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WHEN THE CULTURAL CODE OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION FAILS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF SIX NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

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**WHEN THE CULTURAL CODE OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION FAILS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF SIX NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

**By**

**Diana Jean Stansberry**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WHEN THE CULTURAL CODE OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION FAILS: AN ANALYSIS OF SIX NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

**By**

**Diana J. Stansberry**

In this thesis, the topic of sexual assault in modern American culture is examined in a theoretical framework entitled the cultural code of emotional expression. It is proposed that the cultural code of emotional expression fails to provide the survivors of sexual assault and other participants in the culture with the ability to understand, find meaning in, and express emotions regarding sexual assault in a culturally designated manner. Rather, the survivors of sexual assault are marginalized and create their own meanings, expressions, and "sub-culture."

Narratives are elicited from female sexual assault survivors regarding their reactions to and constructions of their assaults. The research outlines similarities and differences in the emotional expressions of sexual assault survivors. Based on the failure of the cultural code of emotional expression, examples of universal, cultural, and individual reactions to and expressions of the women's sexual assault experience are shown and discussed.

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**Dedicated to the reader  
who cares enough  
to seek understanding and insight.**



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this thesis, I examine the topic of sexual assault in modern American culture. I propose that the cultural code of emotional expression fails to provide the survivors of sexual assault and other participants in the culture with the ability to understand, find meaning in, and express emotions regarding sexual assault in a culturally designated manner. Rather, the survivors of sexual assault are marginalized and create their own meanings, expressions, and "sub-culture."

Before I proceed, I first need to define several terms. By the term "modern American culture," I am referring to the culture of the United States of America in the early 1990's. The term "survivor" refers to both males and females who have been sexually assaulted and have worked (and may be working) to incorporate this traumatic experience into their lives. The term "survivor" in this thesis will refer to the female survivors only. Although "sexual assault" includes many forms of culturally defined inappropriate sexual contact, the term is used in this thesis to denote rape and incest only. The term "sub-culture" was provided by one of the participants in my research to refer to a cognitively based collective or community of sexual assault survivors (this is discussed in Chapter 9 – Victim Blaming and the Reconstruction of the Cultural Code of Emotional Expression).

As a sexual assault counselor at a volunteer crisis center, I began to notice similarities in the appearance and emotions of the clients I was seeing. These two themes, physical appearance and emotions, were connected to each other. I hypothesized that due to the poorly defined position of sexual assault survivors in modern American culture, these women were expressing their emotions in alternative ways (i.e. physically). Furthermore, since these alternative emotional expressions were linked to the failure of the cultural code, the expressions must also be tied to the culture. In other words, the cultural background of the survivor would influence her emotional expression.

In this thesis, I have utilized a narrative form of analysis (analysis of narratives, or stories, elicited from survivors) so that the women involved in my research will, hopefully, remain as distinct individuals, rather than voice-less subjects (for a detailed description of narrative analysis, see Chapter 3 – Methodology). Throughout the thesis, three themes of reactions and expressions are followed: universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic. The term "universal themes," as used in this thesis, is not meant to imply these themes occur cross-culturally. Rather, universal themes are emotions and the traumatic event that occur among all of the subjects in my study and have external support from literature (Winkler, McMullen, and Wininger, 1994). For example, the emotions described by the rape trauma syndrome (Winkler, et al, 1994:268–270). Cultural themes include those reactions and emotions that can be logically and reasonably linked to culture and culturally based values. For example, a woman who was raised in a religious household that valued remaining a virgin until marriage feels intense guilt for losing her virginity when raped.

Idiosyncratic themes include reactions and emotions that do not occur among all the women in my study, do not appear to have a direct cultural link, and/or are influenced by the woman's personal experiences. For example, a woman who places her health at risk by refusing to seek testing for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS in order to prevent her assailant from having more "power" over her.

Due to various limitations on my research (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10 – Summary and Conclusions). I am not proposing that these women are representative of their demographic cohorts. Instead, I invite the reader to perceive this work as discerning the preliminary threads of my hypothesis and as a basis for future research in this area.

The chapters are organized in a three sections. Section I contains Chapter 2 – Literature Review and Theoretical Framework and Chapter 3 – Methodology. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the theory and research behind my proposed cultural code of emotional expression. Chapter 3 provides the reader with a description of the process, or methodology, of my research.

Section II focuses on the micro level experiences as related by the women in my study. The micro level includes the survivor's personal experiences of assault, communication, and life experiences that influenced their reactions to their sexual assaults. Chapter 4 – The Narrative of Sexual Assault contains a brief demographic description of each woman with her narrative account of her sexual assault experience.

Chapter 5 – Explicit Communication of Sexual Assault includes a discussion about the women's experiences telling other people about their sexual assaults, confronting their assailants, and expressing their emotions through creative, artistic forms. Chapter



6 – Being Alone and the Internal Experience focuses on the women's personal and internal emotions and their expressions. In Chapter 7 – The Influence of Family and Childhood Experiences on the Construction of Sexual Assault, the women describe early life events they feel influenced their responses to their sexual assault experience.

Section III examines the macro level of experiences as related by the women in my study. The macro level includes the women's views of sexual assault as a general topic of discourse. Chapter 8 – Responses of Other Sexual Assault Survivors contains the women's descriptions of their interactions with other survivors and how these interactions influenced the women's construction of their sexual assault experiences. In Chapter 9 – Victim Blaming and the Reconstruction of the Cultural Code of Emotional Expression the women of my study offer their analysis of culture, including how and why sexual assault survivors react to their experiences. This section is followed by Chapter 10 – Summary and Conclusions where I offer a summary of the thesis, a discussion of findings, and include areas for future research. I wish the reader to note at this time that in order to maintain confidentiality, all names in this thesis have been changed and identifying information omitted.

## SECTION I

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In my review of the theoretical literature on culture, emotion, and the body, I have pulled together the main themes in the current literary discourse on these topics in order to create and pose a basic theoretical framework, the cultural code of emotional expression, for analysis of my thesis. I begin my presentation of this material by defining culture and the concepts of self and personhood. I will then proceed from these definitions to elaborate upon my theoretical framework of the cultural code of emotional expression. I conclude this chapter by providing a brief review of the feminist theory of victim blaming and how this theory demonstrates a failure of the cultural code of emotional expression to provided understanding, meaning, and a means of expressing emotions regarding sexual assault for sexual assault survivors and other members of modern American culture.

#### **Culture**

Human culture is not a material thing that can be touched by the individual or displayed for others to see. While the material by-products (hand axes, automobiles, behavior, etc.) of culture can be observed by the on-looker, culture exists only within the minds of its participants. Yet despite its intangibility, individuals look to culture



to define their experiences and attribute meaning to them (Bock, 1988). Cultures create their own conformation, by assigning members social roles that "reinforce belief in the prevailing system of classification by making it appear grounded in reality" (Bourdieu, 1990:71). To be effective in constructing this sense of "reality", culture requires the constant involvement and continuous interactions among all participants (Rosaldo, 1980). In this way, culture reproduces itself and provides for its participants a means of mediating between personal and group needs and experiences (Middleton, 1989).

Participation in a culture involves a

long slow process of autonomization ... [that] one does not embark on ... by a conscious act, one is born into the [culture], with the [culture]; and the relation of investment, ... is made more total and unconditional by the fact that it is unaware of what it is. (Bourdieu, 1990:67)

In other words, cultural membership does not occur quickly such as in a brief rite of passage, rather the process occurs over the course of an individual's lifespan through the process of socialization. Through this process, an individual develops a sense of "belonging" to and participation in her/his culture (Bourdieu, 1990).

### **Self and Personhood**

The concept of what defines self and personhood varies culturally (Rosaldo, 1980; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Here, the term 'self,' relates to the individual's personal, inner definition of her/himself, while 'personhood' refers to the combination of the physical boundaries and limits of the body and the "essence" that culturally constitutes a "human being." Since the "... *self is an entirely social product*" (Bock,

1988:147; original emphasis), the individual's view of 'self' informs social life (Rosaldo, 1980). This view of the 'self' is continually constructed through interactions with the 'other' (actual individuals in the culture or in the form of Goffman's "generalized other") (Bock, 1988; Goffman, 1959).

As the individual seeks her/his place in the culture, s/he will examine her/his perceptions of her/him –'self'. In a "steady state system", where the culture changes very little, there is an emphasis placed on "presenting self in conformity with a smoothly functioning society" (Middleton, 1989:196). The constructed 'self' that is gained from these interactions influences the individual's self-knowledge and can restrict the experience of 'other selves' (Douglas, 1982). In the individual's pursuit of 'full self-knowledge', s/he must include the social conditions that affected her/his development of the self (Douglas, 1982).

The culturally based conception of 'self' and 'personhood' determines the perceptions of experience (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). These conceptions form the basis of determining "human capabilities and actions, ideas about the self, and the expression of emotions" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986:45).

### **Emotions and Culture**

Culture can be partially described by "its characteristic organization of emotions" (Middleton, 1989:188). This is to say that in every culture, people experience events that evoke an emotional response, but culture provides a way of 'framing' that experience into a meaningful event. Each culture's code of emotional

expression acts as a crucial link between random, emotional life events, historical grounding, and the individual.

In the western mind, emotions have long been categorized as being irrational and uncontrollable, a sign of vulnerability, and feminine in nature (Bock, 1988; Lutz, 1988). Emotions were, in the past, attributed to "natural and biological provinces of human experience," and therefore thought to be "relatively uniform, uninteresting, and inaccessible to the methods of cultural analysis" (Lutz and White, 1986:405). These ideas were expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre who states in his outline of emotion theory that he "shall not seek the explanation or the laws of emotion in the general and essential structures of human reality, but *in the process of the emotion itself* ... which will never permit either an understanding of a thing other than itself or of grasping by means of it the essential reality of man" (Sartre, 1948:9; original emphasis). Such cultural constructions are relative to the culture's past history as well as the particular era within history (Bock, 1988). The study of human emotions and their relationship with other aspects of culture remained unproductive until emotions were redefined and viewed as an integral part of human experience (Elias, 1991).

