Sexual Violence and Trauma: Exploring Contemporary Feminist Approaches

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Feminist research and activism has attempted to challenge the notion that sexual violence is insignificant. In part, this has been accomplished through forging connections between sexual violence and trauma and advocating for the inclusion of sexual violence into the diagnostic criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Yet the increasing reliance on trauma and psychiatric models in the feminist campaign against sexual violence has also been debated. This project draws on a case study of twenty-four feminists in Halifax, Nova Scotia to explore how feminist debates around sexual violence and the usefulness of trauma are addressed by self-identified feminists in conversations about sexual violence. Drawing on focus group and interview data, this study finds that three concepts – choice, experience, and trauma – shaped participants' understanding of sexual violence and limited participants' ability to engage structural analyses of sexual violence. This study also demonstrates that feminists may be perpetuating a 'trauma-of-rape' discourse.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Section I: Sexual Violence and Trauma

Beginning in the 1960s, feminist consciousness-raising groups identified the widespread problem of violence against women, including rape, and defined these experiences as forms of systemic oppression of women (Bevacqua, 2000). The anti-rape movement successfully shifted the feminist and public discourse on sexual violence, making significant changes to policy, law, and medical approaches to the issue. Feminists provoked an abundance of research and scholarship in various disciplines on the prevalence, severity, and impact of sexual violence (see for example, Dworkin, 1974; Brown, 1995; Davis, 1981; Herman, 1992; Kelly, 1988; Marcus, 1992; Rothbaum, et al., 1992; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974). Despite these successes, feminist activists and scholars within the anti-rape movement continue to understand sexual violence in various, and sometimes contradictory, ways (see for example, MacKinnon, 1989; Dworkin, 1974; Vance, 1984; Willis, 1982; Marcus, 1992; Hengehold, 2000; Gavey, 1999; Mardorossian, 2002; McPhail, 2016). The causes of sexual violence, its manifestations, and appropriate feminist responses to this issue divided feminists of the anti-rape movement, and contemporary feminists continue to struggle with the concept (Bevacqua, 2000; McPhail, 2016).

Of the many misconceptions that feminist activists and researchers have attempted to challenge, perhaps the most important is the notion that sexual violence is insignificant (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). In 1974, Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom coined "rape trauma syndrome" to describe what they saw to be the severe psychological impacts of rape on those who experience it. Throughout the 1970s, feminists generated "an explosion of research" on sexual assault and its impacts, and successfully advocated for the

establishment of a centre for research on rape within the National Institute of Mental Health (Herman, 1992, p. 30). In addition, feminist researchers were key to changes in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-3) and the criterion used to diagnose Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The narrow criteria that existed at the time was intended to capture the traumas of war and other experiences "outside the range of human experience," and therefore excluded everyday experiences like sexual violence as potential stressors (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Feminist researches demonstrated the prevalence of PTSD symptoms in those who experience sexual violence and the current DSM (DSM-5) specifically refers to "actual or threatened sexual violence" as a potential stressor for PTSD (Leys, 2000). Feminist work led to this addition and much contemporary feminist scholarship on sexual violence draws on this psychiatric model to describe and understand the experiences of individuals post-assault (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1983; Tseris, 2015; Richmond, Geiger & Reed, 2013). Further, feminist therapists have adopted trauma models into their practice with clients who have experienced sexual violence (Maracek, 1999).

Efforts by feminists to address the impacts of sexual violence have reframed public perceptions and significantly shifted legal and medical framings of the issue (Bevacqua, 2000). Despite ongoing struggles with judicial proceedings and the treatment of survivors who come forward, trauma models have highlighted the severity of sexual violence and have helped to provide more sympathy and support for victims, increasing their access to mental health services and the sensitivity with which they are treated (Tseris, 2015). While these are significant gains, integrating trauma models into the feminist anti-rape movement has also been controversial, as it has also prompted the reframing of sexual violence as a medical issue in need of individual management and

cure. Some feminist scholars have suggested that the widespread use of trauma models in feminist and mainstream approaches to sexual violence has obscured the social mechanisms that produce sexual violence, locating the issue of sexual violence within the individual who experiences it, and has depoliticized the issue through 'trauma talk' (Wasco, 2003; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; Tseris, 2013). Others support the use of trauma models and seek to expand the definitions of both sexual violence and trauma to account for the everyday experiences of gender-based oppression, including microaggressions and even the *fear* of violence, that are said to have a cumulative and significant impact on the psyche (Brown, 1995). There are also feminists who recognize that trauma models at once aid and hinder the goals of anti-rape activism (Marecek, 1999; Gavey, 1999).

The debate amongst feminist scholars regarding the consequences of applying trauma models to sexual violence is rooted in broader concerns about the medicalization of social issues and the displacement of structural understandings of sexual violence in feminist theorizing and activism. While trauma has afforded victims wider access to services and better treatment in some fields, an emphasis on trauma and the impacts of sexual violence now dominate frontline sexual violence advocacy (Tseris, 2015). Trauma-informed approaches are also being integrated into service provision in health care and law (e.g., Nova Scotia Health Authority, 2015; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2017). The linking of sexual violence and trauma is evident in media coverage of sexual violence (e.g., Hobson, 2016). As well, researchers have demonstrated the significance of the sexual violence-trauma relationship in discussions of sexual violence amongst feminist therapists (Maracek, 1999) and amongst "lay" people (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; Chasteen, 2001). Some feminists worry that the intensive focus on trauma in feminist advocacy, research, and treatment of sexual violence redirects feminist focus away from addressing

the causes of sexual violence and towards providing better treatment and resources for those experiencing the impacts of sexual violence (Tseris, 2015; Hengehold, 2000; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). Others are concerned that as trauma is increasingly seen as the inevitable and acceptable outcome of sexual violence, women may be pressured to 'perform trauma' in order to be considered legitimate victims (Hengehold, 2000, p. 201). While scholars engage in debates regarding the value of trauma to feminist frameworks of sexual violence, little research has explored how feminists outside the academy are responding.

Section II: Project Goal

As a feminist and activist, I regularly participate in feminist conversations and initiatives, including those addressing sexual violence. In 2015, I volunteered for a sexual assault and sexual harassment phone line and noticed that 'trauma' dominated the training and literature offered to volunteers. Discussions of sexual violence amongst feminist organizers and volunteers seemed to be inseparable from discussions of trauma, and the trauma-informed training that every volunteer was obligated to attend demonstrated the importance of trauma models to feminist work on sexual violence. I began to wonder how much consensus there is among feminists about the use of trauma models for addressing sexual violence, how the feminist understanding of trauma might or might not differ from psychiatric models, and how this framework might affect the treatment of those victims/survivors who don't identify with trauma models, or who assert that they have not experienced trauma. These individuals appeared to be on the margins of feminist discourse of sexual violence. I wondered whether all feminists saw as strong a relationship between sexual violence and trauma and whether some might respond differently to the problem of victims/survivors challenging this paradigm.

The main objective of this project was to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the trauma discourse as it applies to sexual violence from the point of view of self-identified feminists. I sought to understand how a sample of feminists in Nova Scotia address and respond to debates in the feminist literature around the usefulness and consequences of trauma models to sexual violence. My research question is as follows: *How do contemporary self-identified feminists in Nova Scotia evaluate trauma as a model for understanding sexual violence?* In order to answer this question, I sought to understand how research participants understood feminism, sexual violence and its impacts. This project had three related goals: First, to understand what distinguishes a feminist approach to sexual violence from non-feminist approaches; second, to understand how feminists define sexual violence and its impacts, and whether they draw on trauma in their understandings; and third, to understand how feminists respond to debates around the usefulness and consequences of trauma to feminist approaches to sexual violence.

Section III: Thesis Structure

In the second chapter, I present a review of the literature that this study builds on, as well as the theoretical framework I will draw on in my analysis. I begin with theoretical debates in the feminist literature on sexual violence. I follow with an exploration of two concepts important to contemporary feminism: choice and experience. Finally, I explore the relationship between sexual violence and trauma in feminist scholarship, including the trauma-of-rape discourse.

In Chapter Three I explain my methodology, data collection and analysis process, and explore the limitations of my project.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings of my research. The findings are structured around three significant concepts that participants used to understand sexual violence. First, I explore participants' understanding of "choice" and how it influenced their approaches to sexual violence. Second, I describe participants' use of "experience" as a feminist framework for sexual violence. Finally, I explore the use of trauma and, specifically, the trauma-of-rape discourse, for understanding sexual violence. I end this chapter with a description of how participants explicitly evaluated trauma and its usefulness in the feminist campaign against sexual violence.

Chapter Five presents a discussion of my findings in relation to the literature discussed in Chapter Two.

My sixth and final chapter provides a summary of the findings and a discussion of how the findings are situated in, and add to, the literature presented in Chapter Two. I end this chapter with a discussion of the significance of my research and possibilities for future research on this issue.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

In this chapter, I present an overview of the literature relevant to my project, as well as the theoretical frameworks I draw on in the analysis of my data. I begin in Section I with a review of the feminist literature on sexual violence and the feminist debates concerning the cause(s), definition, and impacts of sexual violence. Section II explores two issues in contemporary feminism: First, I describe the "choice" feminist orientation and its relevance to contemporary feminism. I explore how the contested notions of "agency" and "choice" are addressed by this framework, and how "choice" feminism is influenced by liberal and neoliberal ideology. I then explore feminist uses and critiques of "experience" and the significance of experience to feminism.

Section I: Feminism and Sexual Violence: Tensions and Debates

The Causes of Sexual Violence

The notion that "sexual violence is about power, not sex" has become a truism (McPhail, 2016). This explanation for sexual violence dominates both feminist and, increasingly, mainstream approaches to sexual violence, influencing theory, research, and frontline work on the issue. Susan Brownmiller (1975) is most often credited for the reframing of rape as an issue of power (Bevacqua, 2000). In *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, she provided a comprehensive history of rape and wrote that rape is not motivated by sex but by male domination and female degradation. The roots of her analysis, however, stem from radical feminists' consciousness-raising efforts throughout the 1960s and 1970s, through which women shared with each other sexually violent experiences and began to theorize the relationship between these experiences, broader systems of power and male domination. These feminist analyses and the 'power, not sex' framework have since influenced the everyday language used to describe sexual violence,

as well as the framing of sexual violence in Canadian law. In the feminist and public lexicon, "rape" has been replaced by terms such as "sexual assault" and "sexual(ized) violence", in part to broaden the scope of experiences being described but also, importantly, to emphasize the violence thought to be inherent to these acts (McPhail, 2016, p. 316). Amy Chasteen's (2001) study on everyday understandings of rape demonstrate the relevance of these such feminist frameworks to how women define rape and its causes. Furthermore, Canadian law defines sexual violence within a broader Section that pertains to non-sexualized physical assaults, demonstrating that sexual violence is seen as more closely aligned with other types of violence than with other forms of sexual offences (Criminal Code, 1985).

Despite the popularity of the power-not-sex theory and its influence on feminist and public approaches to sexual violence, the notion that sexual violence is rooted in power and not sex has also been contentious for feminists. Tensions over the causes of sexual violence and its relationship to (aspects of) heterosexuality culminated in the 1970s and 1980s into what is often referred to as the "feminist sex wars" (Bracewell, 2016, p. 24). Feminists like Catherine McKinnon (1989) and Andrea Dworkin (1974) are well known for suggesting that rape and heterosexual sex are inseparable; for these feminists, sexual violence is thought to be both embedded in and a product of normative heterosexuality. More recent feminist scholarship has similarly problematized the distinction between sex and violence, suggesting that these frameworks position normative heterosexuality as the inherently 'good' other to sexual violence (Gavey,1999). Scully (1990), for example, suggests that we so often theorize the prevalence of male perpetration of sexual violence in relation to normative male sexual behaviour that we must therefore also recognize sexual violence as itself *sexual behaviour*. In addition,

McPhail (2016) argues that a singular theory of rape (i.e. one that uses violence as its sole explanatory framework) cannot possibly account for the various ways in which sexual violence is perpetrated and experienced, nor can it address the intersectionality of oppression that complicates the manifestations of sexual violence for some women (p. 324).

Whether sexual violence is understood as embedded within or as distinct from 'normal' heterosexuality, and whether it is seen as related to or distinct from sex, most feminists agree that sexual violence is not an anomaly but is instead a form of systemic oppression that is perpetuated disproportionately against women and children by men (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1989; Bumiller, 2008; Gavey, 1999; Scully, 1990; McPhail, 2016; Kelly, 1988). However, feminists have also disagreed over the prevalence of sexual violence – how often it is thought to occur and in what ways. In the next section, I will address feminist efforts to define sexual violence and the importance of these definitions to research that addresses sexual violence.

Defining Sexual Violence

In her introduction to *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept*, Sharon Lamb (1999) writes, "victimization is a highly contested space" (p. 4). Referring to the various groups that have a stake in definitions of rape, sexual violence, abuse, and victimhood, she suggests that the process of defining sexual violence is itself a "power struggle" (p. 4). She and others (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Canning, 1994; Kelly, 1998) illustrate the significance of language to feminists' theorizing of, and organizing against, sexual violence – the words we use, and those we don't, construct our reality. As Liz Kelly (1998) has suggested, "the extent and even existence of forms of sexual violence cannot be acknowledged" when words are not available (p. 122); when words

are created or definitions expanded, women are able to name, and thus render visible, experiences that were previously hidden. In particular, words like 'violence' and 'harassment' have helped to problematize many experiences, and some feminists have argued that problematizing these experiences is the first step towards their prevention (Kelly, 1998; Anderson & Doherty, 2008).

Many feminist scholars have said that legal definitions of sexual violence as well as those used in research reflect a masculine worldview, characterizing some behaviours as 'normal' whether or not they feel good for, or are acceptable to, women (Kelly, 1998; Gavey, 1999; MacKinnon, 1989). Kelly (1998) argues that legal definitions do not reflect the actual experiences of women and leave women with "no way of specifying how or why typical male behaviour feels like aberrant male behaviour" (p. 69). She and other scholars (e.g. Gilbert & Webster, 1982; Bevacqua, 2000) see sexual violence as a continuum of behaviours that Kelly says "ranges from extensions of the myriad forms of sexism women encounter everyday through to the all too frequent murder of women and girls by men" (p. 84). On this continuum she includes experiences of coercive or "pressurized" sex that women frequently reported to her in interviews (ibid). Maria Bevacqua (2000) similarly problematizes women's everyday experiences through the language of sexual violence, referring to experiences like harassment and unwanted sexual advances as "little rapes" (p. 53). She argues that the language of rape helps to draw attention to these otherwise taken-for-granted events in women's lives.

Black feminists have also emphasized the importance of a sexual violence framework that recognizes the many possible forms of sexual abuse. Angela Davis (1981), for example, has written that broad frameworks are necessary to acknowledge that for Black women, sexual violence "has not always manifested itself in such an open and

public violence" but is more often subtle and "ideologically sanctioned" (p. 17). Kelly (1988), Bevacqua (2000), and Davis (1981) each argue that routine forms of gender-based oppression are indicative of the same abuse of male power that produces more violent and explicit forms of sexual violence like rape. Therefore, defining the everyday as part of a continuum, or framing the everyday in the language of rape, extends analysis of male dominance to show that typical and aberrant male behaviour are often indistinguishable.

Whereas some feminists (e.g. Kelly, 1988; Bevacqua, 2000; Davis, 1981) see the *potential* for sexual violence in normative heterosexual practice, feminists like Catherine MacKinnon (1989) and Andrea Dworkin (1974) have suggested that heterosexual intercourse and rape are inseparable (Freedman, 2013). MacKinnon, who argues that sexuality is the primary site of women's oppression, suggests that women find it "difficult to distinguish" between rape and sex, as both have elements of male dominance and female passivity (p. 49). Similarly, Dworkin (1974) has written that rape is "simple straightforward heterosexual behaviour in a male-dominated society" (p. 84). Others have less explicitly offered similar analyses, suggesting that power dynamics between men and women and gender roles in normative heterosexuality produce conditions in which rape and sex cannot be clearly demarcated; distinguishing between heterosexuality and sexual violence fails to question the ways in which normative heterosexuality may contribute to, or be part of, sexual violence (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011, p. 6; Gavey, 1999).

Extending the boundaries of victimization to everyday sexuality, however, has been contentious and many feminists have heavily criticized the works of both MacKinnon and Dworkin, at times rejecting their contributions for defining sexual violence too broadly and denying women's sexual agency (Freedman, 2013; Vance, 1984). Carol Vance (1984), for example, writes that "to speak only of sexual violence and

oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live" (p. 1). She sees such arguments about "the ubiquity of danger and humiliation in a patriarchal surround" as "shar[ing] the same undialectical and simplistic focus as its opposition" – the outright denial of the existence of sexual violence (ibid, p. 5). Others (e.g., Cahill, 2001; Gavey, 1999) raise similar questions about women's agency in a framework that sees sex and rape as indistinguishable and further argue that such understandings inevitably imply that women are unable to distinguish between the two. In such frameworks, women are positioned as 'dupes' of the patriarchy or as having a 'false consciousness' rather than a valid interpretation of their own sexual experiences as distinct from rape.

The notion that women have a 'false consciousness' has influenced how feminists and non-feminists have researched sexual violence (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). Researchers often define participants' experiences as sexual violence whether participants themselves identify their experiences as sexual violence or not (ibid; Gavey, 1999). The majority of contemporary research on sexual violence asks women about a range of behaviours that researchers have determined fit the definition of sexual violence; women who report experiences that are consistent with researchers' definitions of sexual violence are included in sexual violence statistics as women who have experienced sexual violence (Gavey, 1999). This method has been useful for feminism and feminist research, as it demonstrates the prevalence of rape in women's everyday lives, thus allowing feminists to challenge earlier findings and assumptions that rape is a rare phenomenon (Gavey, 1999). For example, feminist psychologist Mary P. Koss is well-known for developing research instruments that she felt better captured the prevalence and manifestations of sexual violence, and which "did not require a woman to label the experience as rape"

(Webster & Dunn, 2005, p. 118). She discovered that only one third of participants defined their experiences as rape despite reporting experiences that aligned with her criteria and argued that "women may not conceptualize their experiences as rape based on their own acceptance of social and cultural beliefs about rape" (ibid, p. 120). She therefore suggested that sexual violence statistics must reflect even those experiences that women themselves do not, or have not yet, identified as sexual violence (ibid, p. 119).

Major studies on sexual violence have similarly attempted to better understand the prevalence of sexual violence by asking about a range of behaviours that meet the researcher's criteria for sexual violence and including all participants who report such experiences in sexual violence statistics. For example, the National Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) (1996) used this method and revealed that close to twenty percent of women experience rape in their lifetimes (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Notably, the VAWS focussed narrowly on forcible rape. More recently, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2011) asked participants about a range of behaviours and experiences that align with the legal definition of sexual violence and found that 18.3% of women have experienced rape while 5.6% of women have experienced sexual assault other than rape (as cited in Richmond, Geiger & Reed, 2013, p. 444). Studies that explore sexual violence in broader or narrower ways have each yielded different results, but a review of available data suggests that up to one third of women experience some form of sexual assault in their lifetime (Ontario Women's Directorate, 2015).

However useful these statistics have been for illustrating the severity and prevalence of sexual violence in women's lives, defining women's experiences in ways that conflict with their own narratives is problematic for feminists (Kitzinger &

Wilkinson, 1997). The positivist assumptions embedded in a consistent definition of sexual violence, especially one that overrides women's own understandings of their experiences, conflict with a common feminist aim: to validate women's experience (Lamb, 1999; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). As Sharon Lamb (1999) suggests, many feminists consider women's narratives and experience as essential starting points and value "making the subject [of feminist research] the arbiter of her own truth" (p. 5). Indeed, many feminist researchers claim to portray participants' experiences as closely to participants' own understandings as possible, acting as a "conduit" for participants rather than analyst of their experiences (ibid, p. 567). However, as Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) suggest, this often is not possible since many women's interpretations of their own experience are not easily incorporated into feminist theory. Feminist researchers addressing sexual violence might not want to frame participants as passive victims, but they also cannot 'validate' all interpretations of sexually violating experiences (e.g., "I deserved it") within a feminist framework.

Reflecting on her own research on sexual violence, Gavey (1999) writes that "from the point of view of a feminist research ethic…the validity and ethic of labelling [a participant] a 'rape victim' at a time when she did not choose this label herself" would be questionable (p. 67). Yet she also asserts that "feminist research increasingly seeks to go beyond giving women voice and reporting on women's experiences to offer analyses and critiques that help make sense of women's experiences as they are shaped and constrained by power relations in social contexts" (p. 68). Thus, feminist researchers of sexual violence must decide how to interpret and define experiences that may occupy an ambiguous space between sex and sexual violation while also attempting to validate, or at least acknowledge, women's own understandings of their experiences.

