF), MUSC researcher, trained as coders for this study and discussed operationalization, which is the process of turning abstract concepts into observable and measurable phenomena (Heath, 2023). The coders completed practice coding on 10% of the samples as recommended by DeWever et. al. (2006). All data were coded, and the ratings compared between the coders. Interrater reliability (IRR) was determined using Cohen's kappa. The first round of IRR resulted in a kappa of 0.07. The discrepancies in coding were discussed and operationalized with a second round. The kappa coding was completed reaching 0.54 and after a third iteration of coding both coders reached a kappa of 0.82 was reached. According to Duwe (2017), 60-74% is considered good, and 75% or higher is considered excellent. The coders

reached 82% agreement for this study, a confident and strong score and all remaining responses were then coded.

Figure 14. ***Procedures for Reliability of Interrater Coding Agreement in Qualitative Research***



Note: Creswell and Creswell, 2018

Credibility

Credibility examines the congruency of findings in qualitative research, but it is acknowledged as highly subjective and relies on an individual's judgment, unlike in quantitative research (Stahl & King, 2020). This study used well-established research methods, such as triangulation, face validity, and detailed inclusion of participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These strategies are included in this study to validate its credibility.

Dependability and Confirmability

The research results were reviewed independently, and this was accomplished through auditing the research process as recommended by Creswell & Poth (2018) so the weight of the evidence generated compelling themes. A research audit is devised by coding to make sense of survey information and documents aggregating the text (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stahl and King (2020) defined *confirmability* as the means of getting as close to objective reality in qualitative

research as possible. Qualitative researchers use accuracy and involve other researchers to establish confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). This study utilized similar strategies to establish confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research seeks to expand understanding by transferring findings from one context to another (Stahl & King, 2020). This study provided evidence that the findings of this study can be replicated in other situations. This is particularly useful for communities that wish to evaluate their readiness for community-wide collaboration. More importantly, it provides agencies a tool to examine the ideologies and behaviors of community law enforcement and other agencies that respond to victims of sexual assault and rape.

Triangulation

The triangulation of data sources, methods, and investigators establishes credibility to ensure the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018); for this study, triangulation was achieved by having two coders reviewed the survey responses to the Tri-County Community Assessment Sexual Assault Questionnaire. Survey questionnaires and document analysis validated the study results. Further, the study used a rich, thick description to communicate the findings for a shared experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The participants for this study were recruited as part of the *Start by Believing: Evaluation of a Campaign to Promote Positive Responses to Sexual Assault Disclosures* (Hahn et al., 2024). Professionals were identified through member organizations of the community advisory board

and recruited through Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) meetings, emails, and flyers. An information statement was used, and stop logic was embedded in the survey so that participants who did not endorse inclusion criteria did not receive further questions. A waiver of consent was requested and approved by the IRB because it was a brief online survey that presented no more than minimal risk. Web surveys include an implicit agreement to participate. Those who accessed the provided web link after the study was described to them and responded to questions indicated agreement. Participants were told and understood that they could end their participation at any time. A waiver was also requested for other professional providers because there is little risk involved since questions are about a campaign related to the providers' work. Not having a consent form increased participant confidentiality.

The researcher is a career victim advocate, has worked in community-based victim services in law enforcement sectors, and is keenly aware of the importance of the information this study can provide. The researcher is Vice-President of the Board of Directors of End Violence Against Women Internation (EVAWI), which created the Start by Believing (SBB) campaign. The SBB is a free campaign to any person or group desirous of using it; therefore, no individual or organizational remuneration or commitment to implement the campaign is promised.

Delimitations

The aim of this study was to learn more about the presence of rape myth acceptance among detectives who investigate cases of sexual assault and rape. Further, this study sought to understand how detectives use trauma-informed care in their organizations and departments intended to help and not inflict second injury (Brooks & Burman, 2016). This study was expected to have delimitations because it was restricted to the Charleston tri-county community;

therefore, the results may or may not apply to other geographic areas. Secondly, the study was delimited to reviewing cases relevant to victims of sexual assault and rape as the target population within the tri-county region, issues that might be vastly different for other crime victims. Thirdly, the study is delimited because it relies on the views of detectives and officers who may not be accustomed to working exclusively with sexual assault cases and investigate other crimes limiting their understanding of the special needs of this victim population. Some police departments had limited training and experience handling these types of complicated investigations.

Summary

Chapter Three of this study was conducted using the methodology of content analysis to begin to explore and understand the attitudes and responses of detectives assigned to investigate rape and sexual assault cases. The study used archived data from an expansive Tri-County Community Needs Assessment-Sexual Assault (Hahn et al., 2024) to explore issues of reported cases of sexual assault within a tri-county community region of South Carolina. The methodology used a priori coding developing a codebook that used 10 themes based on four sub-scales from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) and six from the trauma-informed principles as defined by SAMHSA (2014). The data from this group of detectives provided a perspective of their attitudes as they handled sexual assault cases based on their beliefs of rape myths acceptance and trauma-informed practices as victims often experience negative encounters when reporting incidents of sexual assault (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022).