Margaret Lock defines emotion as consisting of both thought and feeling (Lock, 1993). Emotions are not "culture-free," and they can be understood only in the context of culture (Sartre, 1948). In each culture, a code of emotional expression can be found. This code includes a "normative organization of emotions ... indigenous classification, form of communication, intensities of expression, and patterns of linkage with each other and with other domains of culture" (Middleton,

1989:188–189). Thus, emotions are being understood "as a formative, institutional, and explanatory force in ordinary life" (Middleton, 1989:196).

Anthropologists have studied the emotion–culture relationship in an attempt to discern "the possible conditions of an emotion, that is, ... whether the very structure of human reality makes emotions possible and *how* it makes them possible" (Sartre, 1948:7; original emphasis). Given that "...the quality of consciousness that characterizes the particular emotion is typically, though not always, accompanied by cognitive processes, and these cognitive processes are ... greatly influenced by culture" (Izard, 1992:310), it would logically follow that emotions are and reflect cultural constructions (Lutz, 1988).

Based on the concept that "... an emotion refers back to what it signifies ... and, in effect, what it signifies is the totality of the relationship of the human reality to the world" (Sartre, 1948:93), emotional meaning is social and emotion speaks of culture (Lutz, 1988). Since emotion is culturally formulated and socially contextualized, the cultural code of emotional expression gives meaning and form to the "public, social, and cognitive dimensions of emotional experience" (Lutz and White, 1986:429). Codes of emotional expression vary not only between cultures, but also within a given culture. That is to say "... whether or not an emotion expression is encouraged or discouraged must vary with the age or developmental stage of the [individual], the sex of the [individual], status of the [individual], or [her/his] family, and a number of other variables" (Izard, 1983:311).

As noted above, the emotional domain is seen in relation to other domains of culture. These relations have been divided into two areas: primary and secondary

linkages. Primary linkages connect emotions with "cognition and morality ... beliefs about the nature of the world, the identity of a people, and how these concerns influence thought, feeling, and action" (Middleton, 1989:195). These linkages provide the individual with a reference point for explaining emotional expression. Secondary linkages are the connections between the emotional domain and other domains (kinship, age cohort, etc.). These linkages can become a cluster of linkages and serve to show the secondary influences that provide information about cultural connections between domains and the meanings attributed to these connections (Middleton, 1989).

Within cultures, some emotions are regarded as more visible and important than others (Middleton, 1989). This difference in the value and importance placed on different emotions is discussed in Levy's work on emotion. Levy divides these ideas of emotion into two categories: *hypercognized* and *hypocognized*. *Hypercognized* emotions are highly visible, well defined and labeled, and carry a number of cultural meanings and evaluations of the situational stimulus and expressions (Middleton, 1989:197). There are times, however, in every culture when individuals and groups occasionally distance themselves from "strong, unacceptable emotions" (Middleton, 1989:199). In this case, these emotions are *hypocognized*. *Hypocognized* emotions are less visible, but they can tell us about tensions and conflicts that drive group behavior (Middleton, 1989).

Levy's theory of emotion defines cultural organization as existing at the level of an individual's personal emotional expression and her/his self-definition (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). The interaction between emotional structure and the sense of self

is dynamic (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). It is thought that emotion has its social origins in the concepts of self, other, world, and experiences (Lutz, 1988).

Each culture's code of emotions is influenced by time and place, and can be seen as a "historically derived group of cognitive and moral structures" that give "meaning and motivation" to participants so they may "enact and interpret" concepts of the self and the "formative and regulative role ... culture [serves] in furnishing us with ordered emotional experience[s]" (Middleton, 1989:188). Through the individual's incorporation of cultural concepts, a set of "constitutive rules" develops. These rules "define for people who they are and how their emotional lives are related to their identity. Such rules derive directly from systems of morality and belief that serve as constant points of reference as people act and interpret acts" (Middleton, 1989:190).

The effects of "acculturation, development, ecological pressures, and internal system stresses and strains are potential sources of change" in the code of emotional expression (Middleton, 1989:198). When the cultural code alters, the individual may experience a sense of stress due to her/his maladaptation to the new code. Turning to Americans, Hochschild presents an argument that "the search for individual authenticity among contemporary Americans is driven by a trend in which the self and emotions belong to more organizations than to the individual" (Middleton, 1989:Footnote 4). In short, Americans' involvement in numerous social roles (such as parent, child, worker, spouse, club member, committee chair, and so on) places different demands and regulations on the individual's emotional expressions. In the face of demanding, constraining and conflicting roles and codes, many American's find themselves with few resources upon which to develop a clear and strong sense of self.

M. Rosaldo defines emotions as "*embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that 'I am involved'" (Rosaldo as quoted in Lutz and White, 1986:430). Emotions are enacted through and on the body (Douglas, 1982). This expression is regulated by the culture's code of emotional expression (Middleton, 1989). Hence, the "balance between emotional impulses and emotion-controlling counter-impulses show[s] itself in a person's movements, in their gestures and in their facial expressions which are signals by means of which people communicate involuntarily or with intent the condition of the self-regulation of their emotions to other human beings" (Elias, 1991:124).

Emotion-behavior studies have repeatedly shown that emotions drive individual behavior (Middleton, 1989). The individual's concept of self in relation to culture, "what [they] believe and know about themselves generate[s] their emotional behavior" (Middleton, 1989:190). Yet, it cannot be assumed that "... *behavior pure and simple is not emotion*, and pure and simple consciousness of this behavior is not emotion either" (Elias, 1991; original emphasis). "In the case of human beings, unlearned emotional impulses are always related to a person's learned self-regulation, more specifically to learned controls [or cultural code] of emotion" (Elias, 1991:124).

### *Summary of the Cultural Code of Emotional Expression*

I have used the preceding literature review to set forth the theoretical framework of the cultural code of emotional expression. This framework incorporates the concepts of self, emotion, and body into a culturally based code of expression. Thus, individuals'



emotional lives, ordered by culture, contribute[s] ... to our sense of identity, our motivation to act, and our interpretation of the acts of others. Our emotions are historically shaped sociocultural constructions more than they are personal possession. They are processual events tied fundamentally to other domains of culture. Emotions, like culture, are organized in distinctive patterns. (Middleton, 1989:187)

Through this code, participants in the culture are provided with a means of understanding, ordering, and reacting to events in a culturally "appropriate" fashion. In some instances, due to cultural dualisms and contradictions regarding certain topics, the code does not provide participants with this information and this absence becomes a source of cultural tension. Furthermore, the lack of cultural proscriptions in such areas raises the question of locating the boundary between the universal, the culture-specific, and the individual or self-specific expressions of emotional experiences. I suggest that the area of sexual assault is one of these situations.

### **Failure of the Cultural Code of Emotional Expression**

Unlike, for example the death of a loved one, sexual assault in American culture is an example of a failure of the cultural code of emotional expression to provide understanding and meaning for cultural members. In American culture, it is typical that when a loved one dies, the cultural code of emotional expression guides individuals or survivors by defining them as "mourners" and prescribing acceptable expressions of emotion such as crying and wearing black clothing. I argue that there are no such prescriptions for survivors and other cultural members in the area of sexual assault.

Drawing from the wealth of literature regarding sexual assault, there are two notable themes that pervade the research and theory: the rape trauma syndrome and victim blaming. I suggest that these reactions are responses by and toward the survivor can be attributed to the failure of the cultural code.

The rape trauma syndrome describes survivors' responses her experience of sexual assault (Brownmiller, 1975; Fairstein, 1993; Winkler, McMullen, and Wininger, 1994). These reactions include "dysfunctional feelings of disequilibrium, and ... symptoms of malice which range from physical to emotional upheavals" (Winkler, et al, 1994:268). These strong reactions to the trauma of sexual assault have a wide range of manifestations. I argue this range of manifestations demonstrates the failure of the cultural code to provide the survivors with a means of ordering and expressing their emotions.

Despite numerous legal definitions of rape, incest, and criminal sexual conduct, the question of consent is repeatedly raised as the determining factor in labeling sexual assault (Boumil, Friedman, and Taylor, 1993; Brownmiller, 1975; Fairstein, 1993; Roiphe, 1993; Walker, 1979). The question of consent places the survivor's word against the assailant's and is a source of cultural tension. In order to avoid this tension, American culture has developed a victim blaming response.

Victim blaming is serves to "maintain the status quo and prevent the kind of open dialogue necessary to eliminate" sexual assault by keeping "the victim [survivor] in a clearly prescribed role bounded by the stereotypical myths" (Walker, 1979:14; Margolis, 1982). By attributing the cause of sexual assault to the survivor, cultural

members are able to avoid the tension created by the failure of the cultural code and can dismiss the survivor as personally lacking in some way.

### **Conclusion**

In this thesis, the themes of universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic reactions to sexual assault by the survivors and other cultural members in modern American culture will be traced. Section II explores the responses to sexual assault on a micro level. The survivors discuss their personal experiences of sexual assault, their reactions, the reactions of those individuals close to them, and the influences on their emotional expressions. Section III presents the survivors views of macro level responses to sexual assault. The survivors present their interpretations of cultural influences on the reactions of survivors and other cultural members. Throughout these sections, the universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes will aid the discussion in Chapter 10 – Summary and Conclusions by distinguishing what reactions are culturally influenced.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The idea for this thesis was conceived while I was working as a sexual assault counselor. I began to notice emotional (i.e. shock, anger, denial) and physical (i.e. clothing, mannerisms) similarities among the women I counseled and wondered why these similarities existed.

#### **Preliminary Study**

I began my research into this area of study by conducting a pilot project during which I interviewed a total of thirteen individuals. These individuals were either rape survivors or significant others (family members or friends) of one or more rape survivors. I elicited narratives from these individuals through the use of open-ended questions that allowed each person to speak freely and construct the experience in their own words. In these interviews, we discussed the survivors' responses to the sexual assault through the survivors' changes in body rituals and interactions with others.