Section II: Sexual Violence and Trauma

In addition to challenging the notion that sexual violence is a rare phenomenon, feminist activists and researchers have also attempted to challenge the notion that sexual violence is insignificant (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). Ann Burgess, a psychiatric nurse, and sociologist Lynda Holmstrom (1974) responded to this trivialization of sexual violence by demonstrating the negative psychological impacts of rape, which they named "rape trauma syndrome" (p. 981). Drawing on analysis of 92 patients admitted to a hospital emergency room after experiencing forcible rape, Burgess and Holmstrom compared the symptoms of women after rape to those of combat veterans and suggested that rape produces a kind of traumatic response similar to war (ibid). Sexual violence has since been added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* (DSM-5) as a potential stressor for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Forging a relationship between sexual violence and trauma in this way has allowed feminists to argue that the impacts of sexual violence can be severe; indeed the notion that the impacts of sexual violence "are so significant that they may extend even to the structure and capacity of the brain" is a stark contrast to earlier notions that sexual violence is 'no big deal' (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; Tseris, 2013, p. 158). However, codifying the relationship between sexual violence and trauma into a diagnosable disorder has also meant that sexual violence is taken up in potentially individualizing and medicalizing ways. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the concept of trauma, how it has developed and how it has been applied to sexual violence. I will also explore how feminists have taken up and responded to the concept of trauma in the campaign against sexual violence.

The Development of "Trauma"

The notion of 'traumatic memory' did not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century (Young, 1995, p. 13 & 39). In the 1870s, psychodynamic theory led to a paradigmatic shift that made an explicit connection between *experience* and *trauma*, and rejected the physiological explanations for symptoms of trauma that had previously dominated trauma studies (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 38). Opposing both his predecessors and contemporaries – who saw trauma as both hereditary and physiological – Sigmund Freud argued that events and memories can have "sufficient traumatic force to produce symptoms" and therefore extended the range of the term 'trauma' to better reflect how it is understood today, acknowledging the potential for social causes of individual suffering (ibid, p. 46).

While better known for rejecting women's experiences of sexual abuse, Freud's initial investigations into traumatic memory pointed to sexual abuse as the leading cause of hysteria: "At the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience"* (Freud, 1986 as quoted in Luckhurst, 2008, p. 46 – emphasis added). He made an explicit connection between sexual violation and trauma symptoms and saw biography and experience as essential starting points to understanding hysteria (Leys, 2000, p. 264). Given the rate at which women from all class backgrounds were experiencing hysteria, however, there was considerable backlash to the political implications of Freud's theories. Freud quickly reworked his theories to suggest instead that women have "repressed erotic infantile wishes and fantasies" that sexual abuses fulfill. These ideas continued to dominate the discourse around sexual violence and hysteria for the following decades (Herman, 1992, p. 13; Leys, 2000, p. 4).

Despite early investigations into the relationship between sexual violence and what we now have termed "trauma", trauma studies throughout the twentieth century largely addressed the experiences of soldiers returning from war (Leys, 2000). The first iteration of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-3) (American Psychological Association, 1980) resulted from a combination of Vietnam veteran activism and the transformation of professional psychiatry in the 1970s, which began to prioritize neurological explanations and treatments of mental illness (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 49). Scholars assert that the codification of PTSD has been a critical development in trauma theory, transforming a previously heterogeneous and contested phenomenon into "a standard and obligatory classification" within the field of psychiatry (Radstone, 2007, p. 11; Young, 1995, p. 7). By providing a consistent symptomology with which doctors can observe and diagnose, the PTSD diagnosis has legitimated trauma-related disorders (Foucault, 2006, p. 309).

What is considered a "trauma", and what is included in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, is influenced by the social and political climate within which trauma is studied and diagnosed. Changes to the PTSD criteria through successive versions of the DSM demonstrate some of the social influences that have impacted our understanding of trauma. For example, sexual violence has only been recently included as a potential stressor for PTSD in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This change resulted from decades of feminist activism and scholarship that advocated for recognition of the psychological harms of sexual violence. In the following sections, I will explore how feminists have worked with the concept of trauma to address the harms of sexual violence.

Feminism and Trauma Theory

Feminists have been "among the most vociferous critics of the DSM" for its bias against women, its medicalization of women's experiences, "and [for] constructing suffering as individual pathology rather than a response to social injustice" (LaFrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2013, p. 123). Despite this, feminists have contributed significantly to the development of the diagnostic category of PTSD and have tended to support its application to experiences of gendered violence (ibid, p. 128; Tseris, 2015). Judith Herman (1992) and other feminist scholars and therapists challenged the diagnostic criteria for PTSD when it was first added to the DSM-3 (Young, 1995; Wasco, 2003, p. 309). They argued that the criteria, which defined trauma as an event "outside the range of human experience" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 72) was androcentric and could not possibly account for experiences of sexualized violence and other assaults that happen "so often in the life of one woman" (Brown, 1995, p. 100). In the 1970s, feminists generated an "explosion of research" on sexual violence, establishing an integrated, post-Vietnam approach to trauma that prioritized abuse, incest, and sexual abuse (Leys, 2000; Herman, 1992; Luckhurst, 2008) and successfully advocating for the establishment of a centre for research on rape within the National Institute of Mental Health (Herman, 1991, p. 30).

It is for these reasons that many credit feminists for the categorization and development of contemporary trauma theory and treatment, which some argue "implicitly embodies many feminist paradigms, even when they are not specifically identified as such" (Brown, 2004, p. 464). Unlike other diagnosable disorders in the DSM, PTSD is understood as a response to external stressors, and thus necessarily acknowledges the social forces that produce suffering (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; DeGloma, 2011). Although few studies have explored how feminist therapists engage feminism in

their clinical practice, those that do (e.g., Maracek, 1999) show that trauma is a key concept in this work, further demonstrating the significant relationship between feminism and trauma theory.

Laura S. Brown has written extensively on feminism, sexual violence and trauma (e.g., Brown, 2004; Brown, 1995; Brown, 2009). She (Brown, 2004) and others (e.g., Richmond, Geiger & Reed, 2013) articulate feminist therapy as a highly theoretical approach to treatment that is based on a shared set of values, one of which is to help clients develop a feminist consciousness. The concept of trauma is well-suited to the feminist therapist's goals, as it necessarily requires a recognition of the social, emotional, and political environments that can cause psychological harm to an individual. As a direct challenge to diagnoses such as Borderline Personality Disorder that can be seen to pathologize individuals, feminist trauma therapy asserts that "the problem is situated not in the character of the suffering person…[but is a] pattern of coping and survival in response to a traumagenic relational milieu" (Brown, 2004, p. 467).

In addition, feminist trauma therapy engages in critique of the experiences that produce trauma for marginalized people: "Certain forms of trauma are viewed by feminist theory as representing, at the individual or interpersonal level, the intended consequences of institutionalized forms of discrimination such as sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and so on" (ibid, p. 465). As such, some feminist therapists and scholars have advocated for an expansion of the concept of trauma to more accurately reflect daily experiences of oppression and their impacts on the brain. Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma was developed to describe the cumulative and negative impacts of racism on the psyche, and the ways in which traumas that are not necessarily instantaneous or violent (in the usual sense) "do violence to the soul and spirit" (quoted in

Brown, 1995, p. 107). Though insidious trauma is not a diagnosable disorder in the DSM, the influence of feminists' engagement with trauma theory is evident in the increasing research oriented towards understanding the long-term mental health impacts of oppression (e.g., Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005), some of which draws on trauma-response models (e.g., Miles-McLean, 2014; Szymanski & Balsam, 2010).

Applying Trauma to Sexual Violence: Tensions and Debates

Though Burgess and Holmstrom (1974) were first in illustrating a clinically significant relationship between sexual violence and trauma, other researchers have added further evidence to their claims (e.g., Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock & Walksh, 1992) and sexual violence has since been clearly articulated as a potential stressor for PTSD in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Despite this recognition, research on the strength of the relationship between sexual violence and trauma has yielded inconsistent results (Gavey, 1999) and changing definitions of both sexual violence and trauma further complicate assessment of the relationship between the two. As Gavey suggests, "conventional empirical psychology does suggest that while there are several common negative psychological reactions to rape, not all women who are raped experience them" (Gavey, 1999, p. 70). While some research suggests that 94% of rape victims meet the symptom criteria for PTSD in the two weeks that follow their assault (Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock & Walksh, 1992), others have suggested that most of these symptoms disappear in the weeks and months that immediately follow (Koss, 1993). The inconsistent evidence on the significance of trauma to experiences of sexual violence, and expanding notions of what constitutes sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Gavey,

1999) warrant further investigation into the relationship between sexual violence and trauma.

Recently, some feminist scholars have questioned the emphasis on trauma in contemporary approaches to sexual violence, suggesting that this emphasis shifts feminist and mainstream priorities from the issues of sexual violence and its *causes* to the *effects* it has on the women who experience it (Tseris, 2013). Though asserting that rape is traumatic provides an important counterclaim to the assumption that it is "no big deal", and though trauma models provide a more "enlightened" and "sympathetic" way of understanding the impacts of sexual violence, feminists argue that the discourse of trauma and its application to the issue of sexual violence can be problematic, particularly for its potential to depoliticize the issue (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011, p. 448 – 449). Tseris (2013) and others (e.g., Farmer, 1996) suggest that trauma models fail to account for how social forces are translated into 'individual' illness and become embodied as 'individual' experience. Though early trauma theorists (e.g., Judith Herman, who wrote arguably one of the most influential books on sexual violence and trauma) argued that trauma therapy and trauma models are useful only if they occur within a broad social movement that questions women's continued exposure to sexual harm, the current medicalized framework of sexual violence and trauma is intensely individualizing (Herman, 1992, p. 159; Tseris, 2013).

One significant critique that feminists have levelled against the use of trauma in relation to sexual violence is that the concept requires a linearity that does not accurately reflect the realities of sexual violence (Brown, 1995; Wasco, 2003). Laura Brown (1995) and Sharon Wasco (2003) suggest that trauma models mask the culture of gendered violence that women experience on a daily basis. The linearity of trauma models suggests

that a particular *event* leads to a cluster of *reactions*; by isolating experience and failing to account for daily harm that causes women psychic pain, linear trauma models obscure the daily social experience of women with a medicalized and individualized cause-effect model (Wasco, 2003). Furthermore, diagnosing women who experience sexual violence with a disorder obscures oppression with biomedical language, repositioning the issue of sexual violence as one that can be addressed through individual management and cure (Tseris, 2013).

Drawing on Root's concept of "insidious trauma", Brown (1995) argues that trauma models fail to account for the psychosomatic effects of everyday experiences of gendered oppression. She suggests that most women's daily emotions and behaviours resemble the symptoms of PTSD: "Most women in North America today are aware they may be raped at any time and by anyone…in consequence, many women who have never been raped have symptoms of rape trauma; we are hypervigilant to certain cues, avoid situations that we sense are high risk, go numb in response to overtures from men that might be friendly – but that might also be the first step toward our violation" (p. 107). Brown suggests that the psychic and somatic effects of oppression should be recognized, but are more accurately captured by a non-linear model such as insidious trauma. Thus, in contrast to other feminist critics of trauma, Brown (1995) does not wish to remove the concept from the sexual violence lexicon; instead, she claims that the concept should be expanded to better capture the impacts of sexual violence on all women, and the ways in which sexual violence affects women's everyday lives.

Other critics of trauma have argued that trauma models pathologize victims of sexual violence, defining the impacts of sexual violence in narrow, medical terms and removing women's agency to decide how they experience and interpret sexual violation

(Hengehold, 2000; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). They see trauma as a reflection of the broader trend of medicalizing women's experiences (Tseris, 2015). While the framing of sexual violence in medical terms – specifically, the framing of sexual violence as a public health issue – has meant that violence against women has gained significant recognition, the uptake of sexual violence by medical and legal institutions has also meant that professionals "ultimately exercise the power to make characterizations about the signs and symptoms of trauma, to educate women about the true nature of their victimization and to define successful recovery" (Bumiller, 2008, p. 68). This often means that women are required to define their experiences in medical and psychological terms in order to be eligible for formal supports and resources, such as counselling and housing (ibid).

Further, as PTSD increasingly signifies "genuine trauma", victims who appear stoic or unaffected are deemed less credible by both doctors and the courts (Hengehold, 2000, p. 201). Women are pressured to conform to the image of 'disordered victim' in order to seek justice and prosecute their offenders (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 74). Simultaneously, identifying with this image reinforces the unalterable and 'popularized' version of the rape experience, cementing the idea that a survivor is justified in prosecuting her offender "only insofar as the attacker is thought to have *succeeded* in an attempt to inflict irrecuperable damage upon [her]" (Hengehold, 2000, p. 201). As a result, women are pathologized whether or not they present with the symptoms of PTSD, as the possibility that one is not traumatized or horribly harmed by rape is "not only constructed as unlikely, but as abnormal" (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011, p. 444).

Despite evidence suggesting that not all women who experience rape will experience trauma, "the notion that it may be possible to experience rape and suffer no lasting devastating psychological effects is less often articulated than is the discourse of harm"

(Gavey, 1999, p. 70). The idea that rape, and sexual violence more broadly, is necessarily traumatic is evident in an analysis of everyday understandings of sexual violence and its impacts. Nicola Gavey and Johanna Schmidt (2011) have named this phenomenon the "trauma-of-rape discourse" (p. 433). The two researchers conducted focus groups with twenty-nine men and women and explored the discursive practices that individuals engage in when describing the impact of rape. This research revealed a dominant discourse of rape that defines rape as psychologically traumatizing, beyond ordinary experience and comprehension, and as having life-long and damaging impacts (ibid). For participants in their study, it was conceptually impossible to imagine a woman who was not traumatized by an experience of rape. Furthermore, they found that participants drew on the trauma of rape discourse prescriptively, defining experiences as traumatic despite what the subjects of various vignettes claimed (p. 445). This research demonstrates that trauma might be inseparable from the definition of sexual violence, so that just as others (including researchers) guide individuals to claim victimhood (Best, 1999), so too do they guide victims to claim the traumas of these experiences. The findings of Gavey and Schmidt's (2011) research are consistent with another study where participants – who may or may not have experienced sexual violence – overwhelmingly described rape as a permanently devastating experience (Chasteen, 2001). In the case of sexual violence, a victim is deemed traumatized whether or not she identifies her psychological reactions as such (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011).

While Gavey and Schmidt (2011) suggest that trauma discourses may provide a more 'sensitive' way of making sense of sexual violence and allow for more sympathy towards victims than previous frameworks, they also argue that the notion that trauma inevitably accompanies experiences of sexual violence pathologizes all responses to

sexual violence, limits frameworks for understanding sexual violence, and obscures a social issue with a medical one. Despite these issues with the trauma-of-rape discourse, many feminists continue to advocate for trauma-informed services and training in various professions (Tseris, 2015). As well, feminist scholars continue to investigate sexual violence through the framework of trauma, including exploring the everyday experience of oppression as traumatic (e.g., Miles-McLean et al., 2014; Szymanski & Balsam, 2010). Therefore, it is clear that feminists are in conflict as to whether the category of trauma should be expanded, adjusted, or discarded completely in the feminist movement against sexual violence.

Section III: Contemporary Feminist Approaches

In this section, I provide an overview of two key organizing ideas in feminist theory. Both "choice" and "experience" have been contentious concepts for feminism, especially in terms of how they are used to make sense of and organize against women's oppression. In the case of sexual violence, the concept of choice has become increasingly relevant, as contemporary anti-rape campaigns tend to draw on the notion of consent as a way of challenging sexual violence. Similarly, experience has been foregrounded in contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence but its use has been widely debated. In the following two sections, I explore the concepts of "choice" and "experience, how they have been debated in the feminist literature, and how they have been taken up or critiqued by feminists theorizing sexual violence. In Chapter Five, these two concepts help to frame my analysis of how feminist participants discussed and defined sexual violence.

"Choice" Feminism

Linda Hirshman (2005) coined the term "choice feminism" to explain the emergence of a particular form of feminism she identifies as beginning in the 1990s. Hirshman says that choice feminism was a product of liberal feminism's backlash against other, more radical, feminisms that tended to be highly critical of male domination and women's marginalization, including women's own decisions that they saw as upholding or perpetuating women's oppression. Instead, liberal feminism offered women 'choices': "A woman could work, stay home, have 10 children or one, marry or stay single. It all counted as 'feminist' as long as she *chose* it." (Hirschman, 2005, p. 23). Ferguson (2010) suggests that choice feminism can be understood as "an *orientation* to feminist politics" that "understands freedom as the capacity to make individual choices, and oppression as the inability to choose" (ibid; emphasis original). Positioning choice feminism as an orientation, rather than a distinct sect, she suggests that many contemporary feminists have adopted varying degrees of choice feminism and points to its influence on feminist politics more broadly. Further, she suggests that choice feminism has reached the mainstream public as a "widespread belief…that the women's movement has liberated women to make whatever choices they want" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 247).

Like Hirshman (2005), Ferguson (2010) argues that choice feminism has emerged in response to criticism of past feminisms, including the ideas that feminism is too radical, essentializes womanhood, or is exclusionary. Heavy criticisms have been laid against second wave feminists for building a unified platform based on an assumed shared notion of 'womanhood', defined largely by relatively privileged women (Ferguson, 2010). The notion of a shared identity as women is seen as essentialist, failing to recognize the ways in which womanhood is constructed socially and differently for

women with multiple marginalized identities. As such, second wave feminists' construction of womanhood excluded many women whose experience of gender was complicated by intersecting forms of oppression. Though choice feminism does little to offer a framework that accounts for these intersecting forms of oppression, it does offer a necessarily inclusive feminism. Choice feminism does not ask women to share a common identity or understanding of women's issues and potential solutions; instead, it promotes liberation for all women through individualized notions of choice, presenting a feminism that all women can identify with and feel supported within (ibid).

Ferguson (2010) argues that the popularity of choice feminism lies in its ability to address the shortfalls of past feminisms. It does so by offering an ideology that is "compatible with virtually any life choices, and seemingly at odds with none" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 248). Because choice feminism prioritizes individual choice, any and all choices are seen as "an expression of…liberation" and therefore immune to critique (ibid). Tyler (2015) suggests that "so thorough is the individualisation of 'choice feminism' that when women criticise particular industries, institutions and social constructions, they are often met with accusations of attacking the women who participate in them. The importance of a structural-level analysis has been almost completely lost in popular understandings of feminism" (n.p.).

The choice feminist framework has created a landscape in which it becomes extremely difficult to define sexual violence. In the absence of a structural-level analysis that connects individual experiences to broader systems of power, it is impossible to define sexual violence as patterned violence. The individualization that choice feminism supports means that women are encouraged to decide for themselves how and if they find particular experiences oppressive or violating, and therefore whether those experiences

should be considered sexual violence. The widespread use of consent-based sexual violence campaigns seems to reinforce this notion by suggesting that, though widespread, the cause of and solution to the problem of sexual violence is individual; the structural causes of and solutions to sexual violence become less important.

Other scholars have presented a relationship between a rise in neoliberal ideology and this emphasis on 'choice' in contemporary North American feminism (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Oksala, 2016; Gill, 2007). Duménil and Lévy (2005) define neoliberalism as both an ideology that promotes individualism, self-sufficiency and independence, and a "*new social order"* that has economically restructured society (p. 9). The tenets of neoliberalism include an emphasis on free-market policies and the transfer of public services – or the welfare state – to private organizations and individuals (Bumiller, 2008, p. 5). However, as an ideology, neoliberalism is "neither limited to the economic sphere nor to state policies" but produces subjects and their behaviour, "creating a new form of selfhood" in which "collective forms of action or well-being are eroded" and replaced by an emphasis on "the individual's capacity to exercise his or her own autonomous choices" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420 – 421). Rottenberg (2014) further suggests that neoliberalism has converged with feminism, creating a new feminism that "us[es] key liberal terms, such as equality, opportunity, and free choice" and producing a feminist subject who is individualized (p. 421). In contrast to previous feminist movements, which accompanied ideas of self-empowerment with critique of systemic and structural oppression, Rottenberg (2014) argues that neoliberal feminism suggests that choices are made freely. Consequentially, choice feminism does little to challenge or change the structures that inhibit or shape women's ability to 'choose'.

Examining the ways in which "neoliberal agency" has influenced contemporary sexual politics, Bay-Cheng (2015) argues that neoliberalism's "sanctification of choice" has created an arena in which individuals are wholly responsible for their 'choices', and little is done to improve the structures that constrain women's ability to be free agents (p. 287). Similarly, Oksala (2016) defines the "new neoliberal feminine subject" as one that sees herself as making free choices based on her own rational calculation (p. 120). She and others (McCarver, 2011; Rottenberg, 2014) argue that "the idea of personal choice effectively masks the systemic aspects of power – domination, social hierarchies, economic exploitation – by relegating to subjects the freedom to choose between different options while denying them any real possibility for defining or shaping those options" (p. 125). She suggests this emphasis on choice supports neoliberal ideology by positioning women as agents with no structural constraints, equating women's liberation with "free choice" and responsibilizing women for "the impediments to their social and political success which are seen as personal or psychological rather than political" (Oksala, 2016, p. 125 – 126). As Tyler (2015) suggests, choice feminism "asks nothing of you and delivers nothing in return" (n.p.).