Chapter Four will provide additional rationale for the use of the qualitative methodology chosen for this study, the selection of participants and the critical information the study revealed based on the central and sub-questions. Chapter Four will provide a summation of the collected

data and the analysis of its content that used a prior coding based on the endorsement of rape myths and trauma-informed beliefs. The exploration of rape myth beliefs and trauma-informed practices by detectives responding to sexual assault reports were rape myths defined as a complex set of cultural beliefs and attitudes that supported and justified sexual violence, mainly by shifting blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Zidenberg et al., 2021). Chapter Four will highlight the voices of these detectives in order to gain insight into their lived-experience as investigators and other descriptive data.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand better the attitudes of detectives who investigate sexual assault crimes. This study used the methodology of content analysis to examine whether the acceptance of rape myth beliefs and trauma-informed practices offered insight into detectives' attitudes about criminal investigations of sexual assault crimes and how those cases were handled. The archived data used was extracted from the Tri-County Needs Assessment Sexual Assault Questionnaire (TCNA-SA), a community-wide needs assessment that was conducted by the Sexual Assault Services of the National Crime Victims Research & Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) in collaboration with community partners (Tri-County SPEAKS, Law Enforcement, Prosecutors, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners) and End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI). The results of this study provided **a** crucial understanding of the attitudes of detectives assigned to investigate sexual assault cases.

Chapter Four provides an overview of the research paradigm, information about the participants, a summary of the data analysis, and conclusions. The responses to the central research question and the two sub-questions constituted the basis of the results used in this study. The research questions were answered using the lived experiences of the responding detectives, which offered insight into the beliefs, practices, and attitudes held by detectives who investigate cases of sexual assault.

Answers to the **central research question** of this study, “What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations?” are found in all six questions in the survey questionnaire. The findings of this study are presented in response to the research

questions. In conjunction with the central question, two sub-questions were derived to sharpen the focus and delve deeper into the issue of understanding detective attitudes about conducting sexual assault investigations. **Appendix B** Matrix of the Research Questions and Instrument Questions shows how the questions in the survey connect to the central and sub-questions.

- **Sub-question 1**: What are some rape myths that detectives believe about sexual assault?
- **Sub-question 2**: What are some trauma-informed practices that sexual assault detectives believe about sexual assault?

This chapter presents the results and findings using content analysis. It also provided data results through narratives from the participants. The participants in this study were detectives who were identified only by a pre-assigned number that ensured proper coding and the connection of their responses.