I found the main theme of these narratives focused on changes in the body rituals (i.e. clothing, behaviors, substance abuse, bathing, make-up, and jewelry) of the survivors. In contemporary America, men and women use their bodies to express

themselves, their self images, and their feelings (Goffman, 1959). "Body language" is a popularly used term that refers to a physical, non-spoken form of communication between individuals. This form of symbolic communication is based on visual cues sent by one person and received and interpreted by another. These visual cues can take form in physical gestures (mannerisms, posture, gait) or in physical appearance (clothing, hairstyle, weight) and are reflections of an individual's self image, feelings, and attitudes. Based on the findings of this pilot project, I proposed a more extensive study focusing directly on the narratives of sexual assault survivors in order to avoid speculation and misinterpretation on the part of those receiving the messages, and to determine what these messages are, and how and why these messages are being sent.

### **Proposed Study**

I originally proposed that rape would create a distinct and sudden alteration in the body rituals of the survivor and that I could find themes of anger, guilt, shame, and attempts to counteract a perceived helplessness. As time passed, the changes in body ritual would be further modified through each participant's individual experiences of integrating the attack into her life, for example counseling, finding that they are part of a larger community of women, or being able to discuss the attack with friends and/or family. As the survivors' views of the attack and of themselves changed over time, I hypothesized their body rituals would continue to change in order to fit with their self-images and feelings. Additionally, the individual's ethnic/cultural background would serve as the survivor's basis for her construction and reaction to her experience.

### **Data Collection**

I planned to conduct and transcribe audio taped narrative interviews with female rape survivors in a private setting chosen by the participant (the woman's home or a secluded study room on campus). These interviews were to have no formal structure or questions, allowing the participant to relate her experiences with little or no interference in this process. This would allow the participant and me to develop a joint-investigation endeavor, pursuing those topics that the sexual assault survivor deemed important (Hyden, 1994). To a large degree, I could avoid forcing these women into a preconceived model by conducting my research in this manner. I planned to utilize an outline of questions (Appendix A) to guide my own inquiries if we found ourselves lacking discussion topics or wandering from the research topic. This in not to imply that any or all of the questions listed in the outline would be asked of each woman or that the questions would be asked verbatim.

Each participant would be interviewed approximately three times in order to gather data. During the first interview, I planned to screen the women in order to assess their individual abilities to recall the rape and pre- and post-rape events, as well as their comfort level and willingness to talk with me. It was my intention through this interview to create a relatively relaxed atmosphere and build trust by allowing each woman to express her concerns about participating in the study. In the second interview, I planned to ask questions and elicit narratives that would allow me to compare each individual's body rituals before and after the rape. I planned to examine such areas as food consumption patterns, bathing, posture and demeanor, lifestyles, attire, make-up and hair styles, sleep patterns, and high-risk behaviors such

as substance abuse. In the third interview, I planned to examine the changes in body rituals each woman had indicated in the previous interviews. I planned to elicit from each woman an explanation of how she responded, what message or messages she was attempting to send, and why she was sending that particular message in that form. By dividing the interviews into three parts, trust could be established and biases in their stories would be minimized. Additionally, continuity in the individual narratives could be established while possible discrepancies could be clarified. Based on necessity and circumstances, I planned to conduct greater or fewer interviews with particular participants.

### **Sample**

I planned to recruit women through posted advertisements and through discussing my thesis topic with individuals who had an interest in this area. Only those individuals who contacted me directly, not through a second party (i.e. a counselor, friend), were accepted. I chose this form of direct recruitment to avoid any infringement on the prospective participant's privacy.

I placed two requirements on the participants. First, all participants were to be 18 years of age or older. Second, all participants' rapes were to have occurred between one to eight years prior to the interview. I originally placed the time limitation on my study group to maintain a perspective on body rituals before and after the attack. Based on my clinical experience counseling sexual assault survivors, I theorized that if the rape had occurred within the past year, the survivor may have too many defenses in place and may be too sensitive to issues surrounding rape to be

able to discuss her own feelings and responses. Furthermore, she may not have been able to recognize changes in her own body ritual. If the rape occurred more than eight years ago, I was concerned the survivor may have forgotten details and information surrounding her feelings and responses to the rape.

### **Modifications and Limitations**

Unfortunately, the reality of the field did not allow me to adhere to my original plan. The first barrier I encountered was the time of year my research began. My research was conducted in a mid-sized university community during summer break when the town contained a limited population. The women were recruited through direct conversations with rape survivors and significant others, as well as through posted advertisements. A total of six participants were recruited and interviewed.

The next barrier I confronted was the decision to include incest in my study. Incest was present in the history of two of the rape survivors. Upon this discovery, I considered dropping them from my study, however after further investigation, I found that these events had not significantly altered the women's reactions to their later rapes. At that point, I decided to include incest/ritual abuse survivor who had contacted me.

Two women who contacted me fell outside the eight year limit of my study, but wished to be included. Due to circumstances surrounding their sexual assaults, they had suppressed the memories of their experiences until recently. For these women, the memories and associated responses to their assaults had occurred within the eight year time limit and they were therefore included.



My plan to allow the women in my study to discuss their experiences with little or no interference allowed for the women to develop narrative monologues. In these narrative monologues, the women dominated the discussion with only occasional questions regarding clarity interjected by myself. In three cases I was unable to complete the third interview. Two participants moved out-of-state before the third interview. In both of these cases, I condensed the interview series into two interviews. In the third case, scheduling conflicts prevented completion of the interview series.

Although the original focus of my research was to be in the area of body ritual, I found that the material yielded by the narratives developed into an exploration of a failure in the cultural code of emotional expression that I will present in this thesis. During the course of the research I continued to identify additional topics of research. Some of these topics I incorporated into later interviews, while others remained unresolved. These unanswered research areas will be discussed later (Chapter 10 – Summary and Conclusions) as fertile ground for future research.

## SECTION II

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NARRATIVE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

I have constructed this section to present the women in the study as individuals. I provide a brief demographic description of each individual, after which each woman tells her own sexual assault narrative in her own words. I have interjected comments into the narratives to provide the reader with a fuller picture of the emotional expressions of each woman during her narrative.

*Carol is a twenty-two year old, single, caucasian woman who was raised in the Detroit Metropolitan area. She works for a mental health agency and is striving to earn her bachelor's degree. She states that she does not "follow any stated religion."*

It was a **very** controlling relationship, **very**, he had me under his thumb I thought I was so lucky to being able to date this senior when I was in high school and only a freshman. It was this big status thing, that and he was really popular. During the time I was still dating him, I wasn't really allowed to have friends.

Jon was really bizarre too. I mean he always knew just the right things to upset me. He knew just how to laugh at me to make me feel really bad about that. He just knew how to push all my buttons really, really, really, bad... and he'd do other

things that like... seemed to make me stay with him. And I can look at it now and see that that's a lot of stuff that—that people who are in abusive relationships, like physically abusive, like wife beaters they get that from their husbands trying to apologize and say it'll never happen again and that's what he was doing I didn't know it then.

***How did he control you, and what was acceptable to him?***

Basically, through using a lot of insults, verbal insults. I can't really say much in the way of physical control, besides the actual rape. But I think that was more mental than... I mean, it wasn't like he beat me or anything, so it wasn't really... you know what I mean. He'd insult me a lot, writing me letters, playing mind games with me.

Always using examples, like saying that he'd gone and talked to Sister Teresa about, and she was the one in charge of dress code, about what was appropriate for women to wear, and they totally agreed on it all. He listed out all the things that they talked about and then complained when I didn't wear them. "You're going to get in trouble for dress code violation." "You don't look right in that." Or the big one, of course, "You look fat in that." "You look like a slut with that much make-up on and I don't want to be dating a slut."

With my friends, he did a lot of insulting. Like whenever I'd go out and hang around with her, he would read me the riot act on it. "Don't you want to spend time with me?" He'd do stuff like that to try to get a rise out of me. Find the things that would matter to me most and put them down.

I was 14...I had been dating an 18 year old for about 3 months. Um,... he had been pressuring me to have sex. He was very control oriented type of guy, um, going to decide who my friends were, what to wear, whether or not I wore make up.... Um... we'd gotten into an argument at a roller rink. I'd rollerskated around the rink with some other guy, not even holding hands or anything, really, talking about other women on the roller rink, and (she chuckled painfully) ah, um... he's like, "Come on, we're leaving."

And so I'm like, "OK." Um, and we left. Um... we'd gone parking behind a different high school... and... it started off just like a normal making out sort of thing and I didn't realize that he had more plans for it... and then he decided that we were having sex... and... that's (shrugged and laughed) that's basically it.

(long pause) I bled a lot! (pause) In case you didn't get that impression... I **bled a lot!** (she coughs) Bled on his homework after he rapes me. Another thing too, I can't even say it was violent, or I had any bruises or that I even said, "No," but... all I did was lay there and cry... I can remember asking, "What are you doing?" and (she scoffs) never answered me.

*Jean is a twenty-two year old, single, caucasian woman who was raised in a small town in western New York state. She works for a sexual assault program and holds a bachelor's degree. She states that she is an atheist.*

When I met Jon, he would just accept whatever I'd said. And he was very emotional, he was a very emotional person. He would be very, ahm... very open with his feelings. He cried a couple of times and that just blew me away that men could

do something like that. I was like, "Wow! Ohmygod! He must really love me!" (she laughs a little) So I trusted him a lot and would let him do just about anything he wanted even though he did this whole emotional trip, push-pull push-pull. He would just (voice cracks slightly, she sighs) very manipulative.