In the context of sexual violence, responsibilization and emphases on individual choice reinforce the ways in which women are held responsible for their own sexual violation. Scholars have widely documented sexual violence myths, which include victim-blaming sentiments in which survivors are thought to contribute – or at least not effectively prevent – their assaults (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Where choice feminism suggests that women's liberation has been achieved and women need only to embrace their free choices, it fails to acknowledge or address the structural and systemic violence that women continue to experience and reinforces the notion that women have somehow

led themselves to those experiences. As Gotell (2009) suggests, "the opposite of the rape-preventing subject is the 'risky woman' who avoids personal responsibility for sexual safety and who 'chooses' to engage in a 'high-risk lifestyle" (p. 867). These notions of personal responsibility are evident in the ways in which women are held to account for their clothing and behaviour pre-assault as a way of determining 'fault' (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Some scholars have suggested that the conflation of neoliberalism and feminism – particularly the notion of agency or choice within them – is problematic because it obscures how feminists have understood and articulated the notion of agency and ignores past victories won by feminists towards achieving agency for women. In particular, some feminists conceptualize agency as resistance to oppressive systems (Lerum and Dworkin, 2015) and warn against "erroneously conflating feminist agency (resistance to oppressive systems, groups, or other individuals) with a neoliberal focus on individualized personal *control* (for achieving individual responsibility)" (p. 322). They suggest that the distinction lies in *responsibility;* neoliberal conceptions of agency position women as entirely responsible for their choices, while feminist conceptions of agency understand the structures that constrain the choices women make.

While it may be true that some feminist ideals of agency are distinct from those of neoliberal responsibility, the distinction becomes less clear in a choice feminist framework that provides little to no commentary on structural impediments to "choice". Even those that support a choice feminism (e.g. Snyder-Hall, 2010) have suggested that choice feminism "insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate…often contradictory desires" (p. 255). Within a choice feminist framework, women must make difficult choices, but the social structures that make these decisions

difficult (or at times out of reach) are not seen to require change. In a choice feminist framework, the focus is on individual choice and not on social structures; agency within a choice feminist framework is positioned as unrelated to broader structural constraints. As McCarver (2011) has suggested, "the belief that it is possible for anyone to conquer their obstacles and succeed" that underlies both choice feminism and neoliberalism makes it difficult at times to distinguish between these two contemporary ideologies (p. 22).

A choice feminist orientation, though appealing to feminists, poses many problems. As McCarver (2011) suggests, "the conflation of feminism with choice is problematic as it distances feminism from meaningful politics, and neglects consideration of the link between personal practice and political implications" (p. 22). Furthermore, the fundamental principle of choice feminism – that choice signifies the absence of oppression – risks dismissing feminism as "superfluous and passé", necessary only to maintain the equality thought to be already achieved (ibid). In addition, McCarver (2011) suggests that choice feminism provides feminists with a "rhetorically paralyzing discourse" that "mak[es] the political *highly personal* and immune from criticism" (p. 22 – 23). Though she notes that recognizing oppression is central to feminism, choice feminism disallows such analysis and is therefore problematic to feminism, as it fails to demonstrate the same depth of feminist critique as past feminisms and makes it difficult to create a "unified platform" amongst women.

"Experience"

The relevance of experience to feminist analysis and organizing cannot be overstated, most especially in the second-wave of the feminist movement. Experience has played an essential role in how feminists conceptualize, problematize, and address social issues (Bevacqua, 2000). Women's sharing of experience in consciousness-raising groups

was central to the feminist movement against sexual violence, as testimony of violence allowed feminists to analyze and problematize everything from rape to the everyday forms of violence in women's lives (ibid). However, appealing to experience has not been an unproblematic strategy. During the second-wave and since, feminists have critiqued the construction of women's experience and the centrality of experience in feminist thought and organizing. In this section, I will explore the theoretical debates on feminism and experience and their relevance to contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence.

Alison Phipps (2016) suggests that the politicization of experience began long before second-wave feminism and can be traced back to the testimonies of Black women who attempted to integrate a racial analysis into the relatively white and homogenous "Women's movement" in the late 1800s (p. 304). More often, however, experiential politics are associated with second-wave feminism, as it was during this time that white and middle-class "feminist academics codified [the use of experience] through epistemological theorizing" (ibid). Second-wave feminism relied on the notion of experience as knowledge and used narrative and testimony as 'evidence' of women's oppression. More importantly, it was thought that women shared a common experience based on their shared identity as women; the mainstream feminist movement at that time relied on the notion of a universal "women's experience", and this was especially significant to the anti-rape movement, as feminists emphasized the prevalence and significance of sexual violence in all women's lives (Bevacqua, 2000).

Despite the centrality of experience in the mainstream feminist movement throughout the late twentieth century, feminists at the time (and since) have critiqued the notion of a shared womanhood – and thus, shared experience – for being exclusive,

focusing narrowly on the lived experiences of relatively privileged women, and ignoring the needs and realities of women further marginalized by race, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ identity, or class (Phipps, 2016). The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) demonstrated the need to attend to these interlocking forms of oppression and helped to "expos[e] the false universalism of 'women's experience', and the construction of the feminist 'knower' in the image of privilege" (ibid, p. 305).

Even those not on the margins of this universal "women's experience" have problematized its centrality in feminist thought. Joan Scott (1992), for example, has critiqued the essentialism that she saw as inherent to such approaches: "The effects of these kinds of sentiments, which attribute an indisputable authenticity to women's experience…[is] to universalize the identity of women…the possibility of politics is said to rest on, or follow from, a pre-existing women's experience" (p. 31). She further suggests that such approaches might attend to difference in experience, but not to the conditions that produce them and thus cannot adequately address differences between women.

In addition to critiquing the exclusivity of mainstream feminist approaches to "experience", Scott (1992) is well known for suggesting that experience is a "linguistic event" or a discursive construct (p. 34). She suggests that there is no pre-discursive experience upon which a feminist politics can be based, since "experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation" (ibid, p. 36). To understand experience as a non-ideological representation of 'reality' is problematic, as it ignores the ways in which ideology constructs experience, makes "individuals the starting point" to feminist analysis and positions experience as unquestionable truth (ibid). She notes this is especially troublesome since dominant ideology reflects the power

imbalances in society and shapes discourse. Feminist researchers of sexual violence have raised similar issues, pointing to how mainstream discourses of sexual violence influence women's own accounts of experience and thus make the reliance on experience as unmediated truth problematic for feminists (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). As Gavey (1999) suggests, feminist research cannot simply present women's experience, but must also "offer analyses and critiques that help make sense of women's experiences as they are shaped and constrained by power relations in social contexts", which is not possible if experience is regarded as a politically neutral description of reality (p. 68).

Despite compelling arguments for why experience should not be an epistemological foundation for feminism, it tends to be used as such. Phipps (2016) suggests that this reliance on experience reflects "the influence of standpoint theory upon contemporary intersectional feminism", through which it has been argued that "those on the perimeters of feminism had access to special forms of insight" (p. 307 & 305). Similarly, Diana Fuss (1989) suggests that part of the unquestionable foregrounding of experience comes from the dominance of "identity politics", which she defines as "the tendency to base one's politics on a sense of personal identity" (p. 97). She writes that, "Experience emerges as the essential truth of the individual subject, and personal 'identity' metamorphoses into knowledge. Who we are becomes what we know; ontology shades into epistemology" (ibid, p. 113). She and others suggest that identity politics operates "both to authorize and de-authorize speech" (ibid, p. 113).

In the context of identity politics, the more marginalized one is thought to be based on their identity, the more credible they (and their experiences) are. In this sense, "experience" can be considered a form of capital and a necessary credential that increases the legitimacy of one's knowledge (Phipps, 2016; Whelan, 2007). However, such use of

experience can foreclose analysis of the experience itself, "preclud[ing] inquiry into processes of subject construction…the relationship between discourse, cognition, and reality…and the effects of difference on knowledge" (Scott, 1992, p. 28). Such use of experience also has the effect of stunting critical conversation, since the only legitimate evidence for one's claims is in "experience" (Fuss, 1989).

Failing to account for structural dynamics that produce experience and influence its interpretation also means that how experience is (or is not) 'counted' in feminist politics often goes unquestioned. Phipps (2016) explains that some experiences – those "narrative[s] that have political use value" – are regarded as truth, while others are dismissed (p. 314). She argues that the feminist movement itself withholds empathy from certain groups and certain experiences as well, depending on the political value of any given experience at any given time: "We are asked to listen to 'survivors'…yet the designation 'survivor', and its associate claim on empathy, is withheld from the Others…The operation of experience as a form of capital, then, creates *selective empathies* granted only to those whose narratives have political use value" (p. 314). Yasmin Nair (Kinnucan, 2014) has similarly critiqued the ways in which narratives of trauma and pain are emphasized in feminist discussions of sexual violence, as these stories are politically useful for emphasizing the severity of sexual violence, while those with other interpretations of their experiences are silenced or denied legitimacy. Therefore, the uncritical reliance on experience – and the failure to question how dominant "experiences" are constructed and prioritized – can create further inequality within the feminist movement.

Despite the many concerns feminists have expressed over the use of "experience" in contemporary feminist theory, many feminists also see relying on experience as a

useful and necessary political strategy. Though she does not support returning to the notion of a "prediscursive female experience grounded in the commonalities of women's embodiment", Oksala (2016) suggests, "feminist theory must 'retrieve experience'" (p. 392). She argues that experience cannot be reduced to theories of social construction and that "the evidence of experience crucially makes collective political action possible by allowing us to not only identify with other people, but to *dis-identify* from the singularity of our own position" by connecting our experiences to others' (p. 397, emphasis original). To reject the value of experience completely would also mean rejecting a successful political tool that has, and continues to be, a strong rationale for making demands and challenging oppressive social norms and practices (ibid).

Others have similarly emphasized the importance of experience to feminist theorizing of sexual violence, since it is only through this emphasis on experience that important terms like "date rape" and "sexual harassment" emerged (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997) and feminist interpretation of these experiences has been central to feminist organizing against sexual violence (Kelly, 1988). Therefore, "experience" has also played an essential role in disrupting, and not merely reproducing, dominant discourses. Experience allows for new constructions of reality and continues to be an important feminist strategy (Oksala, 2016).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the theoretical debates on sexual violence, including feminist disagreements over the causes and definition of sexual violence, as well as its impacts. Feminist scholars continue to debate the causes of sexual violence, including whether and how sexual violence is embedded in normative heterosexuality. Defining sexual violence and accounting for the ways and frequency with

which it occurs has also been difficult, as feminist researchers and scholars struggle to impose positivist definitions onto women's experiences, but also struggle to validate or affirm the ways in which some women might make sense of their experiences.

I explored the emergence of trauma as a way of understanding the impacts of sexual violence. Though the relationship between sexual violence and trauma was forged by feminist researchers and activists, some feminists have expressed concerns around the potential for sexual violence to become depoliticized and medicalized in the context of trauma. As well, some feminist scholars have problematized the trauma of rape discourse that they see as dominating contemporary mainstream understandings of sexual violence.

I followed with an exploration of two significant concepts – "choice" and "experience" – in contemporary feminism, how they have been debated amongst feminists and their relevance to the issue of sexual violence. Together, trauma, choice and experience complicate feminist discussions of sexual violence, in that all three concepts can be taken up in individualistic ways. As well, the interplay of these three dominant feminist frameworks can make sexual violence particularly difficult to define, and this difficulty will be further explored in my discussion of the data in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodology for this project. I first describe my chosen methods for data collection in Section I, and then provide an overview of the study sample and its limitations in Section II. In Section III, I describe the data analysis process and follow with a brief exploration of ethical considerations in Section IV and the limitations of my methodology in Section V.

Section I: Data Collection

This study was an exploratory project aimed at generating new information about contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence and the role of trauma in these approaches. I used both focus groups and interviews to engage twenty-four feminists in conversation about the meaning of sexual violence, its relationship to trauma, and their evaluation of trauma as a tool for feminist organizing against sexual violence. In the following paragraphs, I describe data collection in more detail.

I initially proposed a project that used only the focus group method. I chose this method because I was interested in how feminists negotiate the meaning of sexual violence in conversation with other feminists who might support or challenge their views. Focus groups allowed me to access social interactions between feminists as they explore, explain, and defend their understandings of sexual violence and trauma (Warr, 2005, p. 200). Focus group data represents a mix of participants' personal beliefs with the "available collective narratives" that indicate the "frames of meaning that are shared or disputed among group members" (Warr, 2005, p. 201 & 203), making focus groups particularly useful for exploring issues with groups of feminists who share an ideology but are often divided in their frames of meaning. Rather than gather the perspectives of feminists in isolation, focus groups would allow me to address the co-construction of

feminist perspectives and opinions. In addition, researchers have suggested that focus groups are particularly useful for exploring social issues, such as sexual violence, because they reveal the "fluidity, deviations, and contradictions" in participants' construction of experience (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 172 as cited in Poso, Honkatukia & Nygvist, 2008). Focus groups are also particularly useful for feminist issues, as they bear resemblance to consciousness-raising groups of the anti-rape movement – in this case, allowing a small group of feminists to engage in in-depth and lengthy conversation about sexual violence – and can allow for the development or strengthening of a feminist community or consciousness amongst participants (Wilkinson, 1998).

To my knowledge, only a few studies aside from mine (e.g., Cruz, Hess, Woelk, Bear, 2016; Gavey & Schmidt, 2012) have used focus groups to explore the issue of sexual violence, and none have aimed to gather the perspectives of self-identified feminists. As such, the focus group method was also a necessary addition to the feminist literature on sexual violence and trauma.

Organizing the focus groups was very difficult, and often one or more participants would not show up. I therefore amended my methodology to include one-on-one interviews with feminists in addition to focus groups, which also allowed me to triangulate the data collected and to compare across methods for similarities and inconsistencies in participant responses (Patton, 1999). I conducted four focus groups, containing three to six participants each, and five individual interviews. Each participant took part only once in either a focus group or interview. In total, my study contained twenty-four participants.

Focus groups and interviews shared a single interview guide that asked participants about feminist approaches to sexual violence and the role of trauma in

conceptualizing and responding to sexual violence for feminists (see Appendix C). The questions were open-ended, which allowed participants freedom to discuss responses in the group setting and elaborate in one-on-one interviews (Kruegar & Casey, 2000). Each focus group was between two and three hours, and most interviews ran close to two hours in length. All focus groups and four of five interviews took place in person in Halifax, Nova Scotia; one interview was done over the phone.

Section II: Sample and Population

The study sample was comprised of twenty-four participants. The first criterion for inclusion in this study was that participants identified with one or more of the following gender identity categories: cisgender woman, transgender woman, non-binary, femme, and/or transfeminine. These categories were meant to capture the wide range of gender identities that can be thought of as falling under a broadened umbrella of 'womanhood' or as being positioned along a feminine spectrum of gender. I chose to limit my inclusion criteria to this population for two reasons: First, since anyone who is perceived as feminine or identifies with femininity to any degree is socially positioned to be at a disproportionately higher risk of sexual violence (Ristock, 2005), I wanted to limit my population to those feminists who experience this disproportionately high risk. Second, some feminists are hostile to men's participation in feminism (Fuss, 1989) and would be unwilling to participate in a group conversation on sexual violence with men, or those on a masculine spectrum. As I initially intended to collect only focus group data, the group dynamic was an important consideration. The second criterion for participation was that participants self-identified as feminist. I did not impose a definition of "feminist" since this project also intended to understand how participants themselves understand feminism.

Potential participants were invited to participate using a written invitation letter (see Appendix A) and poster (see Appendix B). As a feminist activist, I am acquainted with many feminist networks in Halifax, Nova Scotia and used a snowball sampling method, sending invitations to key feminist contacts in my social network who then distributed the invitation throughout their networks. I also sent my recruitment letter and poster to various feminist and social justice groups and organizations in Halifax, posted it to my Facebook wall, and sent it through key contacts at Dalhousie University. This broad snowball sampling technique was intended to gather a diverse sample of participants with whom I am not directly acquainted (Bouma, Ling & Wilkinson, 2012, p. 140), as I hoped this would allow me to access the perspectives of feminists both within and outside of the academy. I also hoped to gather participants who I did not know, so that participants would feel freer to discuss contentious feminist issues than they might be with a feminist interviewer who they knew (I address this limitation further in Section V.) I was successful in gathering twenty-four participants, only five of whom I knew personally.

When potential participants contacted me, I invited them to meet briefly in person or over the phone to talk about the study, though some participants opted to get study information via email. I explained the purpose of the study and the participation criteria. Potential participants were asked if they met the criteria, but were not asked specifically for their gender identity or any other demographic information. Potential participants were given the consent form (see Appendix D) and focus group/interview questions (see Appendix C). I felt it important to provide potential participants with this information so that the scope and purpose of the discussion that would take place in interviews/focus groups was transparent. I assumed that most participants would not be exploring

questions about sexual violence and trauma for the first time and thus did not feel that participants' awareness of the focus group/interview questions in advance would significantly affect their responses. It turned out that for many participants, the interview/focus group *was* the first time they were exploring these issues, which I discuss further in chapter four. Participants were not asked to prepare responses to the questions in advance.

My aim was to explore the discursive practices and frameworks that a small group of feminists draw on to discuss the role of trauma in conceptions of sexual violence, not to provide a representative sample of feminist conceptions more broadly as this is beyond the scope of a small, qualitative study (Warr, 2005). The small sample size of twenty-four participants was both a function of my research purpose and the constraints of a master's thesis. Furthermore, I aimed to recruit a diverse group of feminists and tailored my sampling methods to this goal but I did not aim to capture how social location influences understandings of sexual violence and thus did not choose to collect demographic details from participants. Through information participants candidly offered prior to and during interviews/focus-groups, and through characteristics that I could observe, it appears that the sample was relatively homogenous and was comprised of predominantly white, university-educated, self-identified women under forty years of age. Four participants were visibly racialized, one participant self-identified as working-class, and none disclosed disability. Many participants were either students or working in careers that require post-secondary education. LGBTQ+ identity was better represented amongst participants, as nine of the twenty-four participants made explicit reference to their LGBTQ+ identity. The limitations of my participant demographics and my choice to not gather demographic details is further addressed in Section V.

Section III: Data Analysis

All focus group sessions and interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and subsequently transcribed. I began analysis by carefully and repeatedly reading the transcripts to get acquainted with the data. I looked for patterns in the way sexual violence was discussed and the discourses that shaped participants' understandings of sexual violence and trauma, making note of patterns and differences within and between participants' discussions throughout this process.

As a preliminary step to coding the data, I drew loosely on Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) Voice Relational Method to conduct three specific "readings" of the interview transcripts. Each reading focussed my attention towards a different aspect of the transcript: the plot; how participants position themselves in the text; and how participants position themselves in relation to feminism and the feminist community. This third reading varies from the Voice Relational Method, which would otherwise include a third reading for interpersonal relationships and social networks. I chose to modify the third reading in this way because I wanted to explore how, if at all, the tensions in the academic feminist literature relating to sexual violence and trauma would emerge in how feminist participants talked about their perspectives in relation to feminism and the feminist community. Rather than explore social networks and relationships more broadly, I wanted to focus on those relationships that would be relevant to participants' conceptions of and responses to feminism and feminist frameworks. I found the Voice Relational Method to be an interesting way of reading transcripts, but ultimately too time-consuming to use as a method of analysis for my data, given the time constraints of the project. I only conducted these three specific readings for my interview transcripts, using the method as a way of immersing myself in the data prior to coding. These readings did

not structure my coding of the data, which was informed by repeated and broad readings of all the data.

Through careful and repeated readings of both the interview and focus group data, I created a preliminary code list of latent and manifest codes. Beginning with this preliminary list, I began coding both interview and focus group transcripts, adding codes that reflected newly emerging concepts from the data, and removing or collapsing codes that were no longer useful (Seidel, 1998). I continued this process until I was no longer finding new concepts in the data, at which point I stopped the intensive coding process and began my analysis across transcripts. To do this, I created a document for each code, and filled each document with the passages attached to a given code. Codes were re-categorized and/or renamed and passages re-coded during this process as necessary to develop coherent and consistent categories. When all transcripts and their coding had been sorted through, I began sorting through the coding documents themselves, developing coherent themes within codes and describing my observations in the margins. For each theme, I wrote a lengthy description of the similarities, differences, and contradictions between and within passages, and looked particularly for similarities and differences across focus group and interview data. I returned to the original transcripts to verify my analysis and to attend to inconsistencies and contradictions within individual participants' narratives. The data analysis phase of this research was iterative and continued into my writing of my findings.