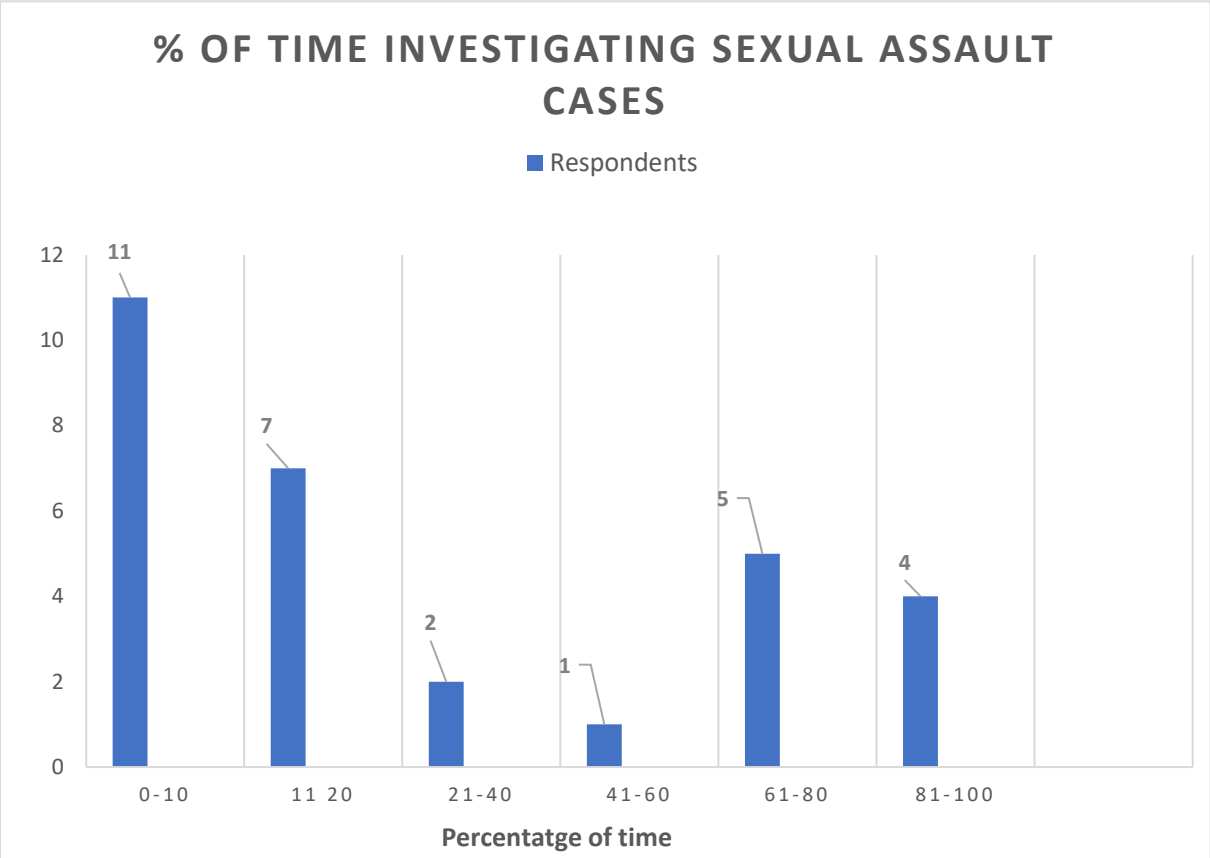
Results

Descriptive Data

Thirty-two detectives signed up to take the study, with 30 detectives completed the survey; they omitted some questions. In this study, the participants were referred to as detectives even though, in their departments, they may not have officially been categorized as detectives, which in smaller jurisdictions officers perform a wide range of duties (Rhodes & Johnson, 2008). The questionnaire results offered insight into the detectives' direct working experiences. The participants averaged a total of 7.36 years (SD = 7.16, with a range of less than one year to 33 years) of professional law enforcement service. The chart below shows how much time the participants said they spent investigating cases of sexual assault. More information is needed to

provide proper perspective, such as the size of their police department and the number of rape reports received by their department. Larger departments are more likely to receive more sexual assault reports; therefore, some detectives spend a higher percentage of time investigating these cases.

Table 4. Percentage of Time Spent Investigating Sexual Assault Cases



Rape Myth Acceptance. For the first sub-question, "What are some rape myths detectives have about sexual assault?" responses were coded using four of the scales from Appendix C. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)

Table 5. Codebook for Rape Myths

Rape Myth	Subscale from IRMAS	Participant Quotes
"It wasn't really rape"	• If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it really can't be considered rape. • If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape. If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape. • If a girl doesn't say "no," she can't claim rape - if they blame the survivor for her inactions during the SA	*51. "false statements, mutual agreement into the sexual act."* *"Indiviudal**s** [sic] not being completely truthful during the investigation (ie. adding details that did not occur or omitting details)."* *51. "Sometimes the victim is uncooperative or they are lying to us."* 51. "*friend involvement and alcohol use"* *62. "lack of physical force, not withdrawling [sic] consent, intoxicated but not lacking the ability to make decisions"*
"She lied"	• A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it. • Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.	*42. "No proof and if their stories drastically change a lot."* "*the details about the crimes don't add up and many times when friends pressure the victim to report"*

Rape Myth	Subscale from IRMAS	Participant Quotes
	• Girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets. • A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped just have emotional problems. • Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim that it was rape	*54. "Consensual sex where the victim offers a different version of events after the fact"*

In this study, no responses were coded as "she asked for it" and "he didn't mean to" (See Table 6. Summary of Rape Myth Responses by Participants). The themes "it wasn't really rape" and "she lied" were found consistent with the codebook and represented 70% (21) of all the participants (n=30) who expressed some degree of rape myth acceptance. The researcher used exemplar quotes to convey the thoughts or beliefs of the detectives who were study participants screened for the presence of rape myths (see Table 5. Codebook for Rape Myths). Thirty percent of participants were coded as having a response consistent with the rape myth, "It wasn't really rape." Responses in this category included statements that minimized rape when it involved contextual factors such as alcohol or known perpetrators. For example, Participant 49 stated, "*friend involvement and alcohol use."* Responses also were coded as "It wasn't really rape" when it included content such as "*the details about the crimes don't add up and many times when friends pressure the victim to report*", according to Participant 49. There were 18 respondents (60%) whose responses were coded in the category "She lied." Participant responses that were coded in this category tended to include assumptions that if the victim acted a certain way during

the investigative process (e.g., adding details to their story) then the report may not have been rape (see Table 5. Codebook for Rape Myths for exemplar quotes).

Table 6. Summary of Rape Myth Responses by Participants

Rape Myths	Number of responses	%
"It wasn't really rape"	9	30%
"She lied"	18	60%
"She asked for it"	0	0%
"He didn't mean to"	0	0%

Trauma-informed Care. The principles of trauma-informed care, as set out in SAMHSA (2014), provide guidelines for the treatment of people with traumatic injury. Examples of trauma-informed care by participants are exhibited in Table 7. Codebook for Trauma-informed Care and Participant Quote provides a summary definition of the themes and examples of how these themes are represented in this study. The participants expressed a high rating for trauma-informed principles, demonstrating strengths within the represented departments. Specifically, 40% of the participants were coded as describing at least one trauma-informed principle in their responses. The trauma-informed principle of *Safety* showed that 56.67% of the quotes represented a concern about victims' physical and psychological safety. Next, 30% of the participants expressed elements of the theme *Trustworthiness and Transparency* that emphasized the building and maintaining of trust with victims. The coders identified positive actions by law enforcement.