He's so good (she exhaled laughing bitterly) and I was just looking for a case, somebody to take care of. And, um... so we fell kind of into each other.... Um, he would call me, when he, felt like he wanted to do drugs and I would talk him out of it. And I felt... useful, and... like he depended on me. And there, yeah there were inconsistencies and stuff, but, y'know I just never really thought about it.... (she sighed)

Like the fact that he was emotionally abusive (she laughed uncomfortably). "Hi-i, I would really like for you to go away" and that kind of stuff, but that didn't really occur to me that that was a... problem I just thought that he was really, kind of, strange, and attributed to the drugs, the fact that he was in a new school.

`K, it was a Wednesday. Um, I was a junior in high school, which puts me about... sixteen.... Um, a couple weeks... a couple three weeks before my seventeenth birthday. And I was a runner, I was in cross country, and part of that entails swim work outs. And... Jon, my assailant, was part of the... cross country team. And um... he use to drive me home. And in the course of driving home we would stop off at, ah... corn field, and, make out in his truck. And that was fine that part was just fine with me. And we used to do it a lot, and I learned a lot from him about, how-what I liked and what I didn't like. Um, but I also made it perfectly clear, from day one that, I wanted to have sex when I got married, and that was it. Told him on several

occasions that I did not want to have sex... until I was married, and... he... said that was fine, that was fine. And he's always used to say, "Let's try this, and let's try this, and let's try this..." just different things, touching and kissing. And... it was all very new for me, so it was very exciting.

And, on this particular day... we, were pretty much naked, I think I had my, my panties on, that was it. (her voice drops notably in this last section) And, he wanted to, quote, try something new, and told me to close my eyes, and of course I would never do that, so.... I think he wanted me to perform oral sex on him. And I said, "No-no, no-no, I don't want to do this, I don't want to do this!" And he said, "OK, that's fine." And... that's always left a... **very** bad impression of oral sex on me. I just, ah, something that had to be snuck up on I guess.

So... he was touching me and... what he did was... take his... penis out, and, start (this section was very stilted) rubbing it against my genitalia and I said, "Whoa, what are you doing?" and he said, "Now doesn't this feel good? Doesn't this feel good?" And I said, "I don't know." I don't think I said anything (she exhales a short laugh). I was, just, too busy trying to figure out what was happening.

And um... the next thing I felt was **pain!** And, I, realized that he had penetrated. And I... backed up, in the seat... to a sitting position so I went from a horizontal position to a sitting position rather quickly and at the same time said, "Jon, you don't have to take care of a kid for eighteen years in college." And that stopped him, he, didn't go any further... but I felt like **shit!** I didn't understand really what had happened, and it took me a couple of weeks to exactly piece together exactly what had happened. He said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I love you." And I said, "Ok."

And ah... we got dressed and he drove me home. And... we... went down the road and stopped at the stop sign and I... I (her voice cracks slightly) remember feeling very awkward... and, very, cheap, and, he drove me home. And... um, I didn't look at my parents (she exhales a bitter laugh). I wouldn't look `em in the eyes. I just... went up to my room, but I was a moody kid so, I don't think they noticed anything was different. And um... that was pretty much the rape.

*Lisa is a twenty year old, single, caucasian woman who was raised near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had just received her bachelor's degree and would be starting a job as a documentary production assistant. She states that she is a non-practicing Catholic.*

I came to college. I've said this so many times it's gonna, at first sound very... like I'm reading it out of a book.

I came to college, my freshman year I played soccer. And, I was up for pre-season. So, it was, um... there was this guy who was like, not the captain, but, everyone knew who he was. He was really well liked. The coaches really respected him, he was like a male role model. He usedta come down the halls, and like talk ta us little freshmen who didn't know **anything**, school hadn't started. And I was just... **clueless** about... anything.

It was my birthday, my eighteenth birthday... and we were at a soccer party. And he... he was really nice. Like I was drinking, wasn't drunk, he wasn't drunk. So, like, alcohol was involved, but... it wasn't. Y'know, it wasn't like alotta people say, "Oh, you guys were both really drunk," or anything. And, um, the party was like



breaking up really early, and like I said, it was my birthday. And, I didn't have very many friends... so there was... I came from far away, so I didn't know that many people. And he was just, and he asked me to go back to his house, and watch... movies or TV or something, and thought nothing of it.

I had a really serious boyfriend. Everyone knew that. I talked to him every night.... There's a common phone, so every night I'd be on the phone, I thought it was completely harmless.

And went back, and like... he took my bike downstairs, in the basement. So, we were upstairs, we were in this house alone and he started to kiss me. And I was just, I kinda pushed him away, and was just like, "Oh no, no...." And, but I never said, "No." And that's probably one of my biggest regrets. **I never said, "No" like, verbally.** It was like this big wall, that if I said, "No," that meant that it was rape. And, even now, like, I'll like, have dreams about saying the word no. And I have a really hard time saying no, I think, because of that. `Cause that's... that was really weird, like in my mind it—that wasn't what was happening, as long as I didn't say, "No."

And, um... so he grabbed my hand (she grabs her own hand) and took me downstairs. I thought to get my bike, I go home, and his room was down there.... So, we go down there, and um... he was just, like—like what happened, I was just—I didn't know what to do. And we were—we were on his bed, and he was like taking my clothes off, and like ("I was" understood) trying to pull `em back on as he did this (she moved her arms demonstrating). And I was just like "I don't feel comfortable, I don't want to do this." I was saying so many other things, and he just like, kept like...

taking... my pants off. And he was, like, holding me down, like with a little bit of pressure. And, um, I was just like, no-y'know-not I didn't say, "No," I just was like, y'know... squirming, and I was... **r-really uncomfortable.**

So, then I thought to myself, "Ok, y'know, if I like, give him a blow-job, he'll **go away.** He'll leave me alone, that'll be it, I can go home," which was really dumb. Now I think that's like, the dumbest thing I did. But then he got up and he left the room. And, um... so I get my clothes back on, and I started to walk towards the door, and he's like, "Where are you going?" An-And he put, and we went like, back on the bed, and, um... then he was like holding me down and he was taking my pants off again. And I was like, he's like "Why did you put your pants back on?"

And at that point in time I said, "Because, I don't want to do this."

And, um... he was just like, "Sure you do. Y'know, it's your birthday! You've gotta celebrate your birthday!"

And he was like taking my pants off, and I'm like, y'know, "I-I don't feel comfortable, I-I, y'know, I don't want to do this..." I said like so many things. And then, um... next thing I know, he-he was like on top of me. And then, he took, and then he took me, and he like... spun me around (she make a twisting motion with her body) so like, I was on top of him. And then at that point, I kinda got off of him. And, um... I wah-and it didn't last very long at all, but... like... he was like through I guess, y'know, whatever happened, he... was... done.

I had no clue where I was. I was like in the middle of town somewhere, had no clue. And I just laid there, in his bed and just like shook. (she shakes) And I remember this song, it was playing on the radio, it was, um, "Losing My Religion" by

R.E.M. (she exhales a bitter laugh). And, like, every time I hear that song, it just plays over and over and over....

And I laid there, all night...didn't do anything. And in the morning he was like, he had to get up early for work, and he was just like, "Do you want to stay here sleeping, or..." he's like, "and I'll drive you home when I get off work."

Like, "No, I please tell me how to go home." And he told me how to get home and I just walked home.

*Isabella is a thirty-two year old, single, Cuban-American woman who was born in Florida, and raised in a larger town in Michigan. She is a full-time student who is working on her bachelor's degree. She states that she does not follow a religion, but considers herself to be spiritual. In addition to her rape experience, Isabella is also an incest survivor.*

Well, the thing is, this incident that happened to me, I did not even realize it was rape until probably, I would say about three or four years later that I realized that it was even rape. Because it was somebody that I knew. I didn't know him very well. I was about, how old was I, twenty-four. And it was a period in my time when I doing a lot of fast living. And I met this guy, his name was Jeff, he was older than me. I think he was like twenty years older than me, so he was like forty-two, forty-four years old, or something like that. And we were both very attracted to each other and we met several times at a bar, and he got my phone number and he called me up.

We met at another bar one night and we started drinking at the bar. And we got over to his place, and I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be physical with him in

the sense that I just wanted to probably kiss, hold each other, maybe do a few things. But what I didn't want to do was have intercourse with him, and I told him that.

We had started drinking and the drinking, I don't know, I think we had like a bottle of wine together. And I told him, I said... well anyway. What happened was, he took me to... we met at the bar but then we decided to go in his car. So what had happened is I was kind of left helpless. I couldn't just get in my car and go home, but after drinking as much as I did, I don't think I was in the position to even go home either way.

So he said, "You could stay overnight here with me." I said, "Fine." So we got in bed together, and... oh, its hard to say how to say it without sounding really bad. I had my dress on, but I didn't have any underwear on, because that's what stuff we were doing some things, but we weren't having intercourse. I just said, "I don't want to do this. Okay, just please, respect that part of what I don't want." He said, "That's fine, that's all right." And I fell asleep in the bed on my stomach... and it was a more of a deeper sleep than what I'm used to because I'd already been drinking.

And it's like the middle of the night I felt him on top of me. But I was sort of like half asleep and so I was just like letting him get on top of me. I thought, "What are you doing?" He says, "Shh, just be quiet, just be still." And he opened my legs from the back. And I said. "Don't, please. I don't want this." And he says, "Shh, be quiet, you're going to enjoy it." So he opened me up wider and he entered... he went inside me. And I couldn't really fight because I was also drunk, but I was really sleepy, and part of me realized this is not rape. And he did it and then he just got off

of me. And after that, it was like he didn't want anything else to do with me and he just let me go to sleep.

The next day I woke up and he says, "Well, I got to take you home now." And he didn't even want to get close to me or anything like that. And I went home, and I didn't really think too much about it.

*Charlotte Ferguson is a forty-nine year old, divorced, Orthodox Jew who was raised in New Jersey. She is a full-time student who is working on her bachelor's degree. In addition to her rape experience, Charlotte is also an incest survivor.*

My rape took place when I was 29, and I had husband who came back from Vietnam who was suffering from post-Vietnam Stress Syndrome, except they didn't a name for that. And if I worked, and I got a good job and I got promoted, then he wanted me to stay home. If I stayed home, he wanted me to go out to work. I never knew where the line was.