Section IV: Ethical Considerations

While confidentiality for interview participants was guaranteed, I was unable to guarantee confidentiality for focus group participants, as there were always multiple participants in each session. The consent form that each participant signed asked that

participants keep focus group conversations confidential, but this obviously cannot be enforced (see Appendix D).

An important ethical consideration for this project was the impact of conversations about sexual violence on individuals, especially those socially positioned to disproportionately experience this violence in their lifetimes. In order to minimize harm for participants, participants were given an opportunity to meet with me in person before the interview or focus group session to discuss what participating entailed. Each participant was also provided the questions beforehand, so as to ensure that they could make an informed decision about participation. Many potential participants who initially expressed interest either stopped responding to emails or did not show up to their focus group session, though I cannot be sure whether this was related to the topic of my research or merely a reflection of the difficulties of organizing focus groups. However, no participants withdrew from the study during or after interviews/focus groups.

Prior to and during focus groups/interviews, participants were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question, step out, or end the focus group/interview at any time. Each focus group session was attended by an active listener – someone trained in peer support counselling or social work – who sat outside of the room and was available for debriefing and crisis support. My own training in Mental Health First Aid, sexual violence peer support counselling, and active listening, as well as my experience providing one-on-one support to victims/survivors through Dalhousie's Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Phone Line, meant that I could also attend to participants' needs if a participant found themselves unsettled or triggered during an interview or focus group. Participants were provided with a list of local resources (see Appendix E) at the

end of the session, which included helpline numbers, websites, blogs, and community resources that cater to victims/survivors of sexual violence.

Data were kept on a personal, password-protected computer and in password-protected folders and files. Audio recordings were transcribed and deleted after the transcribing was complete. Transcriptions were anonymized (i.e., any information that could identify a participant was removed) and a pseudonym was given to each participant. I was the only person with access to the original data with identifying information.

Section V: Limitations

Though my research can speak deeply to the frameworks, understandings, and analysis provided by the twenty-four feminists who participated, my sample size is/was small and not intended to be representative of the perspectives of Nova Scotian feminists. As described in Section II, my sample appeared to be relatively homogenous, further limiting any potential for generalization. The homogeneity of my sample, however, is also potentially useful in that it allows for easier comparisons across participants than would be possible with a widely diverse group, as perspectives on gendered violence can be informed by social location (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005); a heterogeneous group of feminists may have meant more conflict amongst participants with disparate views (Narayan, 1988) or difficulty in the development of coherent themes during analysis. Further, this homogenous sample may provide a suitable group for comparative research with other homogenous feminist groups in the future.

My choice to use focus group and interview data collection methods further limits my study. Both methods of data collection occur in social contexts that may influence participants' responses and the interviewer's presence can affect the way that respondents present themselves and what they say (Hollander, 2004). This is a particularly important

concern for my research, since I asked participants to position themselves on contentious feminist issues. Furthermore, my own identity as a feminist could mean that respondents were *more* or *less* comfortable making claims about feminism, sexual violence, and trauma. In focus groups, there is the added layer of group influence, which may have made participants reluctant to disclose information as they might be particularly aware of the social pressures to conform, maintain social desirability, and avoid judgement or conflict (Hollander, 2004). Though I attended to comparisons across these data sets in my analysis, the analysis presented in this thesis may not adequately address the subtleties of focus group or interview dynamics and their influences on the findings.

Section VI: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of my methodology, including the study sample, recruitment technique, data collection methods, and the process of data analysis. I also described the ethical considerations for this research, as well as the limitations of my chosen methodology on the findings of my research. I will describe the research findings in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Findings

Section I: Chapter Layout

This chapter provides analysis of how participants in this study understood and negotiated feminism, sexual violence and trauma. Participants understood sexual violence using three significant concepts: choice, experience and trauma. Both choice and experience frameworks resulted in significant difficulties defining sexual violence, and resulted in an individualized understanding of sexual violence, which I explore in Section II. In Section III, I demonstrate the significance of trauma to participants' definitions of sexual violence; I also present how they explicitly evaluated trauma's role in a feminist approach to sexual violence. I have chosen to focus on these themes because of the strength with which they emerged from my data and their significance to the sexual violence and feminist literature, as well as to the feminist campaign against sexual violence.

Section II: Defining Sexual Violence

Foregrounding Agency and Choice

Most participants found it difficult to describe what distinguishes a feminist approach to sexual violence; many expressed it was the first time they had been asked to define a feminist approach and began their responses by describing the difficulty of answering such a "hard question". Adrienne captured the sentiment of many participants when she said, "I guess I should say that I feel a bit of anxiety because I don't actually know what the definition of a feminist approach to sexual violence is." One participant suggested that the question was particularly difficult since she believed that there is no one 'feminist' approach to sexual violence: "I think that's the thing of it all. I think that's

with feminism in general…it includes so many things and I think all of those perspectives is what makes a feminist perspective, is that it includes different views" (Melissa). Overall, the majority of participants suggested that there are various approaches that fall under the umbrella of "feminism".

Despite this difficulty in articulating the boundaries of a feminist approach to sexual violence, all participants very clearly cited various feminist priorities in addressing sexual violence. Three participants identified 'frontline' work (such as speaking up when encountering or witnessing oppressive behaviour, supporting survivors, or organizing feminist events) as a significant feminist approach. Liz, for example, suggested that frontline work is "the biggest thing in the feminist approach towards sexual violence." For a few participants, a feminist approach was seen as a departure from 'mainstream' conceptions of, and approaches to, sexual violence, such as challenging the notion that sexual violence is largely perpetrated by strangers or that women have an obligation to protect themselves from experiencing sexual violence. However, more common than both 'frontline work' and 'challenging the mainstream' was the suggestion that a feminist approach offers a critique of systemic oppression and power. Melanie, for example, described the need to "take a broader look" and ask: "What are the systems of power that allow sexual violence to be perpetrated repeatedly and disproportionately against women, against femmes?" Adrienne similarly expressed the importance of a feminist framework that analyzes power and culture: "An important part of my feminist approach to sexual violence is looking at the causes [such as] a culture that facilitates patriarchy and poverty, racism, all these things…a culture that allows sexual violence towards women." Though this was one of the more popular approaches identified by participants, still less than half drew on a structural or systemic analysis or suggested it was important to feminism.

Less than half of participants explicitly advocated for an "intersectional approach", which most understood as the recognition that various identities disproportionately expose some individuals to experiencing sexual violence: "There are certain groups that are more vulnerable or at-risk of experiencing sexual violence…Intersectionality recognizes that [and] then it offers more support to those groups…What kind of background led to this – who were they?" (Dana). For Dana, taking an intersectional approach meant recognizing differences amongst those at-risk of sexual violence and providing more support for those who experience increased risk. Similarly, Melissa suggested that "feminism as a whole looks at intersectionality and not just this subset of women, but like women in general – anybody identifying as female, including all races, everything like that. Everybody should have the same access to resources and things like that." Though some participants identified an intersectional approach as important to their feminism early on in interviews and focus groups, discussions of sexual violence that followed did not attend to identity-based differences amongst women and their experiences of sexual violence.

The idea that intersectionality is about inclusivity and equality across difference was common amongst those participants who advocated for it; however, this understanding of intersectionality significantly differs from the way feminist scholars have theorized the concept. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) defines an intersectional approach as one that recognizes the multiple dimensions of identity and the ways in which experiences can be shaped by overlapping forms of oppression – such as sexism and racism – in ways that make a singular analysis based on gender or race alone insufficient. In her work on violence against women, she describes the importance of intersectionality for its ability to recognize how "the violence that many women

experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (p. 1242). For Crenshaw (1991) and others (e.g., Collins, 2000) an intersectional approach means much more than including *all women* in discussions of sexual violence or recognizing the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by some women, and though participants in this study explicitly named 'intersectionality' as an important aspect of a feminist approach, their understandings of intersectionality do not appear to fully adopt the analysis provided by these feminist scholars.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of participants insisted that choice and agency were key to feminist approaches to sexual violence. Sam explained: "Feminism is about choice. Other people's choices might look super different than our choices but that doesn't mean that they're not feminist." Others agreed, suggesting that a feminist approach to sexual violence recognizes the right of any person to their "personal choice" (Sylvia) and their right to decide how they interpret their experience. Amber and Hannah saw this emphasis on choice as helping to facilitate empowerment, another feminist priority:

> **Amber:** To be feminist is to give people the choice to identify as they want to, and [if] someone's like 'I'm not a survivor, I didn't survive this, I was fucking hurt by this. I was harmed by this. I was victimized by that situation. I didn't survive that situation.' And other people are like 'I survived it' then that's good, that's powerful for them, yeah.
> **Hannah:** It has to be kind of like a swinging door, you know, of whatever feels the most powerful.
> **Amber:** Mhmm. And just recognizing that different things will feel different.

Like Amber and Hannah, most participants acknowledged that allowing people "choice" meant being open to all possibilities of how someone might interpret, define, and deal with their experience.

Participants felt obligated to unquestioningly accept and support all choices, even those that conflict with other essential feminist priorities. For example, Amber explained that her feminist approach is anti-carceral (i.e. rejects a juridical approach to justice) and suggested that encouraging women to use the criminal justice system to deal with sexual violence is 'not feminist'; yet she also expressed an imperative to support those who deal with sexual violence through the criminal justice system:

> It's about giving people space and options, and some people are going to want to find justice through the, the, you know, the criminal justice system. (laughs) And I would never say to someone that had experienced sexual assault, that wanted to go that route, that they're not doing it right. You know, 'that's not a feminist response to your harm.' That's shitty. That's shitty to tell somebody who's experienced sexual assault that the way they want to heal and find justice from it is wrong…It's about being like 'yeah, that's valid' and so, yeah, I think that's the important thing.

Amber's emphasis on choice meant that she felt obligated to validate the choices that are made by people who experience sexual violence, whether or not she agrees with them and, importantly, even if she sees those choices as perpetuating oppression (through the criminal justice system). Her laughter in the above quote illustrates her discomfort with that method of 'finding justice'. Natalie provides another example of the tension between choice and feminist priorities, saying that she "pass[es] no judgement" on women who find catcalling empowering; she explains: "It falls into a bin of things that I don't think are appropriate and I think it's oppressive, but fuck it, you know? There's porn that I think is oppressive, but I don't think it's fair to say 'no one should watch this.'" Though Natalie categorizes catcalling and at least some forms of pornography as "oppressive", she does not feel that she can apply an anti-feminist label to those who find these experiences enjoyable or empowering. Amber and Natalie were just two of many

participants whose need to validate "choice" meant that other feminist analyses and priorities were unsettled.

In one focus group, participants struggled to negotiate a clear definition for sexual violence because of this contradiction between "choice" and a structural feminist analysis of gendered oppression. In the following excerpt, three participants discuss whether catcalling can be categorized as a form of sexual violence against individuals who 'choose' to find it empowering:

> **Melissa:** But then where do we draw the line? Where do we define things? Where do we set a precedent that it's wrong? So just because somebody doesn't mind it…those things are wrong, are like –
> **Lisa:** I know tons of women who have a confidence boost when they're catcalled, and I don't really feel comfortable saying that they shouldn't…I look at it in a different way than they do, but I wouldn't feel comfortable saying, 'Well you know what? You have to feel like you were harassed by that too.'
>
> …
>
> **Melissa:** I just look at the, at the thing that led them to get the confidence boost from catcalling and those kinds of things – it's another feminist issue. It's like, what brought us to the point where that's a confidence boost? ...It's sad that our society sees that as flirtation. It's not flirtation.
> **Lisa:** But then if they think it's flirtation and not harassment, is it our role as feminists to tell them that's harassment and not flirtation?
>
> …
>
> **Susan:** It can just get preachy if you try to, you know, if you try to say 'you shouldn't like that.' It's like, 'well who says you shouldn't?'…Everybody experiences empowerment in their own way.
> **Melissa:** I don't want to say that, like – I don't want to ever define somebody else's experience. But I also feel that, if somebody is fully educated and all that stuff and they still choose that that's okay for them, then that's, then that's, I guess I would say isn't violent to them. But I think in the greater context it still is. I think that, I think that that behaviour is still sexual violence. It, to me, I think it is, because I don't know, I, if – is slapping someone always violence? You know?
>
> …

> **Lisa:** I guess the difficulty that I have with saying that 'it's always wrong' is because it's such a crime that women's agency is removed from the very beginning. So, if someone experiences that and they don't identify with that, do I want to go the next step further and try to tell them what it was?

In this excerpt, Melissa consistently asserts the need to recognize the broader forces that facilitate street harassment. She and her fellow participants had previously agreed that addressing the systemic causes of sexual violence is a feminist priority, but it is clear that this analysis conflicts with the need to affirm individuals' agency and validate all forms of "empowerment". Even though Lisa agrees that sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence, she suggests that she has "difficulty" with making claims based on that analysis; she cannot say that sexual violence "[is] always wrong" because she risks denying women their agency. Melissa, too, "do[esn't] want to ever define someone else's experience" and clearly struggles with the possibility that people would "choose that that's okay for them." She asserts that if someone is educated (presumably, on feminist issues) and still feels that sexual harassment is okay or empowering, then her analysis of sexual harassment as a form of oppression would not supersede that individual's choice. She notes, however, that "in the greater context it still is [violence]".

A closer analysis of this excerpt reveals a shift in Melissa's argument from beginning to end. She begins the dialogue by very clearly articulating that catcalling and street harassment are wrong. However, as other participants consistently argue for the need to affirm individual agency and choice, her responses begin to include the possibility that an individual's own definition – one that contradicts her feminist theorizing of the experience – would be valid. Despite this, she finally claims "that behaviour is still sexual violence." It is possible that Melissa felt pressured to prioritize choice and agency over a systemic analysis because there were multiple participants

arguing against her. As the conversation progresses, she becomes more hesitant, stumbling over words while trying to re-assert her counter-argument (e.g. "It, to me, I think it is, because I don't know, I, if…"). Whether Melissa actually believed in the importance of "choice", or just yielded to her fellow participants, her inability to sustain a critical analysis of sexual violence illustrates the strength of the feminist imperative to affirm choice and its ability to displace other structural feminist analyses.

The previous excerpt demonstrates the constraints participants felt over their ability to apply a feminist analysis of systemic oppression to sexual violence broadly, but other participants offered more concrete examples of the difficulties they experience attempting to juggle the ideas of choice and structural oppression in their personal lives. Dana, for example, described situations where her friends recall experiences that she understands as sexual violence but they do not: "A friend is like, 'oh yeah, I really didn't want to have sex but my boyfriend was really blah' and they describe this whole thing…and they're like, 'No, no, it's not a big deal. It was just this thing.' And they don't really see it in the same way…But it's still violence from my point of view and not theirs, so it's hard to tell what we should do [as feminists]." Sam described the difficulties she experiences in her professional work. Her current workplace is recreating their website, but they are unsure of what to put for a definition of sexual violence: "We just have this section on our website that's like, 'What is sexualized violence or sex without consent? And we're like, 'What do we put here? What is our role to put here?'…So, I think it's a real struggle…you want [people who use the website] to get something that validates what [they're] going through." In this case, the need to 'validate' all experiences meant that Sam and her colleagues were unsure whether they could even put a definition of sexualized violence on the website. The inability to validate individual experiences while

also labelling experiences of oppression as such meant that most participants struggled to apply feminist analyses to sexual violence, both in terms of its broad conceptualization and in their everyday work lives and relationships.

"Experience" and Experiential Authority

Interview and focus group questions did not ask about personal experience and yet more than half of participants answered broad questions about the nature of sexual violence and trauma by drawing on personal experience. I informed participants prior to and during interviews and focus group sessions that I would not ask about personal experiences; still, many voluntarily (and some immediately) disclosed experiences of sexual violence to me. For some, the use of personal experience allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge on the issue; drawing on personal experience of sexual violence gave them a certain level of experiential authority, or a "survivor status", where experience could serve as evidence for claims they made about sexual violence and its impacts. Many participants with "survivor status" began their responses to questions (e.g. What do you think are the impacts of sexual violence on those who have experienced it?) with phrases like, "Speaking from my own experience" or "In my experience of assault," followed by a claim about what sexual violence is, or how it impacts individuals.

Those who lacked survivor status often prefaced their responses by disclaiming a lack of authority. For example, Vicki explained at the beginning of the focus group that she didn't feel "authoritative" on the topic of sexual violence since most of her understanding came from reading articles and posts online. When responding to a question about sexual violence, she began by saying, "I think as someone who hasn't experienced directly sexual assault, the thing that affects me personally is…" In this quote, Vicki reveals that she does not have survivor status, but then continues to answer

the question by drawing on the experiential authority she has from other related experiences. The fact that Vicki felt she had to comment on her experience, or lack thereof, in order to respond to the question is telling; she did not feel that she had the necessary experience(s) in order to have first-hand (and therefore authoritative) knowledge on the issue; however, she continued to comment on the issue based on other related experiences (e.g., sexual harassment) that she had, suggesting that experiences of marginalization are somewhat transferable and that authority to speak on an issue can be gained by disclosing similar or relatable experiences to the issue at hand.

When talking about the nature of sexual violence in comparison to other forms of physical violence, Laura explained: "It's not something that I've experienced, so I don't know if I need to speak to whether or not that's legit…I don't know if I know enough about it to say, 'That's not right.'" For Laura, a lack of experience meant a lack of adequate knowledge and therefore a lack of authority to make claims about this aspect of sexual violence. Unlike Vicki, who used her transferable experiential knowledge to continue to make a claim about sexual assault despite lacking direct experience, Laura felt she should not comment on the issue whatsoever.

The obligation to speak from experience was clear in many participants' discussions, such as Liz who repeatedly said, "I'm trying to speak from my own personal experience." Though Liz had the experiential authority of being a survivor, she was still wary of speaking *beyond* her own experience. Throughout all focus groups and interviews, personal experience served as a form of knowledge, and experiential authority appeared to be central to making claims about sexual violence; those who lacked this authority tended to express some degree of hesitation when making claims, included disclaimers or caveats, or refrained from making claims about sexual violence at all.

Participants also centralized "experience" in their discussions of feminist approaches to sexual violence. Many participants described a feminist approach to sexual violence as being "about experience". Unlike the acute experience needed for "survivor status", participants' reference to "experience" here described a kind of knowledge, or experiential authority, that comes from membership of a marginalized group that is affected by the issue. Vicki, for example, suggested that "the feminist idea is that the people who have dominated the discussion [of sexual violence] have been people who don't experience that day-to-day threat of violence." She saw a feminist approach to sexual violence as one that prioritizes the voices of those who deal with the issue on a daily basis by virtue of belonging to a group that is disproportionately more likely to experience sexual violence (e.g., women).

In another focus group, two participants further explored the idea that identity is an indicator of experiential knowledge. Nisha expressed frustration with the fact that "[the] people who are on the top of our government who make policies and decide things [about sexual violence]…are like seventy-year old men who don't have any, you know, they've never had to deal with it." Amber expressed similar sentiments and further suggested that "that's not a feminist approach because that's a bunch of old white dudes." For participants in this focus group, experiential knowledge was connected to group membership, suggesting that belonging to a marginalized group is key to taking a feminist approach to the issue of sexual violence.

The idea that identity and experience are central to feminism was also apparent in one focus group conversation about 'intersectionality'. As mentioned previously, participants understood intersectionality as inclusion and attention to difference, and though participants in this focus group thought these values were important, one

participant suggested that the inclusion of men in feminism (which she saw as a direct consequence of an intersectional approach) might put women at risk of violence. She recalled an experience of being assaulted by a self-proclaimed feminist man; the conversation that followed demonstrates that participants saw feminist men as suspect:

> **Rebecca:** So just that is like – yeah, it's great that men are involved in feminism now, being an intersectional feminist movement, but it's like –
> **Lindsay:** As long as you're not getting the 'nice guys' [laughter]…Are they self-identifying as feminist or do they actually have feminist thoughts and ideologies?

As the conversation continued, some participants pointed to "privilege" as one reason that men cannot access a feminist mindset. As Lindsay explained:

> They're sort of at the top echelon in terms of privilege…Because even though I am a straight, cisgender white woman, I still have the experience of being oppressed based on gender, and so I do think in some ways that makes it a little easier to relate to the experiences of oppression of other groups.

This conversation demonstrates the centrality of identity-specific experience to a feminist approach. By virtue of occupying a marginalized social identity, one can more easily access the "experience" of oppression and therefore understand oppression more widely as it affects those with other identities. Thus, as Rebecca and Lindsay suggest, men are less likely to have the experiential knowledge necessary for a feminist perspective.