Table 7. Codebook: Trauma-informed Care and Participant Quotes

Themes	Definitions	Participant Quotes
1. Safety	Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve, whether children or adults feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and promotes a sense of safety. Safety is a high priority. **Victims feeling are considered – creates emotional safety and understanding, wants to arrest & keep the streets safe, listens to victim; there are convictions*	*42. "Our detectives put significant time and efforts into the victims and solving their crimes. Offenders are pursued to their fullest capabilities and the necessary follow-ups are completed."* *61. "Arresting a predator does not just help a victim see justice, removing a predator from society (jail) ensures the safety to other potential victims. This is a vile, violent criminal act; and I'm proud to help victims and keep other adults/children safe from such predators."* *"The satisfaction in takin a rapist into custody and finding some sort of justic for the victim who will m likely be let down by the prosecution while at the level of the courts."*
2. Trustworthiness & Transparency	Organizational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust with clients and all involved in the organization. **Behaviors that are positive actions by law enforcement*	*59. "These are very personal crimes and I really just like helping the victim in these types of cases. These cases are very delicate when working and makes it somewhat of a*

Themes	Definitions	Participant Quotes
		challenge that I can improve on each one as well. No sexual assault crime is ever the exact same." *46. "sense [sic] of urgency to collect evidence and statements while treating victims with respect and utilizing trauma informed interviewing"*
3. Peer Support	Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing their stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing. The term "Peers" refers to individuals with lived experiences of trauma.	*53. "We have a good relationship with MUSC SANE [sic Medical University of SC] nurses and the Dee Norton Child Advocacy Center. We also have supervisors that will add additional detectives from another speciality [sic] to assist."* *51. "If someone doesn't know what to do contacts are available for them to ask what to do during the investigation."*
4. Collaboration & Mutuality	Importance is placed on partnering and the leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among organizational staff, demonstrating that	*49. "Assistance from advocates and other victim services"*

Themes	Definitions	Participant Quotes
	healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making.	*26. "Collaboration amongst LE, medical, advocates and prosecutors"* *23. "We get a lot of information from victim advocates and what they can do for victims, but a lot of the time we hear from victims that they aren't getting help or they feel like they're not getting helped. I would like to hear the reality behind what some agencies especially tri-county speaks on what they can do or what they are struggling with. I would also like to see more prosecutors attend these meetings to meet with everyone on what improvements we can make to make these cases stronger right from the start."*
5. Empowerment Voice & Choice	Throughout the organization and among the clients served, individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon. The organization fosters a belief in the primacy of the people served, in resilience, and in the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to heal and promote recovery from trauma.	*49. "helping the victims of crime find closure"* *52. "helping the victims"*

Themes	Definitions	Participant Quotes
	**Taking victims statement and building the case*	
6. Cultural, historical, & gender issues	The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender identity, geography, etc.) offers, access to gender responsive services; leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections; incorporates policies, protocols, and processes that are responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of individuals served; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.	*No themes emerged* from the participants *for this principle.*

*Interrater coding notes

Table 8. Percentage of Participant Responses of Trauma-informed Care

Principle	Number of Participant Responses	Percentage of Overall Responses
1. **Safety**	17	56.67%
2. **Trustworthiness & Transparency**	9	30.00%
3. **Peer Support**	1	3.33%
4. **Collaboration & Mutuality**	3	10.00%
5. **Empowerment**	0	0%
6. **Cultural, Historical, & Gender Issues**	0	0%

Most participants (56.67%) had responses that were coded as rape myths and trauma-informed principles, demonstrating that detectives can have both helpful and unhelpful beliefs. For instance, there were participants who expressed this dichotomy by expressing both a rape myth and a trauma informed principle within their response. An example of this dichotomy was articulated by Participant 40 who wrote, "*Withdrawal of consent after the incident occurred,*" was coded as "It wasn't really *Investigating* rape" along with the expression of the trauma informed principle of Safety through their statement, "*a S/A case is unlike any other and requires a different approach. Solving these cases are incredibly rewarding for both the victim and the assigned Detective.*" Prevention work that discredits common rape myths, although in its infancy, has shown some promise (Reddy et al., 2022; PettyJohn et al., 2023). Recent social activism campaigns such as #MeToo have created a resurgence of anti-rape efforts that challenge

rape myths (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Reddy et al., 2022). According to Reddy et al. (2022), eradicating rape myths is difficult because it exists at the individual, relational and institutional levels, as demonstrated by the theoretical framework, the Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) (see Figure 12. *The Consequences of Self-blame as a Meta-Construct That Stems From All Levels in the Ecological Model).* While individual and relational efforts may be changing at a slower pace, this study revealed, through the comments by the participants, their interest in receiving training in how to conduct sexual assault investigations. There was also expressed interest in trauma-informed training, such as by Participant 46: "*sense of urgency to collect evidence and statements while treating victims with respect and utilizing trauma informed interviewing"* and *"more trauma informed interviewing training, better communication with the solicitor's office on what they would like from investigations".* The latter comment recognizes the need for collaboration as stipulated in the principles of trauma-informed care.