I had, at the time, three young children. The twins were two, and Joey was five. I was working at night in a new mall in a well-known department store, a little bit higher than K-Mart, and I had been promoted to manager for the night, the ladies wear. The mall was, the lights weren't completely all in the mall yet, and the mall was set up that like it was very hard to see. And it was very beautiful architecturally, it had like ridges and indentations.

And that night was pay day, and being the manager I had to reconcile the cash register which made me late. And before everybody left, the manager said,

"Remember," and they had speed bumps too, "in the front of the mall there are no lights. Please go the speed limit, slowly. Be careful."

And I was going over very slowly and I just saw something and heard this big ka-thud. What I saw was, I thought, a body. And so I go, "My God, I've hit somebody." I turned around and all the lights to the store were off, so there was no time to go back to get... well, you can't leave the scene of a crime anyway.

So, I... that was my big mistake. My rapist was very smart, because when I went to the front of the car, I was driving a station wagon, his head and stuff, like he was laying with his head and hands like underneath so I could just see the rest of him. And I thought, "Oh my God! I've hit somebody!"

And there was one light on and I figured I'd go back, and I turned around and that was my big mistake... turning around. At that time he grabbed me. He put a long, it was a long bowie knife, serrated edge, to my throat. And I said to him, "It's pay day. You can take my money, you can take the credit cards. Just leave me alone." But that's not what he wanted. And he told me in not so many words what he did want, and he pushed me into the car.

About four months before that, the city police came to speak to the Officer's Wives Club. And the policewoman said, "If he has any weapon of any sort, don't fight." But they said even after the act of penetration, if there's one split second, if you can keep yourself calm enough, that you could find.

I was wearing a pant suit. I had my period, and I thought maybe by telling him that it would turn him off, but it didn't. He just pulled out the tampax and proceeded to rape me at knife point. And I started to cry and I said, "I'm going to

start to scream....," and I'm not a screamer. And he took the knife and he shoved it up my vagina and said, "If you scream, you're going to get a free hysterectomy, but you're not going to live to tell about it." And so, he raped me.

And I remember somehow disengaging... I was up there and watching all this happening, and I remember the policewoman's words, "one split second." I also prayed because I said, "Dear God, I have three little children at home and a husband. I don't want to die."

At one point he moved. He was wearing a ski mask, I remember. I remember he was wearing a ski mask and surgeon's glove. And he moved and I took my foot and I pushed in the cigarette lighter in the car. And he moved again and I quickly moved and I took that cigarette lighter and I burned his balls, in plain English, and I kept burning him and I started kicking him. I had one boot on and I kicked him, and I kicked him, and I kicked him, and I kicked him until I kicked him out of my car and locked the doors.

And then realized when he came and got in that he threw away the keys. And my big fear was that if he ever came after now he would kill me. But I found them. He put them in the ashtray, which was a stupid place for him to put them because I looked. And I remember backing up that car... and he did come toward me again, and he was really, swearing and he said he was going to kill me. I backed up that car and I went flying out of that parking lot. I hit speed bumps, I don't know how I managed. And where that whole section was, since the mall was open, it used to be a speed trap, there's a statement, "There's never a cop when you need one." I brought that wagon

up to 95 miles an hour. I wanted someone to stop me, at least to report it, and nobody did.

*Alice is a forty-five year old, divorced, caucasian woman who was raised in the Detroit Metropolitan area. She is currently unemployed and hopes to work in the "helping profession." She holds a master's degree and does volunteer work. She states she was raised as a Lutheran, and still follows this religion to some degree. Alice is legally blind.*

Okay. I am an incest survivor. I have multiple rape experiences ranging from infancy through 19 years of age. My first memories were of my father being sexually abusive, rape, and some violence. Although the flashbacks did come to me initially, but I began to uncover that my father was not the sole perpetrator. That a minister posing as a christian minister, he may or may not have had credentials, was involved in a group of people who were assaulting me, both in terms of sexual assault, kidnapping, violence and other crimes of mind control techniques. This was a group of people that my father was associated with, and later I discovered that this has gone on in my family for generations. That my father's whole side of the family were involved in this group, and so it was grandparents, my paternal grandparents, any of the aunts and uncles on that side of the family.

From what I understand, they were all involved in the same cult. There were different aspects of abuse for me. There was the particular church that was, I don't know if they were like the head of it, or if they were, or if my family members were. I'm not to sure of the component, of how the component of the whole group, but they



were all in one group. Yeah, they all belonged to the same group, and some of the abuse took place in the homes of my relatives. Some of it involved my relatives being at the church where... I think sometimes they would be involved in transporting me or kidnapping me and taking me to places for ceremonies and rituals and things.

(she states that she has a poor sense of direction) I got lost, or couldn't keep my mind... would forget where I was, or something like that. Because I think a lot of times when I was... my abuse involved a lot of times people picking me up at bus stops, or people following me around in cars. And I think that I also had times where they used, was a combination of chemical mace and chloroform that they used to come up and they'd give me a whiff of that and then take me away somewhere. So, I think this is somehow related to my abuse.

### **Summary**

These narratives provide a description of the events surrounding each woman's sexual assault. Based on these narratives, idiosyncratic, cultural, and universal themes begin to emerge.

Idiosyncratically, each woman describes her distinct and unique sexual assault experience. Although there are similarities (i.e. assailants are sometimes acquaintances, intercourse was involved, sexual abuse involved), no two narratives are identical.

The theme of culture begins to develop in two manners. First, during the first interview with each woman, I asked her to self-identify her ethnicity. I found that it is important to include the women's ethnicity because it was later referred to

repeatedly by the women as influential to their interpretations of their experiences. Second, themes of retaining virginity (Carol, "he had been pressuring me to have sex" and Jean, "I made it perfectly clear... I wanted to have sex when I got married."), sexuality (Carol, Jean, and Isabella describe being "physical" or "making out" their assailants), and the definition of the experience (Jean, "I was... trying to figure out what was happening"; Lisa, "if I said, 'No,' that meant that it was rape"; Isabella, "I did not even realize it was rape") are found in these narratives.

Universal themes begin to arise based on the types of relationships and the women's reactions to their experiences. In all of the relationships, the assailant (or assailants in Alice's case) were controlling the women through physical or emotional means. In their reactions, the women described reactions (crying, quickly retreating and feeling awkward, shaking, being unable to fight, speeding, and becoming confused) that indicate a degree of trauma and shock.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EXPLICIT COMMUNICATION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

Language provides a bridge between the words and thoughts of the individual's and the culture's concept of the world(s) (Rosaldo, 1980). In anthropology, language is seen as symbolic, while culture "... acts selectively on what is said, when it is said, and how it is said..." (Douglas, 1982:156). These "differences in speech are ... not in any sense accidental but are contingent on a form of social structure," telling the observer about the underlying concepts and conflicts that motivate behavior and drive the culture (Douglas, 1982:24).

Explicit communication, when applied to the women involved in my research, includes the use of verbal and written language. Through their use of language, the women attempted to communicate their experiences to selected individuals to whom they attempted to communicate their experiences. This demonstrates the women's awareness of the cultural perceptions and conflicting messages created by the failure of the cultural code of emotional expression to mediate their sexual assault experience. In the process of this communication, the women received differing reactions from those they told.

### **Telling Others**

In the act of telling others about sexual assault, survivors can never be certain of the reactions they will receive. The "other" can be divided into "professional" others (medical, legal, and mental health workers) and significant others (friends, family, individuals seen in a non-professional care receiving manner), and the assailant. Within these groups, the response to a survivor's experience can vary from acceptance to rejection. This variety of responses can be attributed to the failure of the cultural code to provide meaning and understanding of sexual assault for members of the culture, and can influence a survivor's choice to communicate her experience.

### **Professionals**

Following sexual assault, survivors sometimes seek medical attention to care for their injuries or to complete a rape kit which can be used as evidence later if the survivor chooses to seek legal recourse. Of the six women in my research, Charlotte was the only woman who sought medical attention. She related that the medical staff handled her with sensitivity. She attribute this to the fact that she knew many of the staff members she encountered that night.

From a legal standpoint, sexual assault is a crime that is known to be under reported. The ambiguity left by the failure of the cultural code and the contradictory messages that have arisen in the code's wake cause some survivors to question whether they should report their sexual assault and what the reaction they would receive.

**Carol: I didn't know I could! [report] I had no idea that date rape existed.**

**Lisa:** No, even now I wouldn't [report]... because... there's nothing they could have done. Like I-I don't think it was the authorities' fault. I don't think it's like a court system fault, I think that there's a lot of faults in the court system, but my word against his. If you put me on trial, and you put him on trial... you're gonna-you're gonna believe him, because of the simple reason that you're innocent until proven guilty, and I couldn't prove it... without a reasonable doubt. I couldn't do it, there's absolutely no way, there's too many things that happen, I mean the fact that I never said "No", if someone asked me that, I wouldn't lie. I'd say, "Yes, I said everything but, but I never said those words." If they asked me... um, y'know, so you did like do things with him before. Yeah, I didn't want to, but I did, I didn't even want to kiss him, but I did. I thought, if I just kiss him, he'll leave me alone. But you can't... y'know the facts still remain. I don't know the solution to that, at all... I wish I did, I wish there was solution... I don't know...

**Charlotte:** The next day I had made an appointment with the county police, and ... there was like eight people who just sort of sat there and looked at me. And I said, "What are you looking at?" I said, "I hope this isn't going to be a horror story like I've heard about women who go through rape." And they said, "We're a mini-task force. We're trying to get this guy. You're the eighth woman in five weeks that he's raped, and we are watching him escalate his violence. And the last woman is in the state hospital and she's a total vegetable. And we knew that the next one he'd kill. So we're looking at you because you shouldn't be alive."