The notion of shared experiential knowledge, though, was complicated by a need to attend to 'diversity' and be inclusive. Participants rarely made claims about "women" as a group; in fact, most participants talked about sexual violence in gender-neutral terms and emphasized the need to consider the experiences of non-women (men and those on the trans spectrum). Sometimes participants corrected themselves if they began talking in gendered terms: "Without making that prevention [the obligation of] – I don't want to say

the ‘women’, but the victim’s side of things” (Sophie). Others acknowledged their use of gendered language: “Well, now I’m using binary language, but I do think this is the narrative…” (Natalie). Though participants did mention “women” throughout their interviews (especially in discussions of sexual harassment), they explicitly pointed to the need for conversations around sexual violence to be inclusive of all experiences, regardless of identity. Therefore, while identity was important for determining who could not speak about sexual violence (e.g. men, especially those white and/or old), actual discussions of sexual violence intentionally avoided identity-specific claims.

Most participants expressed a need to be open to all possible experiences (in this case, the actual events that one has been exposed to, as well as how they interpret and define those events). For example, Laura explained that “feminism is really about…understanding individual experiences…and there’s diversity in experience.” Natalie similarly suggested that sexual violence is “different for every person.” Others referred to sexual violence as a “super individual thing.” Sophie framed this perspective as an “intersectional approach”, through which she felt she could ally herself with those whose identities positioned them to have experiences she could not:

> We can’t experience something that we don’t experience. We can only be told about it. And just thinking about how something that could happen to a disabled person, it wouldn’t cross my mind that it could happen to me. And something that could happen to a person of colour, or a trans person, the list goes on – and they’re all things that I can’t directly experience. I can only allow myself to be told about it and to try and be an ally for those things.

For Sophie, respecting others’ experiential knowledge was key to having an inclusive approach to sexual violence that recognizes the unique experiences of those more marginalized than her. Others similarly expressed that they could not directly access certain realities and forms of knowledge and therefore had to accept all others’

experiential knowledge; to not do so would risk denying 'difference', dangerously resembling second-wave feminism (which more than half of participants explicitly critiqued in their interviews or referenced in their conversations around inclusion). Hannah demonstrated the relationship between respecting experiential knowledge and inclusion by cautioning against a feminism that tells others how to feel: "It's probably going to be a white woman like me, just like standing up and being like, 'this is how you should feel about this' or 'this is not a big deal because it might not be in my world.'" Like Sophie, Hannah's respect for others' experiential knowledge was at least partly informed by a desire to present a more inclusive feminism.

Even those who did not frame this approach in the language of intersectionality or inclusion acknowledged a need to unquestioningly accept experience as evidence of claims pertaining to sexual violence. Some referred to this approach as being "survivor-centred" and suggested that a survivor-centred approach is key to feminism and sexual violence; others did not use this language but cited similar obligations. As Amber put it, "Believing people and listening are the number one things [in a feminist approach]." Rebecca explained that feminists have an obligation to "trust what the victim is telling you." Some variation of this statement was made by almost every single participant; only one participant explored the idea that "it sometimes seems like an oversimplification to just be like 'We need to believe people'"; even so, she agreed that a feminist approach is "that kind of survivor-centred approach" (Melanie). Whether they framed it as inclusivity, intersectionality, or survivor-centring, all participants expressed an obligation to include and validate all experiences and to treat others as experts on their own experience.

The significance of experience was related to participants' emphasis on choice and both were at the core of participants' inability (and at times unwillingness) to define sexual violence. As Lisa explained, "respecting their experience and how they feel that they have experienced it and what they identify with after the fact" is essential to recognizing "the self-determination of the person who's experienced that." Alycia explained that "something that might not seem extreme to one person might break down another" and so she and others emphasized the importance of "not having your experience confined to a definition…[as this] sort of takes away from your personal experience" (Nisha). Participants' emphases on individual experience – particularly the notion of "personal experience" – demonstrate that they thought of experience as something that only each individual can understand for themselves and therefore the definition of each experience can only be determined by the experience holder; to not respect that definition of the experience means denying an individual 'self-determination', 'choice', and 'agency' and their right to 'empowerment'. In the following section, I will explore how these individualistic understandings of experience and choice made it nearly impossible for participants to define sexual violence.

Broad Frameworks and Loose Definitions

With obligations to respect both choice and experience, all participants struggled to define sexual violence. As Hannah explained, "sexualized violence is not something that we can even…come up with a parsed definition [of] because even in trying to set the one definition, you isolate other people who are experiencing it differently" (Hannah). Instead, participants suggested that the "conversation [be] open and receiving to any kind of experience that somebody wants to put under that definition" (Laura). Amber said, "You use the loosest words you can." Participants felt that to define sexual violence in

any kind of categorical sense would risk excluding or wrongly defining some experiences, directly contradicting the need for a survivor-centred and/or inclusive approach that affirms each individual as an expert of their experience. Enforcing a definition could also mean that feminists run the risk of including experiences that individuals themselves do not define as sexual violence. For example, Amber cautioned against "talking about [sexual violence] in a way that defines [experiences] as sexual assault when you didn't feel like that was sexual assault." Laura similarly suggested that people should not have to seek out a feminist to get the "feminist definition" of their experience. Some participants found it difficult to even participate in the conversation because of the risk of excluding or mislabelling experiences; as Melanie explained, "it's hard to talk about because I don't want to be erasing people's experiences as a person, right?"

Given this difficulty, most participants did not offer a clear definition of sexual violence, although they often refuted common or 'mainstream' definitions and drew on broad feminist conceptual schemas. The majority of participants saw sexual violence as ranging from everyday experiences, like street harassment and unwanted advances, to extreme and rarer forms, like rape. As Liz explained, both sexual violence and rape are "all-encompassing" terms, describing experiences well beyond violent assaults. She suggested that language be considered a form of violence and explained that "if you target certain words towards a certain demographic…that's definitely an act of violence." Other participants similarly included 'smaller' acts in a broad sexual violence framework, suggesting they share a common structural cause: unequal power relations.

In the following excerpt, focus group participants discuss the relationship between everyday harassment and sexual violence:

> **Nyima:** I think the power imbalance is an important factor [in sexual violence].
> **Renee:** I think when you were talking earlier about the legal system – like, they need to catch up…because if you say 'oh, I was groped at a concert, just as an example, that is a sexually violent act, but nothing is ever going to happen. Let's face it – the perpetrator is going to just walk away from that.
> …
> **Nyima:** I think it begins with that. If you can do catcalling and look at someone, then they go for the next step, like 'oh I can do that and maybe I can do this one and that one', so I think it's a gateway to [sexual violence].
> **Renee:** It's like a symptom, at the very least…At the very least, it's a symptom, but it can also be – like, it's definitely violence. I don't know, it's very hard to describe the – like, it's not okay. [laughs]
> **Audrey:** And I see sexual violence as an umbrella term and then all these things are on a continuum of sexual violence…Like catcalling and touching and unwanted comments, and then, yeah.

In this dialogue, Nyima points to "power imbalance" as an important factor in sexual violence and suggests that everyday harassment is "a gateway" to sexual violence. Audrey directly draws on the notion of a continuum of sexual violence that ranges from the everyday to the extreme. These ideas were shared by the majority of participants, who problematized everyday harassment through the language of sexual violence and noted the importance of doing so: "It's the same. I'm not saying that catcalling is the same as rape, to be clear, but I think that there's a seed that begins with both…That's why when we say things like, 'catcalling isn't as bad as physical assault,' I think it downplays the severity of those kinds of moments because it starts there" (Adrienne). Hannah similarly suggested that "it's all just enmeshed". For most participants, failing to include everyday experiences in a sexual violence framework would risk downplaying their severity and ignoring the structural relationship between them.

In one focus group, participants drew on similar structural analyses to problematize the reliance on consent as the barrier between sex and sexual violence.

Participants in this group suggested that someone can experience sexual violence even when they have agreed to participate in the sexual activity:

> **Sophie:** I feel like the idea would get resistance from several quarters – the idea of putting that sort of 'oh well I guess' into sexual violence…But I think the structure that allows for that is really violent. So that 'oh well I guess it's easier for me to just have sex with my boyfriend or whatever than it is to ask him to go home'…I think that's a very violent idea. Even if it isn't violent in the sense that we think about sexual violence.
> **Amanda:** And that's the rape culture that allows for sexual violence to happen to people without them really grasping either that they could say no, or that they were assaulted.

Others in this focus group agreed with this analysis and shared personal experiences that aligned. For participants in this focus group, the pressures that people feel to agree to sexual activity are also a part of sexual violence, further demonstrating the need for a broad framework that can problematize these 'everyday' experiences.

Only four participants did not agree that broad frameworks for sexual violence were altogether useful, suggesting that they might conflate the everyday with the extreme and create an unnecessary "fear culture" (Laura). Laura explained in her interview that sexual violence "sparks that fear, it's right away, it's a scary thing, it has to make you upset, it has to hurt you" and so when her university was working on a new policy to address sexual assault, she critiqued the broad definition they chose: "I wrote in the comments, 'if you're going to do this, don't call it sexual violence, because…it's not all violent. Not all of this is violence and not all of this is actually scary. Some of this is just uncomfortable or not cool." She explained that these broad frameworks "amplif[y] the experiences of people who haven't experienced real *violence*…[and] diminis[h] the people's experience who have had serious problems."

Josephine also expressed hesitation around the use of broad definitions because she worried that they are cause for discrediting feminism: “I feel like – if you’re going to define it like that, then how are we going to take the other parts seriously?...It just makes it difficult for feminism as a whole…I just imagine someone who isn’t a feminist saying, ‘This is what feminist people mean and they’re crazy’, you know what I mean? And I don’t like that idea” (Josephine). At the same time, she was conflicted over the need for broad frameworks, since she noted that “having that extremely wide definition was helpful” because it allowed her to re-interpret a past experience that she had previous felt responsible for as assault, which she felt helped to alleviate some of the shame she had associated with it.

In these examples, both Laura and Josephine demonstrate the significance of the boundaries of sexual violence. A definition of sexual violence provides frameworks that might change the meaning people give to experience. When sexual violence frameworks encompass broad ranges of experience, this influences how the issue is taken up and responded to. Both participants expressed hesitations about the broadening of sexual violence definitions and felt that the broadening scope might be cause for more explicit forms of violence to be taken less seriously. Both participants seemed to suggest that definitions of sexual violence do not necessarily reflect the true nature of a given experience but, rather, help us to categorize experience in ways that can be useful and/or harmful. Interestingly, both of these conversations took place in one-on-one interviews, and this is notable because these two participants expressed views that many feminists would likely not receive well.

One way that participants were able to define sexual violence more concretely was by focussing on the impacts of sexual violence. In the next section, I will describe how

participants' linking of sexual violence and its impacts reinforced the narrative that sexual violence is inherently traumatic and helped to determine when an experience is categorized as sexual violence.

Section III: The Trauma Imperative

Though participants' reluctance to define sexual violence and their use of broad frameworks made it seem as if there were no set criteria to determine what counts as sexual violence, participants did use the *impacts* of potentially sexually violent experiences to help determine whether the experiences 'counted' as sexual violence. There was a clear contradiction in participants' discussions of sexual violence between the validation of individual experience and choice, and the assumption that sexual violence is inherently traumatic regardless of how an individual responds to, or understands, their experience. Responses given to most questions implicitly and explicitly relied on the notion that sexual violence is inherently and necessarily traumatic, demonstrating that the only 'objective' criteria participants used for determining sexual violence are its impacts. Further, most participants saw trauma as a useful and necessary concept for feminists addressing sexual violence.

The Trauma of Rape Discourse

Every single participant saw trauma as a likely, if not inevitable, outcome of sexual violence. When asked specifically what they saw to be the impacts of sexual violence, participants offered many possibilities, but all were framed in the language of trauma. Sam, for example, asserted that "obviously there's personal trauma that's going to happen" and Josephine explained that after experiencing sexual violence, "you're not exactly the same as you were before, obviously something has changed…there can be a

lot of trauma after." In these two examples, participants' use of the word "obviously" illustrates the self-evidence they feel exists in the relationship between sexual violence and trauma.

Other participants explicitly articulated an almost definite relationship between sexual violence and trauma. Melanie suggested that "the question is more around, 'how do we define what is sexual violence?' [Because] I think, for the most part, if that's an experience that you would understand to be sexually violent, you would have trauma associated with it." The relationship between sexual violence and trauma was seen to be so significant that participants in one focus group described sexual violence in reference to its impacts, suggesting that sexual violence is something that "stays with you" (Nisha): "[It's] a situation that stays, you know? And that's kind of the difference between the kind of 'gross one-night stand' versus sexual assault" (Amber). Here Nisha and Amber suggest that sexual violence is something that has a prolonged impact on the individual who experiences it, and this reflects the criteria used to diagnose Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); one criterion for PTSD is that "the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Furthermore, Nisha and Amber seem to suggest that the impacts of an event, rather than its circumstances, determine if the event is sexual violence. Similarly, Susan explained that, "if it affects you, if it traumatizes you, then yeah, its violence." For most participants, sexual violence was understood to be an experience with a significant and long-lasting psychological impact.

Not surprisingly, participants also implicitly linked sexual violence and trauma in their discussions of sexual violence. Many referred to sexual violence as "a trauma" or "the trauma", suggested that the court process forces victims/survivors to "relive the trauma", and two participants even suggested that being called a "victim" (when one

identifies as a "survivor") can be traumatic. Furthermore, two participants talked about the benefits of "trauma bonding", defined as "bonding born out of sexual violence" (Sam). That the language of trauma dominated conversations about sexual violence in this way further demonstrates how significant the relationship between the two was assumed to be.

Even when participants did not use the word "trauma", they framed sexual violence in trauma's terms – as a destructive and altering experience: "I feel like with sexualized violence…we know it's epidemic, we know it causes people, you know, so much pain…It fractures you" (Amber). Liz claimed that people can never "have ownership" over their experience, by which she meant experiences of sexual violence would always have some negative impact on the individual; she doubtfully suggested that "maybe you'll be okay with it someday…" Alycia explained that victims/survivors "go through a series of stages" which could include "second-guessing kind of their whole person…it might break them down at their core." Though, in these cases, participants did not use the word "trauma" or refer specifically to PTSD, their descriptions closely resemble the diagnostic criteria for the disorder. As discussed before, one criterion for PTSD is the prolonged impact (or re-experiencing) of the event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In addition, the idea that sexual violence "fractures you" (Amber) or might "break [someone] down at their core" reflects many of the manifestations of Criterion D, including persistent and/or distorted negative beliefs about oneself and/or the world, diminished interest in activities meaningful to the individual pre-trauma, and alienation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It was clear that participants' discussions of sexual violence indirectly reinforced psychiatric understandings of trauma

and its impacts and that participants saw sexual violence as resulting in a long-lasting and significant impairment for those who experience it.

Though conversations about sexual violence and trauma clearly reflected psychiatric frameworks, participants actually offered understandings of trauma that were broader and more encompassing than the criteria for PTSD. For example, almost all participants asserted that the manifestations of trauma can vary significantly. Liz described trauma as "a very encompassing term" and explained that she felt all responses to sexual violence could be defined as a form of trauma. Renee saw trauma as connected to the entirety of the post-assault experience, suggesting that even "the social or economic [impacts], that kind of thing…[are] inseparable in their relationship to trauma." This framing of all responses to sexual violence as trauma was particularly apparent in discussions of post-assault sexuality. Sophie, for instance, suggested that both an increase and decrease in sexual activity after sexual violence makes sense within a trauma framework: "I know of instances of both of those happening, where someone just doesn't have sex for ten years because they don't think they can deal with it, while someone else goes into hyper-sexuality and sleeps with like eighty people a month…You can see the traumatic response in 'Well, I'm never touching anyone again because that happened to me' or 'I need to touch as many people as possible to erase what happened to me' narrative. And I think they're both valid." Here Sophie suggests that both an increase and decrease in sexual activity are logical coping mechanisms for dealing with sexual violence and she frames both as "traumatic response[s]".

Similarly, though Dana suggested that people experiencing hyper-sexuality after an assault might feel excluded from 'conventional' trauma models, their behaviour fits: "I can definitely see people dealing with it in different ways, and especially people who are

hypersexual or something afterwards, they might look at the whole trauma model and be like, 'Why am I like this? Why am I dealing with it in this way?' and maybe feel like there is something wrong with them…[but] you could probably even fit that within the trauma model." Dana's statement acknowledges that hyper-sexuality is less often regarded as a trauma response; nonetheless, she suggests that it is a 'different' way of dealing with sexual violence and should be included. Participants did not set a benchmark for "normal" sexual activity post-assault, but their discussions of hyper- and hypo-sexuality illustrate that they believed there is little possibility that one's relationship to sex would be unaffected, since any relationship to, and engagement in, sex after an assault was framed in the language of trauma; a lack of change in sexual activity would likely be framed as repression or denial.

Given the unequivocal relationship between sexual violence and trauma, it was almost impossible for most participants to imagine that someone could experience sexual violence and not experience a trauma response. Liz discussed feeling suspicious of those she has known who were "generally pretty fine after it"; she wondered if they were actually "just like in this long-term repression thing and it's going to come back and bite them like ten years from now or something." Many others framed a lack of traumatic response as repression, denial, or simply a delayed response. In the following excerpt, focus group participants struggled to accept the possibility of there being no traumatic impact from sexual violence:

> **Renee:** I'm a clinician, like I work with clients all the time, and I think that I don't – I'm sitting here saying, like, 'everyone has a right to their choice,' but then if a client or someone I love came to me and said they didn't have any negative impacts based on their history of sexual violence, I'd have a hard time believing it.
> **Audrey:** You'd wonder if they just need to probe deeper, if there was something…maybe it was something that they hadn't

> processed, something that was repressed, something that they didn't understand…And who's to say that there's absolutely no negative responses. I'm sure there's –
> **Lindsay:** But there's lots of other negative, maybe, perhaps –
> **Audrey:** Yeah, they may not have negative feelings about it but I'm sure they have –
> **Renee:** Some sort of like –
> **Audrey:** Intimacy issues, psychological issues…There's still got to be psychological impacts of that…I don't think that girl is gonna not have some negative effects going on.
> **Rebecca:** I mean, I think in, in those cases there are obviously impacts…my immediate answer just boiled down was a sort of loss of innocence...It wises you up whether or not you want to be.

For these participants, a lack of response was 'hard to believe'; instead, they suggested that the trauma response might be repressed, misunderstood, or might have manifested in other areas of a person's life, such as in intimacy issues.

In another focus group, participants initially agreed that someone could experience sexual violence without it having a traumatic impact but then decided that any and all impacts – however brief or delayed – were trauma responses:

> **Interviewer:** Is it possible for someone to experience sexual violence and not experience trauma? To not have a trauma response?
> **Sophie:** I think so.
> **Natalie:** Yeah.
> **Sophie:** I think that humans are inherently resilient, and our brains are resilient, and our brains try to protect us. So, I definitely think that's a possibility for that to happen and for somebody – well, I suppose that would even be a trauma response, wouldn't it, if your brain tries to protect you, then that's a trauma response. [Pauses] Never mind! I rescind my answer!
> [laughter from participants and interviewer]
> **Natalie:** Yeah, that's what I was thinking too when we were talking about different responses, and I said 'up to and including no response', but I think realistically that is probably repression.
> …
> **Sophie:** I want to say that it is [always traumatic], but I also don't want to paint everyone with the same brush. I can't imagine that it wouldn't be, but I don't know how every single person reacts
> …

> **Amanda:** Well we could maybe theorize that…all victims or survivors *do* have a trauma response, but that it might be extremely brief and not permanent at all. I just think that there would be a trauma response in everybody.
> **Sophie:** Yeah, or it could be severely delayed. So that you don't think you have a trauma response for fifteen years, and then suddenly you realize that something happened – you remember, or you figure it out – then it happens.

For these participants, there was no possibility that one does not experience trauma from sexual violence. However brief, impermanent, or delayed, they decided that "all victims or survivors *do* have a trauma response." In interviews, participants made similar statements, suggesting "people can be affected by sexual violence and not really know the effect it's having on them" (Alycia), presumably if the effect is subtle or manifests in less typical ways. A lack of trauma response was characterized as "just what they portray on the surface" (Alycia).

Although "repression" and denial featured in these discussions (and reflect psychiatric framings of trauma), the notion that trauma responses can be brief, impermanent, delayed, or extremely subtle is a significant departure from psychiatric frameworks, which require any and all symptoms to be persistent and long-lasting (at least a month or longer) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In order for participants to assert that sexual violence always has a traumatic impact, they offered significantly broadened understandings of what a traumatic impact can be; participants rejected the notion that a trauma is defined by the length of strength of its impact, and instead seemed to assert that trauma occurs because sexual violence occurs, and so any and all experiences after the fact should be reflected in our understanding of trauma.