Although some officers may not have been familiar with the term "trauma-informed care" they did ask for increased opportunities for training. Participant 29 expressed rape myth acceptance, *"Sometimes victim's [sic] have very outlandish details that simply don't seem probable,"* and *"Victims in this case are generally asking a detective to put their night back together and have no evidence of a sexual assault."* However, this participant also recognized the need for training, "*More training so detectives are better able to understand why victims act in the manner they do."* Canaff et al. (2023) addressed the issue of training, citing specific evidence-based trauma-informed techniques that law enforcement can use to effectively interview victims of sexual assault, such as establishing trust, rapport, understanding that victims are not able to recall everything, appropriate questioning prompts, and other practices.

Summary

The results and findings in this chapter reflect what was revealed through the methodology of content analysis used based on the theoretical framework, the Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009). The theoretical framework provides an explanation for how exposure at the macrosystem level a culture steeped in rape mythology is dominant and thereby creates an environment that makes it difficult for survivors to disclose and eventually recover. This study used archived data and explored the attitudes of detectives relative to expressions of rape myths acceptance and examples of trauma-informed care. The results showed that 70% of the participants expressed examples of rape myth acceptance in their responses and 30% of all the participants expressed a trauma-informed principle.

This study was unique in its efforts to examine the value of incorporating trauma-informed principles while exploring the presence of rape myths. This study revealed evidence of primarily individual efforts to promote trauma-informed practices, yet rape myths were prevalent. Many officers expressed their intention to provide safety and transparency for victims. Murphy and Barkworth (2014) identified trustworthiness as a central element in achieving procedural justice because it provided transparency and openness about neutral decision-making.

Chapter Five of this study will provide a summation of the findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research on the topic of rape myth acceptance and the value of trauma-informed care. Chapter Five will offer tangible steps and ideas that sexual assault detectives and others working to address sexual violence should consider to ensure improved responsiveness to victims and alleviate the likelihood of secondary victimization.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Overview

This qualitative study used a content analysis methodology to explore the attitudes of detectives who investigate criminal sexual assault cases, which were measured on the bases of rape myth acceptance and principles of trauma-informed care. The result of this study offers insight into officers' attitudes about how they perceive and investigate sexual assault crimes, including their feelings about investigating these crimes, their beliefs about what distinguishes "real rape" from false reporting, and their perceptions of who are indeed rape victims. The Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) was the framework for this research. This model provided a holistic view of the effect of sexual assault on the mental and physical health of victims, beginning at the individual level to the chronosystem level (see Fig. 6). This study examined a portion of the meso/exosystem level that describes the criminal justice system's impact on sexual assault victims and, therefore, was appropriate for this study as it considered the role of detectives as crucial players in this system. The theoretical framework supported the research questions proffered in this study:

The Central Research Question: What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations?

Sub-Question 1: What are some rape myths that detectives believe about sexual assault?

Sub-Question 2: What are some trauma-informed practices that sexual assault detectives believe about sexual assault?

The objective of this qualitative study was to use content analysis using a priori coding to explore and understand the attitudes of detectives responsible for investigating criminal sexual assault cases within the identified community setting. This study used archived data from a community needs assessment in a southeastern metropolitan tri-county region of South Carolina

that examined the community's readiness to implement a sexual assault awareness campaign, Start by Believing. However, the purpose of this research was to explore the detective's attitudes about sexual assault criminal investigations based on rape myth acceptance and trauma-informed practices.

According to O'Neil (2019), police officers are often quick to point out victim culpability or victim blame primarily due to the social climate known as rape culture. Further, the prevalence of rape culture impacts how these cases are viewed and investigated. Given this context, it was interesting to note that there was no overt acknowledgment of the rape myth, "he didn't mean to." This category summarizes statements of culpability about the intentions and understanding that men have about incidents of sexual assault and offers justification for their actions, such as "their strong desire for sex" or they" get carried away" by their desires. Also, this myth rationalizes alcohol consumption and uses it to explain the incident and not consider it rape but to deem both parties culpable on both. In most intimate partner sexual assaults, acquaintance and stranger rape, the perpetrators used alcohol or drugs during the victimization (Basile et al., 2021). According to Campbell et al. (2021), in a case where rape myths are evident and the victim's credibility is called into question, it is not likely that a suspect will ever be identified. After the implementation of an SBB campaign in other communities across the country, there was an increase in reports of sexual assault to area law enforcement agencies (Lonsway & Archambault, 2020).