They were very, very helpful. The only part that was very difficult for me was I had to tell them, sit down and tell them word for word what he said and use his language. And they also had to take the knife and they had to measure it with the knife marks that were against my neck, which really threw me a bit. And they were very gentle about that. And then we went down to the scene, and there was a big puddle of blood, but no body. Because I said, "When I pulled out of there, I hit something. If it was him, I don't know."

They put out alerts to as far up as Buffalo, Albany, Binghamton, all over, all hospitals, all doctors. I guess they have their own little sources of, you know, of snitches, and there was no information that ever came back.

And I had to sit and I had to look at mug books, and which to me was a waste of time because I said I don't remember if it was a yellow ski mask and he had black hair, or black hair with a black ski mask, and blond hair. I said, "But he had the cruelest eyes I have ever seen."

They never found him. They worked with me, and I worked with them for almost five months. The entire state of New York, upper

New York from Syracuse to Klausburgh, to Albany, to Rochester, Buffalo, they never found him. The rapes stopped after me, and I once said to the police captain, "When I pulled out of there, I did hit something. Suppose I killed him?" And the captain looked at the two police women and looked at me and said, "If you did, Mrs. Ferguson, you did the world a favor."

Since the increased awareness of women's issues brought about by the women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's, individuals have specialized in counseling survivors of sexual assault. Yet, within the mental health profession, survivors will still receive varying reactions to their experiences.

**Lisa:** Was just really really hard, and I had a—I went to a counselor, who... **did not help**, she was like...like a **man hater** ... and I was just like, I can't go to her anymore.

**Isabella:** And I didn't really realize this was rape until I mentioned the incident to my counselor. And she said, "You realize that was rape." And I said, "No, its not rape." So, and then when she finally mentioned that it was rape, "This was rape, because you didn't want him to do this. You made it clear, and yet he did it." I felt, there was like this guilt was released. I was able to let go of that. I didn't feel guilt over it anymore. I felt like this was wrongly done to me.

[Regarding an incestuous relationship with her father] And for years, I think this is probably years later, I would say probably 10 years later, I was 25 when I started seeing a counselor that I realized that I was blaming him a lot for what had happened. And I got to the point where I thought this is my fault. I'm the one who wanted this just as much as he did. And finally my counselor, Beth, says, "Well, yes, you wanted it. But, Isabella, what did you really want? You wanted to be close to him. And you didn't have a father ever, and both of you are pretty much like retarded when it comes to father and daughter relationships. You don't know where you draw the line." And she said, "You need to face this to him. You need to face him with this situation."

**Charlotte:** I went up to my doctor, my psychiatrist, because my twins at the time, from birth to about two had very, very severe medical problems, and I sort of used him as a sounding board. This is what he said to me: "We will handle this in two sessions, and that's it." And I said, "We'll fit that in two sessions?" And he says, "That's it." And when the second session was over, I said, "But this...". And he said,

"You do not have the 'luxury' of working this through. Your children's lives won't allow you." All he did was up my prescription for valium. And when Sarah, [who] ran the rape crisis group that I went to, heard that she like, almost hit the ceiling.

[Regarding her incest] And the doctor blamed me. He said, "When you're 19 years old, and you were in a peignoir set, it's late at night and you invite your cousin to watch television with you...". I says, "A cousin has no right to touch anybody." I said, "I don't care if it was a perfect stranger, he had no right to touch me." And he still blamed me. He said it was my fault. And that's when I went back, wound up back in the hospital because he insisted it was my fault and I got very upset.

Sometimes, religious figures are involved in the counseling process.

**Charlotte:** And I went up to this older Rabbi and I said, "If a woman is raped, and if she goes through incest, family incest," I said, "does she have to forgive the parties that did this?" And he looked at me and he said, "No." And I knew it was okay.

Jean's comment regarding her own reaction to her sexual assault may reflect why survivors do not access public care providers.

I never went to the hospital... and I never went to the police. I never went to counseling. I don't think counseling would have done me much good. I would have just lied to the therapist. Can't give the [others] control. [Instead, Jean began] writing all the... letters to him. So, self-therapy kinds of things, just... getting it out.

### **Significant Others**

The varied responses of others to survivors is not limited to professionals, but can also be found among those individuals the survivor knows. More often, the reactions of the significant others tend to be more negative toward the survivor. This may be due to 1) the inability of the significant other to negotiate the failure of the cultural code and follow cultural victim blaming, or 2) the inability of the others to accept the implications of the roles of survivor and assailant (for greater detail, see

Chapter 9 – Victim Blaming and the Reconstruction of the Cultural Code of

Emotional Expression). These themes can be seen in the women's narratives.

**Carol:** He [her assailant] made sure everybody else knew about it and he'd bring me flowers in school and he'd always try to be at my locker whenever he could and so it was like alotta pressure from the outside and "Why on earth would you wanna get rid of him?" I didn't know how to tell anybody what he was doing to me... it's like I had no words to describe it.

I told my best friend that I had had sex... It wasn't 'till about two years later that I told another friend, that I thought I'd been raped. Um... the way I worded it to a couple people in between if they asked me if I was a virgin or not was, no, I wasn't a virgin, but I didn't really have a choice in the matter. But I don't think I realized that at that point that I could label it rape. I didn't know what rape was.

Well, one friend when I told her I'd had sex, she was all excited for me. So I'd pretended afterwards still to be excited about the idea... um, the other person I told, I was staying the night at her house and she basically just told me to be quiet and she didn't want her parents to hear. I thought she was right in telling me to shut up at the time, so it really didn't change much. I think she was kinda scared of me after that... but it was a point when she was considering having sex with her boyfriend... and she wanted to talk about sex being good not bad, so (pause and shrug) I don't know. Because of the context I told her, it made it [sex] sound way too scary for her. I don't think our friendship was that deep anyway. It just was uncomfortable for her, I think. Or maybe I was scared of her after because she knew and she could tell people. And that could have been it, too.

Carol related that she also told other sexual assault survivors several years later, and found it "normalizing" to know that "it's not just me anymore."

**Jean:** I never told my parents, and I never told anyone in my family... and I think... that was in November, so it wasn't until... **March**, that I even told anybody, that it happened. And when I did, it was sort of tentative, ta' just check things out, and see if... other people thought it was, rape, too, 'cause I didn't want to run around calling this rape, unless I knew... what to call it. And I got mixed, responses, from people... um, mostly as a hypothetical question, if I asked a hypothetical question I got mixed responses, and if I came out and said this happened to me, then people said, "Oh well... you were raped." Which was good but it still took me a few years to actually be able to just say it and... say... to hell with you if you don't believe me...



Um, after it happened... after May, he graduated, from high school, and... I didn't tell my family. I, don't, want, to hurt them. I told my cousin... and, Ann, and, I told, my best friend Kim, and... I told, ah, some people on the track team that I was friends with, close friends with at the time... and, ah, I... told, my, first serious boyfriend... who I met... I told him about what happened... and, cried about it for the first time, when I told him... and, he, cried... and he was very understanding... so, I told him...

**Lisa:** And like, the worst part was when I went back [to her dormitory], I told everyone what happened and no one believed me. And, um, I couldn't tell my parents... I wouldn't have been able to go to school. I couldn't tell anyone, he was like... the love of like... the soccer team. The [soccer] coach knew, the coach found out, treated me different. Well, he didn't find out my story, but he found out, like, that guy's story and he was really good friends with the coach.

And, ah...my mom still doesn't know. [She] told me that if I got raped that would- that's her biggest fear in the world. And, me knowing that, I knew that if I told her at the time, she wouldn't be able to help me, I'd have to help, take care of her, because she'd be so freaked out by it, and um, she told-she-'cause- she told me that she used to lie awa-awake at night just thinking about what would happen if I was like, y'know acquaintance raped. What would she do? What would she do? So, I don't know. Even now I don't think I could tell her, because... I don't think there's any reason that she needs to know, 'cause I think that it would just bother her so much.

And I told, my dad knew, like... I left enough hints that he picked up on it. My mom didn't want to. And he, like, so he knew. And they both read that [an article Lisa wrote]. And I told them that I wrote it for someone else, 'cause what happened, when it finally came out, it's because it happened to one of my friends.

I told my brother. He was mad, he wanted to kill him. Really hurt. Really upset. Um, my brother's not an emotional person... he's really kinda stoic, but, y'know, he cried and cried and cried and cried and he was just like, "I wanna kill him." Glad I told him. We don't talk too much about it though. It's kinda hard. (pause)

I remember, two of my friends from home and my brother came up, and I took 'em to this party. I **knew** they weren't gonna have fun. They were sitting there and they were watching me, we ended up all getting into this fight, and they all sat there, and they were all like, "Who are you?" And I started crying and crying crying, that's when I told them all that my brother already knew, but that's when I told them all that I'd been raped and they just sat there.... They were like, "No more questions. We know why you are who you are now." It was really sad. That was a turning around point. When I had like, two of

my best friends from before this had happened and my brother sitting there going, "Who are you?" And me relating it to the rape.

**Isabella:** [Isabella lied to her mother about her rape] I didn't want her to know, because she would have made it bigger, at that time, a bigger deal than what it actually what it was. I think she would have blamed me for it, and the one thing I didn't want to deal with more, was to have her blame me more for it.

And then after that happened, I was able to tell a few people, but it wasn't anything that I needed to tell everyone. I didn't see the reason to tell that very many people, and I didn't even tell some men that I had relationships with. I saw no purpose in letting them know. I think its because I felt bad about it. It bothered me more. It disturbed me.

[Now] I'm not afraid to tell people about it [her rape]. If I've spoken to someone, especially my father, to even the incident with my father, I can tell close people now. Of course, not another man. I couldn't say that to another man, but my girlfriends, I can do it.

**Charlotte:** I didn't tell my husband. I just told him I didn't feel well, I had a headache, and blah, blah, blah. And finally, he was sitting with this doctor, who is our friend, and he said, "I don't know what's going on with my wife." And he sitting and talking with him I guess what men talk about. And he said, "Well, Henry. What do you expect from her after what happened?" He says, "What happened?" He said, "She never told you?" And he says, "No." So he told him. My husband came home like a roaring bull, and that was six weeks later. Because I was just too afraid.