Notably, not all participants were as quick to name a lack of observable trauma response as trauma, and required the impacts of an experience to be significant in order to

categorize the experience as a form of sexual violence. The inevitable outcome of this framing is that some participants were unable to accept or categorize experiences *as* sexual violence if they did not result in observable trauma. For example, Liz decided not to define a non-consensual incident between herself and someone she was seeing as sexual violence because it didn't result in significant trauma. Initially, she told her friend, who labelled it as violence and Liz agreed, but she changed her mind upon further analysis of the incident's (lack of) impact:

> **Liz:** Like, to be honest I did feel a little weird after it happened just because I wasn't really expecting it. But I don't personally consider that an act of violence – I'm not traumatized and I made out with him again with, like, absolutely no hesitancy.
> **Interviewer:** Right, okay. So, in that sense, it sounds like if it were violence, it would have more of an impact than it did on you. Is that what you're saying?
> **Liz:** Yeah, absolutely.

Liz felt that the impacts of the incident were not significant enough to consider the experience a form of sexual violence, even though she recognized that the incident was non-consensual and left her feeling "a little weird". Laura used similar justification to exclude harassment from her definition of sexual violence: "It's not pleasant, it's not particularly nice… but I also don't feel attacked, I don't feel hurt, I'm not traumatized by it." In this quote Laura uses multiple words related to feeling and emotion to help differentiate between violence and what she describes as 'unpleasant' experiences. Both Liz and Laura felt that *significant* negative responses are a necessary consequence of sexual violence.

In some cases, this framing of sexual violence as inherently traumatic made it difficult for participants to believe experiences that others shared with them; a lack of observable trauma cast doubt on the initial claim of sexual violence. For example, Vicki

expressed her surprise at finding out that a friend had experienced sexual violence because the friend did not seem to be negatively affected by the experience: "She ended up telling me that she'd been assaulted and it surprised me – and it had been quite recent as well. But she was always very social, she was always dating a lot, she was affectionate and flirty." Her friend's lack of a visible trauma response meant that Vicki was surprised she had experienced sexual violence. She noted, however, that the impacts of sexual violence "can really vary" and said that she felt her friend "was kind of dealing with it in some way by being very sexually open." This seemed to allow her to accept that her friend had experienced sexual violence.

Liz also shared a story of a friend whose post-assault response had her doubting the possibility of sexual violence:

> For a long time, I thought she was lying about what happened to her because I'm like, 'There's no way she could actually be travelling and doing stuff with her life when I can't.' But everyone, you know, handles the effects of a sexual assault differently. So, I no longer believe she was lying. I feel like that's way too messed up for me to think that way. I guess everyone kind of does have trauma, they just deal with it differently.

Liz initially did not believe her friend, but was able to reconcile her friend's post-assault behaviour with the possibility that the trauma response manifested differently and perhaps was invisible to an observer. Also, recall that participants defined sexual violence as an experience "that stays" (Nisha) and that "traumatizes you" (Susan). Reactions that cannot be absorbed into a 'trauma response' are cause for doubt that the experience was sexual violence in the first place.

It's important to note that many of the same participants who drew heavily on the notion that sexual violence is inherently traumatic also said that sexual violence *does not have to result in trauma* to be considered sexual violence. For example, Sophie discussed

the possibility that some people may be desensitized to sexual violence; it may be so normalized in their lives that the sexual violence they experience does not affect them: "If sexual violence is the norm, then you have no response because that's just what happens, right?" Josephine made a similar point, explaining: "Some things we don't think about – we tie our shoes and don't think about it – so if somebody didn't recognize [an incident of sexual violence] as significant…then I guess there'd be nothing." Both Josephine and Sophie suggest that the normalization of sexual violence might mean that it goes unnoticed by those who experience it, in which case the experiences might not have an impact. Nisha explicitly rejected the trauma of rape discourse, critiquing the idea that "what happened to you wasn't that bad because you haven't experienced trauma." She explained that "[trauma] is not a necessary condition. The necessary condition of sexualized violence is the *sexualized* violence. You know? What happens to you after that is not like a necessary condition that needs to exist in order to legitimize…what happened to you." Others in her focus group agreed. This contradiction between some participants' explicit conversations about trauma and the way they implicitly (and, for some, also explicitly) drew on the notion of sexual violence as inherently traumatic was very clear. In the next chapter, I will further discuss tensions within the trauma of rape discourse.

Trauma, Agency and Experience

Notably, the emphasis on "choice" and experiential authority that participants employed throughout their conversations of feminism and sexual violence was somewhat lacking in their discussions of trauma. Only a few participants seemed to notice the incompatibilities between the notion that sexual violence is always traumatic and the idea that people can define their own experiences and should always be believed. In a previous excerpt, Renee explained that, even though she believes that "'everyone has a right to

their choice'" she would "have a hard time believing" anyone who told her they didn't have negative psychological impacts from a history of sexual violence. Renee recognizes the incompatibility between her two beliefs, yet she continues to assert that sexual violence is traumatic *despite* what someone might tell her about their experience. A few others expressed discomfort with asserting that the relationship between sexual violence and trauma superseded one's own understanding, but did not explicitly tie this discomfort to the need to affirm agency or experiential knowledge.

Most participants validated the various possibilities for how someone might experience the impacts of sexual violence. Melanie, for example, recognized that "maybe not all people would frame their experiences as trauma or would say that they had experienced trauma as well as sexual violence" and Amber suggested that "the effects on an individual who's experienced sexualized violence will look different for everybody…I think there isn't going to be one way that people experience it." According to three focus group participants, any and all responses to sexual violence are "valid response[s]":

> **Natalie:** I think [responses] var[y] so widely. You know? And all of those different experiences are the *right* experiences.
> **Vicki:** Mhmm.
> **Sophie:** Yeah.
> **Interviewer:** So however somebody responds is –
> **Sophie:** – a valid response, yeah.

These sentiments more closely resemble the emphasis on agency and experience that participants employed in conversations about the definition of sexual violence; however, they are incompatible with the belief that sexual violence is inherently traumatic, which these same participants also drew on or explicitly stated. Melissa demonstrates the difficulties of juggling these two ideas in the following excerpt:

> I don't know. Like anything else, things are going to affect everybody differently. Like, I don't know if you can say that

> there's no effect. Like, if you really thought about it – is there absolutely none? Like, has it impacted you? Do you check over your shoulder, or has it changed you at all? It could be little things. I don't know. Maybe it doesn't, maybe it doesn't affect everybody.

In this quote, Melissa began and ended with the idea that experiences can vary, while also asserting that there must always be some kind of psychological impact of sexual violence. She asks a series of rhetorical questions that demonstrate her disbelief in the notion that someone could experience sexual violence with no negative impact, but ends by suggesting that "maybe it doesn't, maybe it doesn't affect everybody." In most participants' conversations, it was apparent that the obligation to affirm and accept people's experiences, and thus their responses to sexual violence, was in conflict with the idea that sexual violence is always traumatic.

"Experience" was also relevant to discussions of trauma insofar as participants drew on their personal experiences of sexual violence, or experiences working with victims/survivors, to make authoritative claims. For those who had experienced sexual violence, conversations about trauma were saturated with their own stories, and personal experience served as evidence for their claims that sexual violence is traumatic. For example, Melissa responded to a question about the impacts of sexual violence by saying, "I know for me, it's changed my whole life." She continued to explain the negative impacts of her experience, and concluded, "I can't imagine, for how much it has impacted my life, it not impacting somebody [else's]." Melissa's own experience was evidence that sexual violence has significant and long-term impacts, and her personal experience was cause for doubt that sexual violence would not similarly and significantly impact others. Similarly, discussing the long-term impacts of sexual violence, Lisa stated: "I guess for some it might be [possible], but for me that's not been my experience where that ever

goes away." Here, Lisa remains open to the 'possibility' that the impacts go away over time, but she draws on her own experience to demonstrate its unlikeliness. Liz suggested that sexual violence is something one never fully gets over; throughout her interview, she drew heavily on personal experiences of sexual violence to demonstrate its significant and negative impacts. For these participants, drawing on personal experience helped serve as evidence to claims about the impacts of sexual violence.

Those who cited professional, activist or educational experience with sexual violence also seemed to make significantly stronger claims about its impact than those who did not claim to have personal or professional experience with sexual violence. I did not ask participants for any information on their personal lives or credentials; presumably those who described their qualifications or experience did so because they thought it was relevant to their perspective. Recall that two participants suggested that labelling someone who identifies as a "survivor" a "victim" can be traumatic for that person. Though many participants agreed with the possibility that less extreme forms of sexual violence could produce a traumatic impact, the assertion that being mis-identified (i.e. being called a "survivor" instead of a "victim" and vice versa) could produce trauma in an individual extended the notion of trauma to experiences that are not sexual violence but are *related to* sexual violence. This significantly broadens the scope of sexual trauma as a concept and the kinds of experiences captured by it. Notably, two participants in two different focus groups made this claim, and each also claimed to have 'credentials' related to sexual violence through extensive activist work and/or education. It seemed that, like personal experience, academic, professional, or activist qualifications allowed participants to make stronger claims about the scope of sexual violence and its impacts.

While those without personal or professional experience with sexual violence still asserted a significant relationship between sexual violence and trauma, their claims were less certain. Melanie, for example, explicitly said she did not identify as someone who had experienced sexual violence; she began responses to questions about trauma with phrases like, "I don't know, again, it's all just my postulation" and "I don't have a solid, solid answer. I *think*…" Similarly, others who did not cite "experience" as evidence more often began their statements with "I think" or "I can imagine", demonstrating the significance of experiential authority to conversations about the impacts of sexual violence.

The Value of Trauma

Since all participants articulated a clear relationship between sexual violence and trauma, it is not surprising that most thought trauma to be a useful way of framing and thinking about sexual violence. Many participants pointed out that focussing on trauma means that sexual violence is taken more seriously and, as mentioned, this focus on trauma was also how participants problematized experiences defined as sexual violence. As Sophie explained, "trauma is a word that we understand as being quite severe". Adrienne and Melissa suggested that it's a helpful way of framing sexual violence:

> **Adrienne:** It's important – it's great when trauma gives weight and concreteness to the effects that linger and that mark and that, you know, a person needs to heal, work through…it highlights and gives weight to the severity of the experience of sexual assault and that it doesn't just happen and then it's over.
> **Melissa:** You don't expect somebody to recover from a medical trauma in a day.

Alycia similarly suggested that trauma is useful because, "it's a strong enough word to represent what they've experienced" and Audrey noted that "some people minimize how awful the responses to sexual assault can be, so calling them a trauma can then kind of

open people's eyes to be like, 'you're right, that is a trauma, that was traumatic that that happened.'" As Nyima explained, the language of trauma is useful because "it's kind of almost validating your experience."

Others pointed out that framing sexual violence in the language of trauma helps to normalize and justify the varied ways in which people respond to sexual violence. For example, Vicki explained:

> It's helpful for survivors in that thinking about trauma or sexual assault with trauma can explain or justify a lot of different behaviours…you know, this person is having sex with a lot of people and they say they were assaulted, or this person is not acting like they were hurt at all. But a lot of that is explained by how traumatized people act.

Laura said that trauma has helped to destigmatize the impacts of sexual violence, "and that's really important and powerful so that now people who have extreme experiences can go to someone and say, 'actually this happened' and it's acknowledged that it can be a traumatic experience", though she warned against over-applying the concept to 'non-extreme' experiences. Liz suggested that we have an obligation to survivors to address trauma: "I feel like if we don't talk about it, that would be doing a disservice to all survivors." For most participants, trauma was an important and useful tool for feminists and survivors in addressing and framing sexual violence, highlighting the severity of sexual violence and providing victims/survivors with a legitimate label for their responses.

A few participants raised issues with the concept of trauma because a focus on trauma has meant that victims/survivors are seen only through this lens. Two participants suggested that trauma doesn't account for the positive outcomes of sexual violence. For example, Sam suggested that sexual violence can result in a "determination to learn" and

Nisha similarly described how her experience of sexual assault meant she became very determined to learn about feminism and sexual violence, and developed a "determination to move forward [in] life in a positive way." Because trauma only draws attention to the negative outcomes of sexual violence, it ignores the other impacts that some participants experienced and thought were important. A few participants expressed frustration with the way that trauma can be seen to define an individual. For example, Josephine explained that she hasn't told her family about her experience because she doesn't want to be defined by it:

> I haven't ever told my mom or my family that I've been raped. But what my fear was is that it's going to hurt them so much…and you'll have that feeling like 'now you're just a hurt person', like the powerlessness that comes with it. And I think that's one thing, is that sometimes when you think in terms of trauma and sexual violence, then you can start to think of yourself as powerless and a victim and it's very determined what your position is now…. You lost something.

She expressed anger with people who know about her experience and see her only in relation to that experience: "If I react to something, [they say], 'Of course you're upset about that. That would remind you of this!' and I'm like 'Actually, I'm just upset.' Maybe it's not because I've been victimized in this one way."

Four participants problematized the way that trauma is thought to irrevocably change or determine a person. Melanie explained that "there's a danger in positioning of people who have experienced sexual violence, and who are disproportionately women, as people who are inherently defeated or afraid or controlled by their experience of sexual violence." Lisa compared this to how other mental illnesses are seen: "It almost sounds like your reactions aren't yours. Like they're in response to what – like, with my anxiety, people talk about your anxiety like it's separate from you. So, it just, I don't know, I feel

like the loss of agency and your own reactions – 'oh well that's because the trauma that you're doing that." Both Hannah and Susan took issue with the notion that there is a "pre- and post-trauma person" (Susan), in which it's thought that "you will never be that person again" (Hannah). For these participants, trauma was a useful concept that also bore negative consequences, such as only seeing victims/survivors through the lens of trauma and failing to recognize any positive outcomes of sexual violence.

In addition, a few participants discussed the positioning of victims/survivors in the trauma of rape discourse, critiquing the obligation for victims to display symptoms of trauma in order to have their experiences taken seriously: "It can be one of those ways of 'proving' that this was a non-consensual thing because 'now I'm experiencing trauma and therefore I experienced sexual violence and therefore my case is legitimate'" (Melanie). Melissa pointed out that "we look at sexual assault differently based on its emotional impact so much, whereas other crimes are still a crime where there's an emotional impact or not." This can result in a dismissal of legitimate cases of sexual violence since the idea is that "what happened to you wasn't that bad because you haven't experienced trauma" (Nisha). For this small minority of participants, the focus on trauma significantly and sometimes negatively affects the way we approach sexual violence as feminists and as a society.

One other critique of trauma was that it is used as "*the* concept" (Nyima) at the expense of other, perhaps more useful, frameworks for sexual violence. Participants in one focus group suggested that this focus on trauma shifts attention from the structural changes that need to take place and instead focuses on the individual. Lisa, for example, problematized the notion that therapeutic approaches to the issue of sexual violence are enough. Though she saw a focus on trauma as useful and necessary, she said "the

problem is when you're *only* doing that." In one focus group, participants suggested that a focus on trauma can limit feminist activism around sexual violence:

> **Adrienne:** [It puts emphasis on] training individuals to specialize, dealing with certain parts of things whether it's police officers, or nurses, or doctors, or psychologists, and then it becomes about grant-writing and getting support from the government and then it's no longer about overthrowing a fucked-up system. It's about helping the person who's experienced it and punishing the perpetrator and moving through things like courts, and the state has all the power to do the resolution piece.
> **Lisa:** It's almost like a band aid. Like, 'let's fix these few things so that your immediate care is taken care of' but like 'everything else is fine', but it's all those systematic pieces that lead into this problem in the first place…The bigger piece is just going to keep happening. Like, trauma-informed practice – practitioners are just going to keep getting business.
> …
> **Susan:** It individualizes it instead of saying, 'there is an endemic problem with how we're all raised, with how we all think, all of us, all of us.' And it does sort of put the onus on the individual, again, instead of sort of saying 'we've all got some, you know, responsibility to this humongous societal problem.
> …
> **Melissa:** I think we come back to your original point, where we started this whole [conversation] was the need to recognize both. Recognize the individual and recognize societal impacts and that's the key because trauma does happen to people. They need to be recognized.

These participants saw trauma as focussing too narrowly on the individual and ignoring the structural causes of sexual violence. It provides short-term and individual solutions to what is otherwise a systemic and ongoing problem and shifts the focus to an area of expertise. However, as Melissa suggests at the end of the dialogue, they also saw the focus on trauma as important in terms of providing individual support to victims/survivors.

Conclusion

Participants' emphases on agency, choice, and experience made it difficult to define sexual violence consistently or offer a consistent critique of the systemic forces that produce it. Though they drew on broad frameworks for interpreting experiences as sexual violence, participants were hesitant to impose a definition that might deny someone their agency or choice to define their experiences as they see fit. Participants relied heavily on the notion of experiential authority, positioning victims/survivors as unquestionable experts on their own experience and drew on their own personal experience to make claims about sexual violence and trauma. Experiential authority was closely tied to identity, so that even those without acute experiences of sexual violence were credited with a certain level of knowledge that comes from membership to a marginalized group; participants saw this knowledge as essential to a feminist approach.

The trauma of rape discourse was prevalent throughout interviews and focus groups. Participants relied on the notion of trauma to help demarcate sexual violence. But the notion that sexual violence is inherently traumatic was also problematic for participants, who simultaneously wanted to affirm choice and present inclusive frameworks for sexual violence. Though all drew on the notion of trauma in their discussions, a few offered critiques of the way it positions victims/survivors and alters feminist activism. Nonetheless, most participants saw it as a useful and necessary concept in relation to sexual violence, and indeed their discussions of sexual violence also demonstrate the significance of trauma to feminist approaches.

In Chapter Five, I will further discuss these themes in relation to the literature. I will pay particular attention to the inherent contradictions in the three concepts – choice, experience, and trauma – that participants drew on in their approaches, as well as how these three concepts created difficulties for participants in attempting to engage a

structural analysis of sexual violence. I will explore the trauma of rape discourse and how participants' understandings of trauma shaped the meaning of sexual violence. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my findings for feminism more widely, and how these findings relate to tensions in the feminist literature on sexual violence and trauma.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Section I: Feminism, "Choice" and Inclusion

Ferguson (2010) argues that feminists today tend towards a "choice feminist" orientation which prioritizes, above all else, individual choice. This framework relies on the solidification of choice as the measure of oppression: "As long as a woman can say that she has chosen to do something, it is considered by choice feminists to be an expression of her liberation" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 248). As Ferguson (2010) and others (Oksala, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Gill, 2007) suggest, this emphasis on autonomous choice fails to account for structural forces and inequalities that constrain freedom – the cultural, social, political, geographical and historical contexts in which individuals make choices as well as the ways in which those contexts *shape* what choices are available or seen to be available.

The single tenet of a choice feminist framework is the notion that all choices are valid choices and no choice should come under feminist criticism (Ferguson, 2010). Choice feminism provides little opportunity for analysis of oppression or domination, as such analysis necessarily provides commentary on choices that are seen to result from and/or uphold these systems. This is a significant departure from the way that other feminisms have conceptualized, and at times centralized, choice. For example, liberal feminists sought to establish choices for women that they felt were constrained or made impossible by structural constraints, and therefore liberal feminists offer critiques of structural oppression and its impacts on choice (Chambers, 2008). Similarly, most feminisms see gendered oppression as having some structural element and attend to the cultural, political and social forces that shape opportunities and experience. Choice

feminism, however, is distinct in seeing choice as the absence of structural oppression and thus offers no critique of who can make choices (or what choices can be made), therefore rationalizing choice itself as feminist (Chambers, 2008; McCarver, 2011). McCarver (2011) has suggested that "choice", as it is understood within a choice feminist orientation, is not compatible with feminism, a political movement that centralizes the recognition of women's oppression (p. 35). Drawing on McCarver's understanding of feminism as the recognition and analysis of the structural elements of oppression, I will explore the tensions between "choice" and a structural analysis of oppression in participants' discussions of sexual violence.

All participants in this study demonstrated some orientation towards choice feminism. I am drawing on Ferguson's (2010) notion of a choice feminist "orientation" because no participants in this study self-identified as a 'choice feminist', but also because, importantly, no participants in this study asserted that we have achieved gender equality; instead, the choice feminist orientation manifested as an emphasis on choice and an absence of a structural analysis of oppression. While only a few participants explicitly articulated the need for feminism to prioritize and uphold the choices of all individuals regardless of their liberatory or oppressive potentials, orientations to choice were apparent in the difficulties making concrete claims about feminism, sexual violence, and trauma that all participants demonstrated.

The contradiction between an agency-promoting feminism and a structural feminist analysis was particularly evident in discussions of sexual harassment, where focus group participants engaged in lengthy discussions over whether sexual harassment can always be considered a form of sexual violence. Though most participants offered broad frameworks that included everyday experiences like sexual harassment as sexual

violence, they were uncomfortable asserting that these frameworks superseded an individual's "choice" to allow for or even enjoy these experiences. Therefore, participants who attempted to frame sexual violence as a form of structural oppression variously manifested through explicit forms of violence as well as everyday language and harassment found themselves struggling to also uphold the tenet of choice that they centralized in their feminist frameworks. For most participants, a structural feminist analysis was in direct conflict with the need to affirm and uncritically accept the importance of "choice".