Summary of Findings

Chapter Five summarized the findings and offered a discussion about the implications of the study, its limitations, and recommendations for future research. The results of this qualitative study that used content analysis examined the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault

criminal investigations. Archived data was selected from a community needs assessment of victims/survivors, victim advocates, forensic nurses, law enforcement and prosecutors. This study explored whether rape myth beliefs and trauma-informed practices impact how criminal investigations are handled by detectives. Purposive sampling was used to identify this particular population of professionals in the archived data set, which provided a rare opportunity to hear directly from members of law enforcement about their thoughts and beliefs. The data was analyzed using a priori coding based on a rape myth acceptance scale and trauma-informed care principles making content analysis an appropriate design for this study as it compressed previously collected content into categories based on specific coding. The overarching purpose of this study was to learn more about the beliefs and practices of detectives responsible for investigating rape and sexual assault cases and whether rape myths and trauma-informed principles factored into their work. The study began with the central research question: What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations? There were two sub-questions: 1. What are some rape myths detectives believe about sexual assault? 2. What are some trauma-informed practices that sexual assault detectives believe about sexual assault? These questions were intended to provide an in-depth look at the attitudes and beliefs of the responding detectives and their practices. The participants responded to an online survey where they answered open-ended questions but were not asked to identify themselves or their agencies. This method was chosen to offer them anonymity with the expectation of authentic responses. The Ecological Model of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health (Campbell et al., 2009) was the theoretical framework for this study. According to the framework, external systems such as the legal system can impose secondary victimization through victim-blaming and minimal help. The framework also described the influence of a rape-prone culture, as demonstrated in *Figure 3*.

Rape Culture Pyramid. The pervasiveness of these rape myths greatly influences, consciously or unconsciously, those tasked to provide assistance. According to Reddy et al. (2022), it is difficult to eradicate them because they exist at all levels of society.

The study results found that rape myth acceptance was prevalent in the attitudes of detectives in the identified sample. Data showed that 70% of the participants expressed some form of rape myth and concern about the validity of victims disclosing incidents of sexual assault. The data also showed that 30% of all the participants expressed a trauma-informed principle. Further, detectives acknowledged the need for evidence-based trauma-informed training. Training of this caliber provides informative strategies and techniques that explain the neurobiology of trauma often displayed by victims yet misunderstood by detectives. Descriptive data yielded additional information that is worthy of further examination. For example, the participants shared the percentage of time they spent working on sexual assault cases, where 37% said they spent 0-10% of their time on these cases. Conversely, other detectives said they spend 30% of their time investigating these crimes. Future research should consider examining rape investigations in small departments, the efficacy of using different coding themes, and if there are differences in sexual assault investigations based on culture, gender, or age.

This study demonstrated the continued influence of rape myths within law enforcement departments in the identified population and setting. The results showed that 70% of the participants voiced examples of rape myth acceptance in their survey responses. Exemplar quotes were used to capture and share the feelings and thoughts of the participants. The study revealed a significant gap in the attitudes of detectives, as 85% believed that victims "lied" or "they were not really raped." Hearing directly from the participants about their lived experiences was critical because knowing what these providers think and feel is important. Negative

responses and beliefs to sexual assault disclosures hinder victims from coming forward to report what happened and receive procedural justice or other satisfaction from the criminal justice system (Murphy & Barkworth, 2014). Victims are reluctant to report their assaults to law enforcement for fear of being blamed, not believed, or risk further victimization (Murphy & Barkworth, 2014).

Discussion

Additionally, the study examined the influence of trauma-informed principles and the participants' familiarity with these principles. Trauma-informed principles seek to address issues at every level that can further traumatize victims, in this case, victims of sexual assault. While rape myths have an individualized presence, principles of trauma-informed care are both individually and organizationally driven. From the participants' responses, there were instances of individual attempts to implement trauma-informed principles, whether or not they identified them as such. Consideration was given to victim safety, trustworthiness, peer support, and agency collaboration. The participants cited a firm reliance and partnerships between law enforcement, victim advocates, and Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE). However, law enforcement officers were not sure of the relevancy of MUSC's Sexual Assault Services Program. Therefore, they were not prone to see them as a vital partner. The preliminary findings based on data analyses of all professionals responding to the survey revealed three overarching themes that described the strengths, challenges, and biases of the responses by community professionals. A strength noted by the participants was their appreciation of collaboration through participation in the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). Professionals also acknowledged challenges, including improved communication and engagement, prosecution difficulties, limited resources, and the lack of professional education (Hahn et al., 2024).

This study confirmed that detectives investigating sexual assault hold unconscious bias about victims of sexual assault. According to the literature, most people have engrained internal diagrams concerning what the typical rape scenario looks like, and this is no different for detectives. The "traditional rape script" described by Ryan (2011) states that improving law enforcement response to sexual assault could serve to increase reporting rates to law enforcement. However, the acceptance of rape myths by police officers has led to poor outcomes for victims in the criminal justice system Avalos (2016).