[Later] My doctor did say to me, "Look at the time period of the rape and you told your husband, and look at the time period of your divorce." It was exactly six months.

I told my children, which people thought that was very wrong for me because my children were 16 at the time. My twins were 16 and my oldest was 19... and they were very understanding. I was really surprised. They were very understanding. Their step-mother was very angry at me for telling them, and I said, "Excuse me, you're not their mother, I am, and I have a right to tell them, and I wish to tell them." The boys, I noticed [during] the time [that] year when they came to visit me, were like, whenever we were walking were like,... very protective of me.

I finally told my best friend... I said to her, "You're my best friend, and I have to tell you something, but I hope you won't turn away if I do." And I told her that I was raped, and she just put her arms around and began to cry, for me. I remember my Rabbi coming to visit me, and he's a young man, and I said to him, "What nice . . . man would want to marry me now." He says, "Oh, about a million or so."

He says, "The rape was not your fault." He says, "Its something you didn't ask for, it was just an attack against you."

[Charlotte told of several friends she told who were all supportive of her.] The more you talk about it, the more you find women who have been raped. Some went for help, and the majority did not. Some of them were able to get through it themselves. Some women still live this. And someone once told me I would get to the point where I could say it was wrong, he had no right to do that to me, I almost died. That I was smart enough to think, he didn't kill me and I got away. And I said, "That day will never come." And that day has come, a long time ago.

**Alice:** I told probably a total of about five friends. I told people at various levels. Some I just gave very general information to, and others I talked about my specific experiences and feelings. [Reactions were] Generally, very shocked, grieved for me, supportive, very affirming in terms of saying they believed me. The friend I have known the longest cried and feels very upset and sad that I'm having to relive all of this, and she's very supportive, also. One person I told said he believed me and was quite supportive for about a year, and then said he talked to some social worker friend of his and that he doesn't think its real. He said its not that I believe you or I don't, I just, I'm not sure, or something. And I was hurt and angry by that and I actually told him you either believe it or you don't. There's no middle ground. If you're not sure you believe it, that means you don't believe it.

Alice's mother and sister refused to accept her accounts of events, her step-father was more accepting and supportive. Alice attributes his differing reaction to

I think because he was not a blood relative and didn't know me during most of those years, and was not related to me, other than having married my mother, did not have relation to the people in my background.

[Alice related that she received a variety of reactions, those friends she told] For instance, people that had had some background in dealing with sexual assault, or people that were closer to me personally, than perhaps some other people. [She did not choose to tell] I had a couple of friends who were more like my mother's age than I was, and I thought culturally they would respond more from her point of view, might be more critical, more judgmental, or less able to handle boundaries and things. Perhaps less honest about where they were coming from.

### ***Confronting the Assailant***

Two of the women I interviewed had the opportunity to confront their assailants. In Lisa's case, her assailant's reaction and the results were negative.

And I went, to like a frat party, and I yelled at him. I got kinda drunk, and I was just like, I'm just gonna yell at him and tell him what he did to me. And I yelled at him in front of like, hundreds of people, and—and he goes, "Don't you have any self respect?" And then he turned around, and he goes, "Yeah, just ask her who was on top." And for the longest time... that just stuck in my head. I was like, it wasn't rape, because I was on top, **even though I wasn't...**

With the encouragement of her counselor, Isabella confronted her father regarding their incestuous relationship. Although her father refused to accept her construction of events, Isabella was able to communicate to him her interpretation of the event and end face-to-face contacts with him.

So I brought it up to him just two years ago. He denied the whole thing. Not that it happened, but denied his intentions. His intentions were, "Well, when you were a little baby, Isabella, I used to put you on my chest. You were naked and I put you on top of my chest and you'd go to sleep on my chest." And I go, "Father, that's fine, but I was only 8–9 months old. You did this to me when I was 17. You knew that I was a virgin. You asked me. You wanted me to touch you. How can you even assume that this was just, that that would have been just a natural thing." I go, "That was sexual, and it was sexual the whole time." And he wouldn't admit to it. And, I don't see him anymore. I only speak to him on the phone. I can't see him.

### **Other Forms of Communication**

In many cases, the women involved in my study not only told others about their experiences, but also expressed them in writing, poetry, and painting. This seemed to be a "safer" environment for their expressions, because they had more control regarding who shared their experiences, while simultaneously expressing

themselves in an external manner. This need for controlling the information is mentioned in Charlotte's and Jean's narratives.

I have included a sample of the women's narratives and writing partially as a response to their requests and partially to allow the reader to gain deeper insight into these women and their experiences. When the narrative reflects the women reading their written expressions, the text is italicized.

**Carol:** Ok, I guess I'm going to read this then (she sniffs) um, *this is a very strange situation that I never expected to have to deal with, waiting in a health center for my close friend Julie to see a gynecologist two weeks after she's been raped brings back too many memories, none of them good. Jon Klien, how strange I don't even know if that's how his name is spelled, I don't even remember clearly what happened that night, just the pain the blood and the disgust with him and myself... ah, rollerskating in Rollerworld, Jon getting mad when I skated with Seth what's-his-name, not even holding hands and discussing girls—other girls on the rink, he said one was about twelve when I thought she looked older... ah, Jon sitting on the outside of the rink whining because he wanted to leave... lying on the back area of the car with the seat down, a big red older car... ah, behind the catholic school in the darkest area of the parking lot, that the priest made fun of years later. (she stopped reading) There was like a lecture at my school... and a catholic priest came in and was making fun of the people who made out in that part of the parking lot and how many he'd caught... (she reads again) um, that the priest made fun of years later, or was it centuries later? Why couldn't he have caught us that night?... ah, Blood on that piece of paper, lotsa it, Jon throwing it outta the car, crying on the way home when I tried to redo my make-up, um, blood on my underwear, cream colored stretch old lady underwear... throwing them out, looking at my parents, second time lying outside Town Park the rubber breaking and throwing it aside, me crying again as he scares me about pregnancy at the Dairy Queen... telling me how he'll marry me now and take care of the baby... and telling me how much he loves me... and I feel so bad for Julie and I can't share her pain. That's really all I remember I don't want to bring any of it back so I can empathize with her... It sounds bad I know, but I don't want to remember and relive the pain, it scares me... reminds me of how venerable I was and how much I've changed, how hardened I've become against most emotions, makes me question whether or not I can even feel anything really anymore...*

**Jean:** And that's when I really came to terms with what had happened, was my freshman and sophomore year of c-college, and I wrote a lot about it and I wrote a couple of letters to saying goodbye to him and wrote some poetry saying goodbye to him and... did a lot to purge him out of my life.

[Do you still have what you wrote?] Yes! They're all part of my journal, and the poetry that I have, um, is all in my poetry thing. I didn't destroy any of that. That's really... weird, 'cause usually if I break up with somebody I destroy everything that they gave me, but this particular stuff that I wrote, (her voice drops) has... I can't destroy.

Then I'd take these to, Oh, my god, my friends are so wonderful! I'd take these little things to my friends and I'd say "Hi. You have to listen to this." And I'd read them these page and a half of terrible horrible things that happened to me. And they'd just be like (she sits with her mouth open and a look of amazement and disbelief on her face) "Wow. Thanks." (she laughs) They're so wonderful 'cause, I did it to like, eight or nine people! Who I would just pick a certain person and I'd say, "Hi. You are my... you're my listener for the moment." And... the story changed... depending on how-how bad a mood I was in or, um, what particular details I was focusing on or-or what angle I decided to look at the story from. And, ah, I'd just take it to these people and tell 'em. I tell them, you know, that I was raped, and ... that's how I deal with it, just telling my story, I guess. I told my story a lot.

This is ah... this is from my journal. This is from my journal and this is written my first semester at college, so, a year and a half after it happened. And I did go back through my journal to see if I had written down [information about the rape], and of course, I hadn't. It's like very cryptic little messages, but nothing that actually indicates anything. So... this was written September 5, 1990. Ok, do you what, do you know the book, When Rabbit Howls? The book about the woman with multiple personalities. She had like 95 personalities, and it was a result of incest. It's a very disturbing book. That's what I'd been reading.

*When Rabbit Howls is the name of the book. It is strange how much I feel when I read this book. For one thing, I can't get enough of the sexual references. Only recently have I been able to admit this need to read, see, know, and sometimes even desire to experience what it is about RAPE that bothers me. See, I even capitalize it in the middle of a sentence. There is no denying now that I was raped. The one question that I had remaining was dissolved upon walking into class. You see, I was always wondering if I didn't somehow deserve what happened. I lay there with him in the truck, I can still see the dashboard, I remember the moonlight and the way the truck windows steamed up, and I remember the vinyl seats and the awareness of his*

body, naked. I remember the feel of his penis moving within the perimeters of my genital area. I remember how, I remember being curious, and yet frightened. I remember him pushing, and extreme pain. I remember wondering how far in he had gotten. I remember him holding me to him. I remember I had my underwear on the whole time. I remember looking for blood afterwards, and finding none, and hoping alternately that I was and wasn't pregnant. I remember pretending to myself nothing bad had happened, and laying in his arms, marveling at both his and my naked body laying side by side. I remember shame and feeling dirty and I remember hoping that he would "make it all better." I remember pushing out my nagging suspicions and two weeks later categorizing my emotions not to feel pain. I remember feeling violated and devastated. It WAS rape. I did not want to go all the way. He did so without my permission. I sit here on my bed hoping Pete will walk in, or Mary, so I can tell someone that I have... so I can tell someone that I have them, and if... so, I, can tell someone and have them affirm my thoughts. Once when I first started my journal, I wanted it to be published years after I was gone. Now I'm not so sure, I just personalized it beyond the scope of my barriers. It is both sad and strange that Jonathan Alan Smith was the reason for starting this book, and only now, countless entries later, can I admit on paper and to myself what it is that he did to me. He stole from me an experience that I deemed to be the most important in my life (sexual love, intercourse). With one thrust, he reduced me to a scared and unstable little girl again, a little girl who desperately needed love and trust. The ironic thing is that he showed me how to trust again. When I decided to get intimate, not sexual – as I NEVER had that decision carried out as I wanted, Jon had opened up my walls and looked inside. He knew the torment I had felt in grade school. He knew how scared I was. He knew my vulnerabilities. He showed me that men felt that way also. He made me believe that men had feelings. I started to trust, I actually felt safe when I was with him. For the first time since first grade, Jesus that's a long time, I actually felt some confidence in my life. I wrote a lot about my so-soul shattering like glass when I felt him dump me, right after "the act." It fragmented into a million mindless pieces... pieces it has taken a year and a half to heal. No, two years. And more love and energy than any person should have to give. J.