The inconsistencies between recognizing the structural elements of oppression and privileging choice above all else were obvious in most participants' discussions, but especially evident in the absence of systemic or structural analysis in most participants' conceptions of feminism. Though all participants identified as feminist and saw sexual violence as a problem to be addressed by feminism, less than half offered any critique of structural inequality or oppression, even when asked specifically what a feminist approach entails. Those who did engage in more 'traditional' feminist analysis also seemed to feel obligated to affirm choice; they were caught in what McCarver (2001) refers to as a "rhetorically paralyzing discourse" (p. 22). For example, both Amber and Natalie discussed what they saw to be oppressive social practices: Amber described her anti-carceral feminist approach while Natalie suggested that some kinds of pornography are oppressive. Yet neither was willing to sustain the argument that those who choose the judicial system or pornography as avenues for empowerment are perpetuating oppression or are at all in conflict with feminist priorities. Natalie appeared to be indifferent towards others' choices to use pornography, while Amber asserted that she "would never say to someone that had experienced sexual assault, that wanted to go [through the judicial

system], that they're not doing it right. You know, 'that's not a feminist response to your harm'…It's about being like, 'Yeah, that's valid.'" Arguably, the imperative to accept choices that perpetuate oppression – in Amber's case, the need to validate these choices as *feminist* – renders feminist analysis useless. As Ferguson (2010) asks, "What good is a political consciousness if we are afraid to use it?" (p. 250).

Both Ferguson (2010) and Hirshman (2005) suggest that the choice orientation in feminism has become widespread because of its ability to diffuse criticisms of second-wave feminism. Hannah's disparaging reference to a "white woman just like [her]" who would stand up on behalf of feminism and make any sort of broad claim or judgement represents both a critique of feminism's past (and perhaps also present) and her own desire to be seen otherwise. Many participants similarly critiqued what they felt were exclusive forms of feminism and expressed a desire to participate in a more inclusive feminism, sometimes couched in the language of 'intersectionality'. As a result, most participants could not offer a definition of sexual violence but instead offered broad frameworks that were intended to be "receiving [of] any kind of experience that somebody wants to put under that definition" (Laura). The worry of accidentally excluding someone or some experience was high, and many participants hesitated or explicitly expressed difficulty with answering my questions, for fear of perpetuating or participating in an un-inclusive feminism. Most participants' unwillingness to set clear boundaries around sexual violence is not surprising, as Ferguson suggests that the "long history of scathing criticism" against feminism has resulted in an environment in which "it sometimes seems that the worst sin a feminist could commit would be to leave someone out" (p. 248).

Section II: Feminism and "Experience"

Participants' use of, and reliance on, "experience" further complicated their approach to sexual violence. Participants drew heavily on the notion of experience in two significant ways. First, participants saw experience as coming from identity, and identity/experience was essential to feminism. Diana Fuss (1989) describes the dominance of identity politics in feminism, in which she suggests that identity is thought to "*necessarily* determin[e] a particular kind of experience" and that both identity, and the experience it 'determines', are thought to produce forms of knowledge unique to identity-holders (p. 99). Though many participants attempted to distance themselves from the essentialism inherent to identity politics, and though they emphasized difference, inclusivity, and 'intersectionality' throughout their conversations, it was clear that many also relied on this notion of identity-specific knowledge. This was particularly evident in discussions of feminism, where multiple participants suggested that those without "experience" could not take a feminist approach to sexual violence. Participants felt that having identity-specific experience was essential to taking a feminist approach to the issues of sexual violence, demonstrating the relevance of identity politics (Fuss, 1989) to participants' accounts of feminism.

The second use of experience referred to actual events that one has lived through. Participants explicitly referenced the importance of this kind of experience in their conversations about sexual violence, but they also demonstrated its importance by drawing on personal experiences of sexual violence to make claims about sexual violence and trauma. In Chapter Four, I refer to this use of experience as "survivor status". It can also be understood as an "experiential credential", "a form of knowledge defined, validated, and deployed by a collective [that] becomes a kind of epistemological

qualification" (Whelan, 2007, p. 960). In participants' discussions, personal experience was wielded as a form of authority that allowed participants who had an "experiential credential" to make more authoritative claims about sexual violence than those who did not claim to have personal experience.

Yasmin Nair problematizes this use of experience in feminist approaches to sexual violence, suggesting that it has produced a politics in which "only those who have experienced it are allowed to talk about it" (quoted in Kinnucan, 2014). Others have similarly suggested that "the appeal to experience" that dominates feminist conversations privileges the voices of those 'with experience' at the expense of potentially more useful contributions (Fuss, 1989, p. 114). For instance, the privileging of experience can often mean that all experiences are seen as equal, regardless of how one interprets and/or analyzes the experience; contributions from those without direct experience of the issue are unwelcome, despite the possibility that they might offer a useful critical analysis relevant to the issue at hand. An individual's interpretation of a given experience may do little to further feminist goals and can actually at times reproduce oppressive ideologies (e.g., when women see themselves as responsible for experiences of sexual harm). Further, this can limit alliances in political work between individuals who experience different but related or comparable forms of oppression.

Fuss (1989) claims that "arguments based on the authority of experience can often have surprisingly de-politicizing effects" (p. 115); this is especially true when experience is positioned as an unassailable form of knowledge that portrays a "truth" about the way things are (Scott, 1992, p. 36). Participants in this study drew on the notion of experience as unassailable truth. This was demonstrated in their appeals to experience and their unwillingness to define sexual violence. Participants felt that sexual violence could not be

defined since we can never know the full possibilities of experience and to define sexual violence in a way that excludes or reframes others' experiences would deny their 'truth' or experience. The effect of this rhetoric is that it positions sexual violence as 'individual experience' rather than patterned violence and therefore has the depoliticizing effect that Fuss (1989) describes. In addition, this reliance on experience (and, importantly, the 'diversity' of experience which suggests that experiences cannot be compared or effectively categorized) positions sexual violence as something we can never fully understand, a dangerous proposition for feminists.

A further problem of appeals to experience is that such appeals often fail to recognize that "no knowledge is immune from context, bias, and partiality" (Tseris, 2015, p. 35). In participants' discussions of sexual violence, attempts to define certain behaviours (e.g., harassment) as sexual violence were stunted by the possibility that others might experience these behaviours differently – for instance, as empowering; participants were therefore unable to define these behaviours as sexual violence. Because participants saw experience as evidence, they accepted the notion that sexual violence only occurs if one feels they have experienced it. This understanding of sexual violence is problematic for many reasons, especially because it positions women (and others who experience sexual violence) as autonomous and free thinkers who are not influenced by broader discourses of gender and sexual violence (Fuss, 1989). Indeed, an abundance of research (e.g., Stewart, Dobbin & Gatowski, 1996; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Cowan, 2000) has demonstrated that common conceptions of sexual violence often do not reflect the ways in which sexual violence is actually perpetuated and experienced; to suggest that those who (potentially) experience sexual violence are somehow immune from adopting and/or perpetuating misconceptions about sexual violence, and thus can always and

accurately describe the "truth" of their experience, is questionable. As Scott (1992) suggests, accepting experience as evidence in this way dismisses important questions about broader influences, as it positions experience as "both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation beyond which few questions need to or can be asked" (p. 33).

Scott's (1992) analysis of the broader influences on experience and interpretation of experience are particularly important to the findings of this study. Despite participants' commitment to validating and privileging experiential knowledge, it was clear that dominant discourses about the meaning of sexual violence and its impacts strongly influence how experiences are defined and understood. Participants' belief that sexual violence leads to trauma allowed them to reframe others' experiences when the description of those experiences did not align with the trauma of rape discourse. I will further address the significance of trauma to participants' understandings of sexual violence in the following section.

Section III: Feminism and Trauma

Gavey and Schmidt (2011) suggest that everyday understandings of rape reflect a "trauma of rape discourse", in which rape is understood to be beyond ordinary experience and comprehension, psychologically traumatizing, and as having a severe and lifelong impact on those who experience it. This discourse reflects the broader contemporary psychological paradigm that "demarcate[s] and frame[s] various forms of distress and challenge as illness" (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2013, p. 120). Though an abundance of research has explored the relationship between sexual violence and trauma from both medical and sociological perspectives, few studies have explored how individuals construct rape and its impacts. Those that have (e.g., Chasteen, 2005) present findings

consistent with Gavey and Schmidt's (2011) trauma of rape discourse. To my knowledge, no other studies before mine have explored how feminists construct or understand sexual violence and its impacts.

My research has specifically asked how self-identified feminists in Nova Scotia evaluate trauma as a framework for understanding sexual violence. The findings of my research demonstrate that most participants supported trauma frameworks, while some critiqued the emphasis on trauma that Gavey and Schmidt (2011) and others (Wasco, 2003; Brown, 1995) describe. In addition, participants drew heavily on the trauma of rape discourse in their understandings of sexual violence. As many participants simultaneously critiqued and relied on trauma frameworks for sexual violence, it is essential to differentiate between their explicit criticisms of (or support for) trauma as it is applied to sexual violence, and their implicit (and sometimes also explicit) use of trauma discourses for defining and describing sexual violence. In this section, I describe the relationship between feminism, sexual violence, and trauma in participants' accounts and explore the consequences of the trauma of rape discourse for the feminist campaign against sexual violence.

Unlike other psychiatric diagnoses, some feminists see the PTSD diagnosis as sympathetic to feminist concerns, or as feminist itself, as it requires an acknowledgement of the ways in which external events influence individual psychopathology and thus legitimizes the significant psychological harm that some victims/survivors experience (Brown, 2004). This contradiction between critiques of medicalization and support for the PTSD diagnosis is evident in the current study, in which participants overwhelmingly believed that trauma frameworks are important to the feminist campaign against sexual violence. When asked directly about the value of trauma for feminist approaches to sexual

violence, most participants agreed that trauma is a useful and necessary framework, suggesting that it legitimizes the issue of sexual violence and justifies how individuals respond to it. Participants' support for trauma frameworks resemble the arguments made by feminist researchers who suggest that trauma frameworks should be used and even expanded in the feminist campaign against sexual violence (Brown, 1995; Miles-McLean et al., 2014).

Less than half of all participants critiqued what they saw to be a potentially individualizing and/or medicalizing understanding of sexual violence. Those who did echoed the criticisms made by feminist scholars about the consequences of trauma discourses (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; Wasco, 2003; Brown, 1995; Tseris, 2016) who similarly feel that a focus on trauma denies women's strength or resiliency in the face of violence, permanently marks those who have experienced sexual violence with a 'victim' identity, and shifts the focus of feminist and mainstream approaches to sexual violence from asking "broader political questions about male privilege and gendered power relations" to an "emphasis on the need for increased psychiatric support" and trauma-informed care (Tseris, 2016, p. 39).

Despite these explicit evaluations of trauma as potentially problematic, participants' discussions of sexual violence and trauma drew heavily on the trauma of rape discourse that Gavey and Schmidt (2011) identified, demonstrating that that this discourse extends even into feminists constructions of sexual violence. Participants' discussions emphasized the notion that sexual violence likely or inevitably leads to trauma. Through both implicit and explicit references to the severe and damaging impacts of sexual violence, most participants described sexual violence by drawing on psychiatric terms like "repression", "denial", and "hyper-sexuality" to describe how individuals deal

with these experiences. These mirror the ways in which trauma is conceptualized in the psychiatric literature (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many participants were unwilling or unable to accept the possibility that sexual violence does not lead to trauma in all cases and framed an apparent lack of trauma in trauma's terms (as repression or denial). This provides further support for the relevance of the trauma of rape discourse, in which the possibility that one is not traumatized or horribly harmed from rape is "not only constructed as unlikely, but as abnormal" (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011, p. 444).

Notably, the emphasis on the emotional impacts of sexual violence that participants relied on in their definitions of sexual violence appears to mirror the experience-based orientation that participants also took. If experience is the basis on which claims about sexual violence can be made, it easily follows that the emotional impacts – which can presumably be known to only the individual who experiences them – would be a suitable way of determining what is or is not sexual violence. Emphases on the emotional and psychological experiences of survivors/victims might allow us to make more legitimate claims about the realities of sexual violence in a context in which experience is prioritized; however, it is also clear that the validity of one's experience is easily undermined by the trauma of rape discourse, which requires a reinterpretation of all experiences as traumatic. Thus, though the emphases on experience and the trauma of rape discourse appear compatible and useful to one another, there is discord between these two discourses as they are taken up in the understanding of sexual violence.

It is not surprising that the trauma of rape discourse dominates everyday conceptions of sexual violence. As Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr (2013) and other scholars (e.g., Frank, 1995) suggest, medical narratives have been given a 'master status' in contemporary society, and these narratives have the ability to displace all other

interpretations of human suffering (p. 120). Critiques of medical narratives, or attempts to make sense of suffering using other frameworks, are unwelcome, as they are often seen to be denying the pain and suffering that accompany these experiences (Tseris, 2016). In the case of sexual violence, trauma frameworks have also been useful for legitimizing the problem of sexual violence and allowing feminists to challenge the notion that rape is "no big deal…[or] a woman's fault" (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011, p. 433). However, as Gavey and Schmidt (2011) suggest, the widespread use of trauma frameworks for approaching sexual violence have replaced this seemingly universal assumption (that rape is insignificant) with another: that rape is so significant that it affects "the structure and capacity of the brain", offering a narrow and problematic framework through which to address sexual violence (Tseris, 2013, p. 158).

This framing of sexual violence as inherently traumatic and the reliance on this discourse as a way of problematizing sexual violence hinders feminist analysis of the causes or mechanisms of sexual violence (Tseris, 2016). Indeed, participants' reliance on this discourse and their explicit support for trauma models are especially concerning given that most participants did not supplement this framework with an analysis of the structural causes of sexual violence. That the trauma discourse was the most significant framework that participants used to define and understand sexual violence demonstrates the strength of these medical narratives, their influence on conceptions of sexual violence, and their ability to supplant more critical approaches. Further, this research indicates that there may be little resistance by feminists to the medicalization of sexual violence, though further research is needed to explore this hypothesis.

The consequences of trauma discourse for the meaning of sexual violence are severe. Gavey (1999) suggests that feminist constructions of victimization "may

implicitly require us to establish psychological harm in order to take a moral stand against sexual violence and against heterosexual practice that is offensive or disrespectful without necessarily being violent (in the usual sense). That is, the injustice of sexual coercion and sexual violence may become too closely tied with the 'proof' of psychological damage" (p. 76). This is supported by the findings of the current study, where participants problematized sexual violence through the language of trauma, referring to the psychological impacts in order to establish the initial 'harm'. Two participants described doubting friends' reports of sexual violence on account of a lack of observable trauma and one participant was unable to categorize her own non-consensual experience as sexual violence because it did not result in significant enough psychological harm; for this participant, the experience seemed to occupy an ambiguous position between 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour and 'sexual violence'. Her analysis of the incident lends support for Gavey's assertion that such "offensive or disrespectful [behaviour that is not] necessarily violent (in the usual sense)" is difficult to capture in a sexual violence framework that sees trauma as a defining feature of sexual violence (Gavey, 1999, p. 76). This suggests that feminist theorizing of sexual violence may be at least partially restricted by the trauma-of-rape discourse, as it fails to equally problematize non-violent but similarly oppressive sexualized behaviour (Gavey, 1999).

In addition, the requirement of psychological harm is problematic for victims/survivors attempting to seek justice for sexual violence through the criminal justice system, forcing them to conform with the image of a 'disordered victim' in order to be taken seriously; and while conforming to this image often means victims/survivors are seen as more legitimate, it can also discredit them as rational witnesses. As Stewart, Dobbin and Gatowski (1996) suggest, these notions "can affect the treatment the rape

victim encounters in both the criminal justice system and in the community and, perhaps more importantly, they can also influence the victim's decision to report the rape and pursue her case through the system" (p. 159). A narrow construction of the impacts of sexual violence can mean that victims/survivors who do not present with symptoms of trauma are not believed, or that they will feel pressured to 'perform' trauma in order to be believed.

A contemporary example of the consequences of this discourse is the infamous Jian Ghomeshi trial (2016). In this case, the women who accused Ghomeshi described post-assault emotions and behaviours that align with what is commonly understood to be a "trauma response" (for example, all three women claimed to have been so impacted by their assault that they were unable to face Ghomeshi or talk to him again); however, some of these accounts turned out to be untrue (Gollom, 2016). Whether they were traumatized by the incidents or not is irrelevant; what is important is that these women clearly felt an expectation to display particular emotions and behaviours in order to be believed. The expectation to perform 'trauma' was high enough that they were willing to lie in their testimony, likely for fear that their stories would not be believed or taken as seriously if they accurately described their responses. The Ghomeshi case provides a clear example of how the trauma-of-rape discourse constrains victims/survivors in seeking justice, demanding of them a singular narrative about sexual violence that can result in further difficulties navigating the criminal justice system.

Notably, participants in this study were open to a range of potential manifestations of trauma, which demonstrates that their conceptions of trauma depart from the narrow criteria of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For example, participants suggested that lack of response, short-lived response, and economic

and social impacts – among others – could all be considered evidence of trauma. While this might allow for more varied responses to sexual harm and provide more consideration of its structural causes and impacts, the broadened scope of trauma that participants offered increases – rather than challenges – the medicalization of sexual violence. Indeed, in these frameworks, more (or perhaps all) victims/survivors are recognized as experiencing trauma, and all behaviour post-assault is framed in trauma's terms. This was evident in participants' discussions of hypo- and hyper-sexuality, as all sexual activity after assault was framed as trauma response. While participants suggested that broadening the scope of trauma allowed for recognition of those experiences that are not captured in traditional models (e.g., hypersexuality), their broadened and more inclusive definitions of trauma also pathologized all sexual activity – indeed all experiences – after sexual violence.

Perhaps the most pressing concern for feminists should be that the trauma of rape discourse denies victims'/survivors' agency (Healicon, 2016, p. 3). Though participants adamantly asserted the importance of choice and agency to feminist approaches to sexual violence and attempted to define sexual violence in ways that would not constrain victims'/survivors' stories, their assertions about the trauma of sexual violence leaves little room for victims/survivors to define their own experiences or to claim an experience of sexual violence without also claiming an experience of trauma. The contradiction between these two discourses – one that emphasizes choice/agency and one that emphasizes a singular narrative about sexual violence – was only noted explicitly by one participant.

As discussed in Chapter Two, feminist scholars continue to debate the value of trauma to the feminist campaign against sexual violence. On the one hand, trauma models

(and the PTSD diagnosis) are helpful in highlighting the measurable and lasting psychological effects of structural violence. Because trauma models necessarily point to external events as the cause of psychic harm, they can more effectively "mobilize resources and draw attention to justice and inequality" (Duncan, 2015, p. 232). PTSD is perhaps the only diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) that explicitly points to the social causes of mental illness. Simultaneously, the widespread proliferation of trauma discourse in the public lexicon, and the increasing diagnosis of trauma-related disorders, represent what some have termed a "trauma industry" (Theidon, 2013) in which various forms of pain and suffering are increasingly understood and narrowly categorized as "trauma" (Hinton & Good, 2015, p. 8). Kimberly Theidon (2013) has explored how the "trauma industry" leads to a dismissal of Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous understandings of suffering in reconciliation initiatives, reducing these theories of pain and suffering to "beliefs", "customs", or otherwise less legitimate forms of knowledge (p. 26). The "increasingly normative trauma discourse" is seen as a universal truth, rather than a Western and psychiatric model of understanding human suffering; in turn, this discourse has come to dominate crisis work around the globe, requiring that those in non-Western and non-clinical settings are required to interpret their experiences as trauma in order to access support (ibid). The findings of the current study suggest that victims/survivors of sexual violence in Canada might be similarly required to interpret experience through narratives of trauma in order to be believed and have access to justice. While at times an effective tool for responding to suffering, the widespread application of trauma models to the issue of sexual violence and the trauma of rape discourse that it enables can create

"pernicious demands to demonstrate traumatic experience as a means of determining who is provided compensation and care" (Hinton & Good, 2015, p. 10).

The findings of this research show that the trauma of rape discourse is the dominant framework that a group of self-identified feminists in Nova Scotia used to talk about sexual violence; further research in other sites and with a wide variety of feminists is needed to explore the relevance of the trauma of rape discourse to Canadian feminists more broadly. In addition, participants' evaluation of trauma models suggest that feminists may see medical and individual frameworks of sexual violence as, for the most part, useful and necessary. Participants in this study largely drew on trauma models for understanding sexual violence. However, they did not present a structural feminist analysis that locates sexual violence as a form of structural and gendered violence; this is concerning, given that trauma discourses risk individualizing and de-politicizing the issue of sexual violence if the 'traumas' themselves are not understood through frameworks of oppression.