The uniqueness of this study is that it examined open-ended responses from law enforcement about sexual assault investigations using a priori coding to identify both rape myth acceptance beliefs and trauma-informed principles extracted from a community-needs assessment. This duality added to the distinctiveness of the study.

Implications

The findings of this study can offer the tri-county community practical steps for moving forward to address the low rates of reporting sexual assault cases and the experiences of discontent by survivors attempting to interact with detectives. Several practical issues can be addressed due to the findings in this study based on the information gained from the participant's suggestions and experiences. The information can help them with the groundwork necessary to move forward with their efforts to implement the global Start by Believing sexual assault awareness campaign. Overall, the following recommendations for using the findings in this study are:

Training

This study highlights the need for specialized police training to decrease rape myth acceptance and increase victim engagement, not only with law enforcement but with other

aspects of the criminal justice system**.** The participants identified the need for law enforcement comprehensive sexual assault trauma-informed victim interviewing, which is essential because reporting to law enforcement following an incident of sexual assault is lower than it is for other violent offenses (Downing et al., 2020). This training should include how trauma impacts a victim's behavior and memory, as well as the implications for investigations. It also includes the neurobiology of trauma, interview techniques with victims, and interrogation procedures with offenders (IACP, n.d.). Connecting with victims from the perspective of trauma-informed care can increase rape reporting, prevent re-victimization, and gain constructive evidence using productive victim interviewing protocols (Rich, 2019). Although the emphasis of this study pertains to law enforcement, all members of the SART should participate in training to ensure a strong victim-centered approach and enable the partners to understand and appreciate each other's roles.

Collaboration

This study highlighted the need for greater collaboration between law enforcement and the solicitor's office. This issue is connected to training, as detectives were confused about the South Carolina sexual assault criminal code and what was necessary to get cases accepted by the solicitor's office. One participant expressed their need for *"more trauma informed [sic] interviewing training, better communication with the solicitor's office on what they would like from investigations."* Another detective expressed that they saw *"working with solicitor's office for better communication with their office while a case is adjudicated" as a means of improving collaboration."*

Some detectives were frustrated about the vagueness of how South Carolina's law are written and one detective, when asked about what makes it easier to investigate sexual assault

cases, Participant 25, expressed it this way, *"Nothing really. Maybe the fact state law allows probable cause to be built on the victims [sic] statement alone which is unique to the sexual assault law".*

The study also supported ongoing communications with the SART, a network of collaborators that meets in the community. The SART's role should be heightened to provide increased multidisciplinary interagency cooperation for instruction and partner collaboration. SART members should come together through a victim-centered focus to respond to the needs of sexual assault victims by holding offenders accountable, implementing prevention strategies, and providing educational opportunities for the community (WVFRIS, n.d.). The National Institute of Justice (NIJ, 2017) researched the elements that made SARTs function more effectively and found that in teams that interacted more frequently, participation by members was valued and respected. A meta-analysis revealed that the effectiveness of SARTs was mixed because of limited research and varying team compositions. Greeson (2014) wrote, *"Responders in many SARTs believe their teams have improved relationships among responders and created improvements for victims"* (p. 7).

Identifying specific beliefs may help inform training needs, procedures, and policies within sexual assault investigations. This information can contribute to improving the overall response to rape victims in this region by identifying individual and systemic barriers that can preclude victims from reporting incidents of rape and sexual assault. Individual attitudes and reasonings influence the decision-making about sexual assault cases. According to Garza & Franklin (2020), rape myth endorsement decreases preparedness, while specialized sexual assault training increases detectives' preparedness for conducting investigations. Training through SART can be very beneficial to detectives and is what they have requested.

Limitations

The study relied on all self-reports; therefore, the researcher could not be assured of the participants' degree of experience. The open-ended survey questions were narrow and may have missed some perspectives that could have been pursued through an interview, which could have provided an opportunity for follow-up questions and provided far richer information.

Recommendations for Further Research

Modify the Existing Study

Conducting another aspect of this study using broader themes for thematic analysis would be beneficial. For example, Bohner et al. (2009) termed rape myths as "descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape that help to deny, downplay, or justify sexual violence that men commit against women and theorized four broad categories of beliefs about rape myths: 1). Blame the victim for their rape, 2). Disbelief in claims of rape, 3). Exonerate the perpetrator, and 4). Only certain types of women are raped. Broader categories might make capturing rape myths easier and more accurate.

Rather than use the SAMHSA (2014) definitions of trauma-informed care, a new stud y should use specific activities and behaviors by law enforcement that demonstrate what constitutes trauma-informed care.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender

While no overt themes emerged about cultural, historical, and gender in this study, it should be explored, nonetheless. Moreover, the racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics of the setting in which this study occurs support the need for a closer examination of this issue.