While I certainly acknowledge the pain and distress that can accompany sexual violence, and the help that medical care can provide, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that suggests that trauma discourses may enable an individualized and medicalized framework of sexual violence that limits structural and systemic approaches to the issue and constrains women's ability to access justice. Echoing the questions and concerns of many feminist scholars (e.g., Tseris, 2015; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; LaFrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2013), I suggest that feminists must be careful not to perpetuate discourse that frames sexual violence as inherently traumatic, as the consequences of this discourse are too great for it to be an effective political strategy against sexual violence

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented a qualitative analysis of contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence and trauma. Drawing on data from four focus groups and five interviews, I have explored the perspectives of twenty-four self-identified feminists on feminism, sexual violence, and trauma. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the findings of this research, the significance of this study to both feminism and feminist scholarship, and possible directions for future research.

Section I: Summary of Findings

This research produced the many significant findings that I described in Chapter Four. Participants relied on three concepts – choice, experience, and trauma – in their understandings of sexual violence. These three concepts created contradictions that many participants struggled with. Furthermore, drawing on these three concepts, participants presented an intensely individualized understanding of sexual violence; this was especially true given that trauma discourses feature so heavily in their discussions, at the expense of structural analyses of sexual violence for most participants. I will begin this section by summarizing how participants understood and drew on the notions of choice, experience, and trauma in their understandings of sexual violence. I will then provide a brief overview of how participants explicitly evaluated trauma and its usefulness for understanding sexual violence through a feminist framework.

Most participants saw agency and choice as feminist priorities and treated them as significant frameworks through which they approached sexual violence. Participants strongly felt that individuals should have the freedom to make choices, and that choices should not be criticized. Prioritizing choice in this way meant that participants felt

obligated to be open to all possibilities of how someone might interpret or define sexual violence. This emphasis on choice displaced other feminist priorities that participants described but, more importantly, made it difficult to apply any analysis of oppression or structures of power and privilege to the issue of sexual violence. Less than half of participants attempted to engage in such analysis and those who did either contradicted themselves by simultaneously asserting the "choice" narrative or were questioned by other participants who more adamantly promoted a choice feminist framework. Furthermore, participants conveyed the difficulties of negotiating a feminist analysis with an emphasis on choice by sharing past conflicts that had occurred in interpersonal relationships and in their feminist work.

Participants' discussions of sexual violence also emphasized the importance of "experience" to a feminist approach; this was demonstrated through explicit conversations about the importance of experience to feminism, and through participants' use of personal experience in their discussions. "Experience" had two significant meanings for participants: First, it referred to knowledge that comes from membership to a marginalized group; second, it referred to actual events that one has lived through. Having either or both forms of experience meant having "experiential authority", which participants saw as necessary to participating in a feminist conversation about sexual violence.

Participants saw experience as essential to feminism more broadly and this idea influenced what they determined to be a "feminist approach," as well as who they thought could be described or included as a feminist. However, despite drawing on the notion of shared experience to articulate the boundaries of a feminist approach, participants were hesitant to essentialize experience and thus attempted to speak of sexual violence in

gender neutral terms while also professing the importance of acknowledging diverse experiences. The notion of shared experience, essential to participants' conception of a feminist approach, conflicted with participants' desire to challenge notions of feminism as exclusive and essentializing.

Participants' own use of experience not only further demonstrated the importance of experience to a feminist approach more broadly, but also demonstrated the importance of experience to making authoritative feminist claims. Though interview/focus group questions did not ask about participants' personal lives, more than half of participants responded to broad questions about feminism, sexual violence and trauma by drawing on personal experience. Demonstrating that they had personal experience with the issue allowed participants to assert what they knew about sexual violence; personal experience gave participants credibility, through which they could make authoritative claims that those without personal experience could not. Those without either personal experience of sexual violence or experience working with victims/survivors were more hesitant to make claims about sexual violence and tended to present their opinions with less authority.

Both "choice" and "experience" were at the core of participants' difficulty defining sexual violence. Participants did not feel that sexual violence could or should be defined in any concrete way, as this would risk excluding experiences and people and would also limit individuals' choices about how to define their own experiences. Instead, participants presented broad frameworks through which individuals could interpret experience and intended for these broad frameworks to serve as guides that individuals were not obligated to use. For the most part, these broad frameworks ranged from everyday experiences, such as harassment and unwanted sexual advances, to rarer experiences, such as rape. A minority of participants did not agree that broad frameworks

were altogether useful, suggesting that they conflate everyday experiences with more serious forms of sexual violence and that using these frameworks might fuel assumptions that feminists 'exaggerate' sexual violence and should not be taken seriously.

The third framework participants used to understand sexual violence was the impacts of sexual violence and, more specifically, trauma. Every single participant saw trauma as a likely, if not inevitable, outcome of sexual violence and many defined sexual violence in reference to its impacts, as an experience "that stays" or that leads to trauma. The language of trauma, and the notion that sexual violence is destructive, altering, and has long-lasting effects on those who experience it, was evident in most conversations about sexual violence, even when participants were not being asked explicitly about the impacts of sexual violence. In order to include all experiences, participants asserted that the manifestations of trauma can vary and they were willing to accept that any and all responses to sexual violence can be understood as a trauma response; this included absence of response, which was understood by participants to be denial or repression. For most participants, it was impossible to imagine that someone would experience sexual violence and not experience trauma and meant that some participants were unwilling to accept experiences as sexual violence if they were not accompanied by obvious trauma; or, participants reconciled the lack of obvious trauma with the idea that trauma can manifest in various, and often invisible, ways (e.g. denial or repression).

Despite asserting a very clear relationship between sexual violence and trauma, some participants also asserted that sexual violence *does not* have to result in trauma to be considered sexual violence. Such assertions, though contradicting other implicit and explicit claims made by these same participants about sexual violence and trauma, were echoes of the emphases on "choice" and "experience" that participants centralized in their

conceptions of feminism and sexual violence. Clearly the notion that all sexual violence is inherently traumatic limits how an individual can define their own experience, and some participants struggled with this, given their fervent beliefs in individual autonomy and experiential knowledge. Only one participant recognized the contradiction between the trauma of rape discourse and her emphasis on choice; a few others expressed discomfort with the idea that the relationship between sexual violence and trauma was stronger than what an individual might claim to be true about their experience.

When asked explicitly about the usefulness of trauma, most participants claimed that trauma was an important and valuable way of framing and thinking about sexual violence for feminists. Many participants suggested that emphasizing trauma allows sexual violence to be taken more seriously and justifies the varied ways in which people might respond to sexual violence. Most participants did not see the medicalizing or individualizing that trauma does to the issue of sexual violence to be a problem; indeed, two participants felt that medicalizing and individualizing sexual violence is necessary and beneficial. Some participants saw trauma as a potentially problematic framework: two participants suggested that it does not account for the positive outcomes of sexual violence; five participants suggested that it can become the 'master status' of a victim/survivor; and in one focus group, it was suggested that a focus on trauma has the potential to shift feminist activism from the structural to the individual, though these participants still saw trauma as useful if it is not the *only* way of understanding sexual violence.

Overall, this research suggests that three significant frameworks – choice, experience, and trauma – shape feminist conceptions of, and approaches to, sexual violence. The emphases on choice and experience necessitate broad frameworks for

sexual violence and make it difficult to define sexual violence in a clear or consistent way. The only defining feature of sexual violence for participants was its impacts, and they understood trauma as a necessary outcome of sexual violence. Not surprisingly, participants found trauma to be a useful and necessary concept for framing and approaching sexual violence.

Section II: Significance of Study

Emma Tseris (2015) suggests that "even 'compassionate' narratives about human suffering must be taken as tentative, limited and revisable. No knowledge is immune from context, bias, and partiality" (p. 35). I agree, and have attempted to demonstrate that contemporary feminist constructions of sexual violence contain many narratives in need of revision. Though the desire to affirm agency and preserve or achieve the autonomy of women and other marginalized groups is certainly an important priority for feminists, it should not replace the fundamental analysis of oppression that has, until now, distinguished feminism from other political approaches. Without acknowledging the systems and structures that constrain choice, feminism can do little to improve the conditions in which women make choices or the choices that are available for women to make.

Similarly, the trauma of rape discourse has been politically useful, emphasizing the seriousness of sexual violence and providing more sympathetic treatment for victims/survivors; however, this narrow framework, which dominates feminist and mainstream discussions of sexual violence, necessarily excludes or requires the eventual assimilation of those whose experiences do not fit; victims/survivors are pressured to interpret their experiences through trauma frameworks, reinforcing the image of victims/survivors as irrevocably damaged. Further, framing sexual violence – which is

experienced disproportionately by members of marginalized groups – in the medicalized language of trauma aligns with the neoliberal tendency to medicalize and individualize social issues and deny the structural forces behind them. This is especially concerning given feminists' past advocacy against the medicalization of women and women's experiences.

Choice and trauma can both be compassionate narratives and are arguably being presented in this study by those most invested in seeing a world free from sexual violence. However, I have attempted to demonstrate that broader – and less compassionate – ideologies help to facilitate these frameworks and also benefit from an individualized and medicalized understanding of sexual violence. Constructions of sexual violence offered by participants mirror aspects of 'postfeminist' ideology that sees feminism's only role as maintaining the choices for women that it has provided; an emphasis on 'individual choice' has displaced analysis of gender inequality and relevant structures of power and privilege. This presents a palatable feminism that reinforces, rather than questions, dominant discourses, even those discourses that contribute to the marginalization of women and other groups disproportionately affected by sexual violence.

The few participants in focus groups who attempted to incorporate a critical feminist analysis into their approach were met with objections by other participants who saw these overarching analyses as infringing on individual choice and possibilities for empowerment. As was demonstrated in Chapter Four, analyses of systemic oppression were entirely displaced by choice frameworks, as if questioning choice or experience to any degree would undermine the entire framework of autonomy that underlies many feminist analyses. Though focus group participants remained respectful of one another, I

have seen in my own feminist activism the ways in which questioning popular feminist paradigms can lead to extreme conflict and exclusion and where often the most critical feminist perspectives are displaced by more popular and palatable approaches. This troubling feature of feminism is one which would bear further study and discussion. As Gavey (1999) suggests, "although there may be short-term political costs, embracing a more complex and less certain position [on these issues] may ultimately be an effective political strategy" (p. 70).

The findings of this research point to significant problems in contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence, and have the potential to influence future feminist theorizing of this issue. This study fills a gap in the research on sexual violence and trauma which has, until this point, largely ignored how trauma is reflected in feminist discourses of sexual violence. Though scholars have debated definitions of sexual violence and the usefulness and dangers of trauma models, how feminists are responding to these questions in their conceptions of and approaches to sexual violence and trauma was largely unknown. My research has contributed to this area of knowledge, presenting a case study of twenty-four self-identified feminists in Nova Scotia. Furthermore, this research contributes to the recently developed theory on the trauma of rape discourse (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011), demonstrating that this discourse may be pervading even feminist understandings of sexual violence, however further research is needed to explore this hypothesis.

Section III: Future Research

This study contributes to important research being done on the trauma of rape discourse in everyday conceptions of sexual violence, but it is only one of a few studies (e.g., Gavey & Schmidt, 2011) that have explored this phenomenon and its consequences

for thinking about, and dealing with, sexual violence. Further research on the trauma of rape discourse and its influence on feminist and mainstream approaches to sexual violence is needed. Further, only one study (Maracek, 1999) to my knowledge has explored the frameworks that mental health professionals use to understand sexual violence, so further research on the perspectives of legal and medical professionals, who often work directly with victims/survivors, is also needed.

Further study into feminist perspectives on sexual violence and trauma is crucial to establishing the reliability of the findings presented here. To my knowledge, this is the first study to explore this issue with a group of self-identified feminists. However, this study is limited by its sample and methodology. Future research should explore the perspectives of a more diverse group of feminists. In addition, further research should explore how focus group and interview dynamics may impacts participants' responses, especially since sexual violence is a contentious issue and participants may not have felt comfortable presenting minority viewpoints or disagreeing with other participants in the interview/focus group environment. Future research might also consider using methods that afford participants more anonymity and confidentiality, such as surveying or phone interviewing, that may allow participants to respond to questions more freely and express less 'acceptable' or mainstream opinions. The analysis presented here does not adequately address the subtleties of how these two methods influence participant responses.

Further research that explores the influences of neoliberal ideology on feminist approaches to various social issues is also needed. Though scholars are observing shifts in feminist approaches as they adapt and respond to neoliberalism, more research should explore the influences of "choice" feminist frameworks as well as medicalization on feminist approaches to various social issues. Some scholars (Bumiller, 2008) have

observed shifts in feminist approaches to issues such as sexual violence, and the relationship between neoliberalism, medicalization, and the increasingly individualized and institutionalized approach to the issue. The potential for neoliberalism and medicalization to supplant more critical, radical, structural, and/or grassroots approaches to social issues is great, and understanding the extent to which this is occurring and how it impacts feminist campaigns, theorizing, and initiatives is important.

Finally, much more research is needed on the relationship between sexual violence and trauma. Though early researchers established a significant correlation between the two phenomenon (e.g., Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974; Rothbaum, et al., 1992), research in the past few decades has yielded inconsistent results (Gavey, 1999). While I suggest that feminists should be critical of the medicalization of sexual violence, a better understanding of the relationship between sexual violence and various potential psychological impacts is important.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Dear [Name],

I am conducting a study on feminist understandings of sexual trauma as part of my Master's in Sociology at Dalhousie University. I am a feminist researcher, and I am particularly interested in how feminists conceive of the impacts of sexual violence. I will be conducting focus group discussions (approximately one to three hours in length) with individuals on this subject. The aim of this research is not to ask about personal experiences of sexual violence, and you will not be asked to disclose or discuss your own experience(s)!
You are eligible to participate if you are eighteen years of age or older, identify as *a feminist* and also identify as:

- A woman (cisgender or transgender)
- Non-binary
- Genderqueer
- Femme
- Transfeminine

I aim to include as diverse a group of feminists as possible. I identify as a queer woman of colour, and encourage feminists who identify as disabled, working class, racialized, and/or LGBTQ+ to participate!
If you are interested in learning more, or are interested in participating, please contact me by email. If you know someone who is eligible and might be interested, please pass this information along.

I thank you for your time, and look forward to hearing from you!

Tameera Mohamed
Tameera.Mohamed@dal.ca

Appendix B: Poster Invitation

Do you identify as a feminist?

If so, you are invited to participate in a study on feminist conceptions of sexual violence and its impacts. Participation in this research consists of attending a focus group discussion session (approximately one to three hours in length), and discussing sexual violence and sexual trauma with other feminists. The aim of this research is not to ask about personal experiences of sexual violence, and you will not be asked to disclose your experiences!

In order to participate, you must be at least eighteen years of age, and must also identify as a cisgender woman, a transgender woman, non-binary, genderqueer, transfeminine, or femme.

I am a queer feminist woman of colour, and this study is part of my MA research in Sociology at Dalhousie University. I especially encourage feminists who identify as LGBTQ+, racialized, disabled, and/or working class to participate. If you are interested in participating, and would like more information, please contact me, Tameera, by email!

Tameera.Mohamed@dal.ca

Appendix C: Focus Group/Interview Guide

1. What do you think is a feminist approach to dealing with sexual violence?
    a. Are there multiple feminist approaches? And, if so, how do they differ?
    b. What makes this/these approaches *feminist*? (Probe: How do they differ from the way society generally approaches sexual violence?)
    c. How do feminist understandings of sexual violence differ, if at all, from the way sexual violence is defined in the legal system, or represented in the media?
    d. How do you position yourself within these approaches? What do you think the consequences—good or bad— of these approaches are?
    e. Do you ever find there are conflicts between feminist approaches to sexual violence and the individual experience of sexual violence? (probe: Do you find individuals define experiences as sexually violating that are not captured in feminist approaches to sexual violence? Or, do you find that individuals do not define their experiences as sexually violating even when feminist approaches include those experiences as sexual violence?)

2. What do you think we should call those who experience sexual violence? Victim? Survivor?
    a. Why should or shouldn't we use these labels?
    b. What do these labels mean to you?

3. What do you think are the impacts of sexual violence on those who have experienced it? (Probe: Why do you think that/what's your reason for thinking that?)

4. What do you think about the use of "trauma" as a way to think about the effects of sexual violence?
    a. What are the advantages and disadvantages, if any, of using trauma models to talk about sexual violence?
    b. Does sexual violence always lead to sexual trauma? (probe: Is it possible to experience sexual violence without it having a psychological impact? Are there other psychological impacts of/responses to sexual violence that are not captured by trauma?)
    c. Do all forms of sexual violence lead equally to sexual trauma? (probe: How does the severity of the violence affect the severity of the response, if at all?)

5. Some feminists suggest that women and feminine people experience "insidious trauma" as a result of the constant fear of sexual violence throughout our lifetimes, and so though we may not have been violated, we have symptoms of sexual trauma (like hypervigilance, avoidance, etc.).
    a. Is this an accurate representation of how individuals who are at risk of sexual violence feel on a day-to-day basis? Is it possible for someone

to have not experienced acute sexual violence/assault, but to have symptoms of sexual trauma?

b. Do you see any limitations or problems with this idea of insidious trauma, or the way it is used?

6. Some people think that defining sexual violence as traumatic medicalizes and individualizes the experience – that is, takes it out of its social and political context. What do you think of this argument? Is there a way to talk about sexual trauma while also recognizing the social forces that produce these experiences?

7. Are there any other ways of understanding sexual violence and/or trauma that you draw on or find useful?

Appendix D: Consent Form (overleaf)

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

CONSENT FORM

Exploring Feminist Conceptions of Sexual Violence and its Impacts

Researcher: Tameera Mohamed
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Dalhousie University

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Tameera Mohamed, a graduate student in Sociology, as part of my master's degree at Dalhousie University. I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Emma Whelan. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of this study is to examine how feminists understand sexual violence and sexual trauma.

As a participant in the study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group session with approximately five other people, and discuss five questions regarding the feminist understanding of sexual violence and the role of trauma in feminist approaches to sexual violence. The focus group should take between 60 and 180 minutes and will be conducted in a private room of a public building. The session will be audio recorded, so that I can identify the speakers when I transcribe the session. All data will be anonymized (meaning I will remove names and any other identifying features). If I quote any part of your interview in my thesis, I will use a pseudonym in place of your real name.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to leave the focus group session at any time if you no longer wish to participate and to rejoin if and when you want. You are also welcome to ask that details of what was said in the focus group be changed or left out up until one month after the focus group session. I will not be able to remove the information you provide after that date because I will have completed my analysis.

Information gathered through focus groups will be described in my thesis, and possibly in conference presentations and publications. Nothing that could identify you will be included in any of these distributions. I and my project supervisor will have access to the unprocessed information you offer, and I will keep anonymized data on a password-protected computer so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

Despite all efforts to keep your participation and information shared in the focus groups confidential, there is the possibility that other participants in the focus group could share your identity or what you say beyond the focus group. You are advised not to share information that is particularly sensitive or private with the group. While I cannot guarantee that other group members will keep your identity or the information you share in the focus group confidential, I will ask all group members to respect the privacy of their fellow group members by not sharing members' identities or contributions beyond the group setting.

My ability to keep this information confidential is limited insofar as the law permits. This means that I am legally required to report disclosures of child abuse (a child is defined in

Nova Scotia as someone under the age of 16), or threats of harm to yourself or to another person.

Because of the nature of the conversation, you may feel unsettled or triggered by the subjects being discussed, or specific comments made. There will be an active listener available at the focus group session. This is an individual who has training in peer support and active listening, and is available to talk privately if you should feel triggered or upset by the conversation at any point during, or immediately after, the focus group session. I will also provide all participants with a list of local resources that you may use at your discretion.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on how feminists conceive of sexual violence and its impacts. I can provide a copy of the anonymized transcript, or a summary of the session, upon request. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my thesis after December 2017.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor. My contact information is Tameera.Mohamed@dal.ca and (902) 719-5868. You can contact my supervisor, Dr. Emma Whelan, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-6752, or email emma.whelan@dal.ca.

This research has been reviewed and approved by Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-3859, or email catherine.connors@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Resource List for Participants

Avalon Sexual Assault Centre
1526 Dresdon Row, Suite 401, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 3K3
Phone: (902) 422-4240
Email: info@avaloncentre.ca

South House Sexual and Gender Resource Centre
1443 Seymour Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3M6
Phone: (902) 494-2432
Email: outreach@southhousehalifax.ca

Halifax Sexual Health Centre
6009 Quinpool Road, Suite 201, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3K 5J7
Phone: (902) 455-9656

Nova Scotia Sexual Assault Centres
http://www.casac.ca/node/54

Self-Care After Rape Tumblr
http://selfcareafterrape.tumblr.com/

Forums for Survivors
http://www.vansondesign.com/RecoveryCanada/SexualAbuse/Forums/