Understandably, more women are victims of sexual assault; one in six women and one in thirty-three men will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetimes (RAINN, 2023), yet the participants in this study did not mention male victims at all, nor were there mention of LGBTQ+ victims. Gilmore et al. (2023) found that persons who identified as a sexual minority or gender minority consumed more drinks per week, had more severe post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS), and reported higher levels of suicidality. Conducting a study that offers more exacting inquiries about gender identity and sexual orientation would help determine the comfort level or attitudes detectives might have about working with members of these marginalized populations.

College-age Victims

There are at least five colleges and universities within the tri-county area, and extended work addressing rape on and off college campuses is critical. Sexual assault on college campuses is alarmingly common and is an ongoing problem for females, especially undergraduates (Salim et al., 2022). Many students arrive at college with significant histories of sexual assault, but more work is needed to learn if there is an association between sexual assault, alcohol use, and suicidality (Gilmore et al., 2023). Alcohol consumption or drug-facilitated rape are issues that need additional study within this setting. Alcohol use was cited several times by detectives as the rationale for not moving forward with the investigation.

Summary

This study was unique because it looked for the presence of rape myths and trauma-informed principles within law enforcement agencies in a diverse metropolitan area of a southern state. The survey is replicable and can be modified based on specific community needs. The

overarching goal is to examine ways to increase the disclosure of sexual assault reports to law enforcement by victims. Understanding the attitudes and beliefs of detectives can help identify reasons victims are reluctant to come forward. Through this study, detectives identified sexual assault trauma-informed training as a missing element in their professional training and programs such as Start by Believing have globally demonstrated the positive implications of meeting a victim's disclosure with an open mind.

In conclusion, communities are safer when victims can come forward to report their victimization and not feel or be blamed. The recognition and denunciation of rape myths and providing trauma-informed care will go far in reducing secondary trauma created by the criminal justice system designed to help.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Tri-County Rape Myths & Trauma-informed Beliefs Questionnaire for Detectives Investigating Sexual Assault Cases

We are interested in your opinions about sexual assault investigations. Please share your opinions to the following questions:

1. What do you like about investigating sexual assault cases? _____

2. What do you dislike about investigating sexual assault cases? _____

We understand many factors can impact the success of a sexual assault investigation. Please share your opinions on factors that influence an investigation.

3. What makes sexual assault cases difficult to investigate? _____

4. What makes it easier to investigate sexual assault cases? _____

We are also interested in your opinions about reports of sexual assault to your department. Your honest opinions on this topic can help us to improve investigations of sexual assault cases.

5. How can you tell if someone is making a report of sexual assault that is not actually a sexual assault? _____

6. What are some common characteristics of reports made to your department that are not actually sexual assault? _____

Thank you for participating in this community needs assessment! The purpose of this questionnaire is to help improve responses to sexual assault disclosures.

Appendix B. Matrix of the Research Questions and Instrument Questions

Research Question	Survey Questions
The Central Question: What are the attitudes of detectives about sexual assault criminal investigations?	**1.** What do you like about investigating sexual assault cases? **2.** What do you dislike about investigating sexual assault cases? **3.** What makes sexual assault cases difficult to investigate? **4.** What makes it easier to investigate sexual assault cases? **5.** How can you tell if someone is making a report of sexual assault that is not actually a sexual assault? **6.** What are some common characteristics of reports made to your department that are not actually sexual assault?
Sub-question 1: What are some rape myths detectives have about sexual assault?	**We are interested in your opinions about sexual assault investigations. Please share your opinions to the following statements:** **1.** What do you like about investigating sexual assault cases? **2.** What do you dislike about investigating sexual assault cases? **5.** How can you tell if someone is making a report that is not actually a sexual assault? **6.** What are some common characteristics of reports made to your department that are not actually sexual assault?
Sub-question 2: What are some trauma-informed beliefs that sexual assault detectives have about sexual assault?	**We understand many factors can impact the success of a sexual assault investigation. Please share your opinions on factors that influence an investigation.** **1.** What makes sexual assault cases difficult to investigate? **2.** What makes it easier to investigate sexual assault cases?

Appendix C. Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)

Strongly Disagree **Strongly Agree**

	1	2	3	4	5
Subscale 1: She asked for it					
1. If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand.					
2. When girls go to parities wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble					
3. If a girl does to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped.					
4. If a girl acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble.					
5. When girls get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.					
6. If a girl initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex.					
Subscale 2: He didn't mean to.					
7. When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex					
8. Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.					
9. Rape happens when a guy's sex drive goes out of control.					
10. If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally.					
11. It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing.					
12. If both people are drunk, it can't be rape.					
Subscale 3: It wasn't really rape.					
13. If a girl doesn't physically resist sex – even if protesting verbally – it can't be considered rape.					
14. If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.					
15. A rape probably doesn't happen if a girl doesn't have any bruises or marks.					
16. If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.					
17. If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape.					
Subscale 4: She lied.					
18. A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it.					
19. Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.					

20. A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets.					
21. A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems.					
22. Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape.					

- Scoring: Scores range from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).
- Scores may be totaled for a cumulative score.
- Higher scores indicate greater rejection of rape myths.

(Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon & Famer, 2011)