It is curious that the person that I want to tell most at the moment is the one I can not tell, actually there are three. I want to tell Jack, but I can not because he is already hurt, and can probably bear no more. Although I know he would for me, I don't want to put him through that. Pete came in, and I went to dinner. I couldn't spoil her mood by verbalizing the sick feelings that I feel. I also want to tell Steve. Steve, because I want, I need for him to sympathize with my

*fears. These are my two closest friends. I do not wish to hurt them as I was hurt.*

(long pause) And I wrote that and then afterwards, after dinner apparently, I did go find Steve and I told him all about it. Shows my way of coping, that's all.

This is—this is a poem that I wrote... fourth of December 1990, and it's called, "Farewell." And I'd like to read it for you.

*If you hold my hand, how can you hurt me?  
 If you touch my face and look into my eyes...  
 If you cause the pain, how come you take none?  
 If you are responsible, walk away...  
 If you knew the truth, why did you lie?  
 If you have been there before to feel the void...  
 If you care, why did you press?  
 If you knew I was trusting and unstable...  
 If you called yourself my friend, then why?  
 If you searched my soul and saw me unmasked...  
 If you give yourself, does that make it all right?  
 If you love me...  
 If you strike, are you aware of where the whip hits?  
 If you care to know...  
 If you wanted love, why didn't you stay?  
 If you wanted my hurt, you have it...  
 If you deny responsibility, can you?  
 If you play me for a fool...  
 If I fall to pieces, are you here to pick up the pieces?*

*No.*

*But I don't want you anyway.*

And it's dedicated "To Jon Smith, putting away the pain and betrayal at last." Poem number one-fifty... got a hundred fifty-six typed.

**Lisa:** That's when I wrote that [a year and a half after her sexual assault].

*This is an essay for everyone. It is for the man who raped me, for all of the men capable of rape, for all of the victims and for all others so that they may understand.*

*I want him to realize and feel the pain that he caused me. I am different now, less naive, not as trusting and empty of innocence. I lost the ability to feel love. He stole that from me.*



*Love is an innocence. It is a blinding passion. He forced me to open my eyes. Rape is violence, pure and hostile. To me, sex is synonymous with violence. It cannot be an expression of love.*

*I feel like I have no control over my life. If I could not stop him, who can I stop? My life has changed course.*

*I refer to the person who I was as "she." This is how I deal with the pain -- I separate it. I created a new identity for myself, now I want "her" back. I am tired of running from her. I do not want to keep changing: cutting my hair, scarring my body and growing further from myself.*

*Inside there is a chill. I have distanced myself from the whole ordeal. The words I choose suggest surrealism. Sometimes I feel like it never really happened. In a way, this is true. I am writing about a girl who does not exist. A girl without a heart cannot survive. I have created a new person. I want her back. I need my heart.*

*The nightmares exist and in them, I remember her. I think that if I can reclaim her, nothing will be different. This is false. In some way, her heart has been ruined. It is time to replace mine. The innocence is gone, but maybe I can get some love back.*

*A person's ability to love is essential to survive. It is not something that can be given. Once taken, it can never fully come back. When a rape occurs, a soul has been stolen. Only gods and devils should have that power.*

Lisa submitted this essay to the paper under a false name because she was afraid that they would publish her name despite her request for anonymity. The paper chose to withhold Lisa's name per her request.

**Charlotte:** I did, for my therapist, paint a picture, because I do paint. I was on the ground in blue, and there was just this big black figure standing over me holding a knife with blood dripping off of it. And I had always covered it. I did not know she [the young daughter of a Rabbi and his family Charlotte was living with] saw it. And she said, "What was the picture that you painted? What was that about?" I said, "Oh, it was probably something in like in my monster books. Probably something that I did." That was the scene that I feel depicting my rape. I never knew she saw it, though.

***Summary***

In their explicit communication of their experiences of sexual assault, the women's narratives reflect a variety of responses from professionals and significant others. In the two cases of confronting the assailant, the assailants openly denied any inappropriate behavior on their behalf and rejected the survivor's definition of the events. Through the use of writing, poetry, and painting, the women in my study were able to explicitly communicate their experiences with less concern for others' reactions since they could have greater control over who had access to these works.

The choice to engage in explicit communication of their sexual assault experiences is a universal event among the women in my study. Yet, who they communicated to, how they communicated their experiences, and the reactions of those receiving the information are culturally influenced. The results of this communication influenced the women's constructions of their idiosyncratic sexual assault experiences.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **BEING ALONE AND THE INTERNAL EXPERIENCE**

Immediately following their assault, the women in my study described experiencing a period of time that was characterized by solitude seeking and internal disruption. Without a cultural code of emotional expression to provide understanding and meaning of the trauma of the assault, the women related they withdrew from others in an attempt to understand their emotions, reactions, and the events of the assault. While relating information about their experiences during this stage, the women expressed universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes.

One constant among all humans is the fact that we all experience life through our bodies. This has caused some physical/biological anthropologists to describe culture as "a biological phenomenon, a product of the evolutionary process" (Blacking, 1977:8). In this manner of thinking, culture can be seen as "... a generalized state of fellow-feeling that can be perceived through the sensations [of the body]" while "... nonverbal forms of interaction are fundamental" (Blacking, 1977:13).

Culture and the body interact in that

there is every reason to think that the social determinations attached to a determinate position in social space tend, through the relationship to one's own body, to shape the dispositions constituting social identity (ways of walking, speaking, etc.) and probably also sexual dispositions as well. (Bourdieu, 1990:71)

Further, it has been asserted that "nothing is more essentially transmitted by a social process of learning than sexual behavior, and this of course is closely related to morality", a purely cultural construct (Mauss as quoted in Douglas, 1982:65).

Mary Douglas argues that "... there are no natural symbols; they are all social" (Douglas, 1982:xix-xx). Symbols are culturally constructed, and therefore the perception and interpretation of symbols is also culturally determined (Douglas, 1982). Additionally,

everything is tinged with imposed significance, and fellowmen, like social groups, moral obligations, political institutions, or ecological conditions are apprehended only through a screen of significant symbols which are the vehicles of their objectification, a screen that is therefore very far from being neutral with respect to their 'real' nature." (Geertz, 1973:367)

Thus, through interaction, that by its very nature involves communication and symbols, "... the identity of the individual will be refracted to him by the concrete symbols of his group" (Douglas, 1982:25). In this manner, "rather than creating a problem [of identity] to be solved by his own unique investigation", culture acts to provide an external means of attributing one's identity to one's self (Douglas, 1982:25).

While symbols communicate cultural information to the individual, "... the structure of symbols must be able to express something relevant to the [culture]" (Douglas, 1982:38). In other words, while the individual interprets cultural symbols, the participants in the culture must also be able to interpret some of the individual's symbols. The cultural use, manipulation, and meaning attributed to each symbol by participants will vary and give insight into the cultural structure and regional variances in interpretations of cultural values. Thus, within a single culture "... there are

different kinds of insensibility to symbols and different powers of response" (Douglas, 1982:18).

Geertz and Levy have focused their work on the public and private aspects of behavior and emotional dynamics, and the division between public surfaces and private behavior (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Myers observes

that shame objectifies the strain between personal needs and group needs. Shame is a 'metasentiment defined only in relation to other emotions and evaluating the self as a totality with respect to positively valued qualities. It coordinates the demands of relatedness with personal autonomy.' (Myers as quoted in Middleton, 1989:191)

In the communication of the cultural code of emotional expression through symbols and rituals, participants are guided in the expression of emotions and provided with meaning and an understanding of events. It is at this point that the cultural code of emotional expression begins to fail in the case of sexual assault. As reflected in the narratives, the sexual aspect of the crime of sexual assault leaves the survivors morally questionable and in marginal position within society. Due to the failure of the cultural code to provide a definition and meaning to the events, the survivors of sexual assault and other cultural participants are left without a means to negotiate and understand the events surrounding sexual assault. In this situation, the survivors react to and express their emotions in universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic ways.

Among the women in my study, there exist similarities or universalities among their feelings (i.e. shame, guilt, fear, numb, etc.), but their expressions of these emotions varied. This is not to say that there were no similarities in expression, rather that the expressions were not always consistent, having idiosyncratic and/or cultural

influences. For example, Carol's "using" men and Jean's redefinition of her sexuality are idiosyncratic responses; Isabella's strong "hispanic" value for "pleasing men," and Carol's and Jean's value for virginity are culturally influenced responses. Based on these varied findings, it is my assertion that the trauma of the experience of sexual assault creates "universal" emotions among the survivors (Brownmiller, 1975; Fairstein, 1993; Winkler, McMullen and Wininger, 1994). These emotions are typically expressed in cultural ways, in that the dominant culture influences the survivors' emotional expression through values and stereotypes. When the cultural code of emotional expression fails, the women's expressions become idiosyncratic.

### **Universal Themes**

Universal themes are expressed in each of the narratives and are concerned with emotional responses to trauma. These themes are grouped as avoidance, feelings about self and events, and sexuality.

#### ***Avoidance***

Avoidance behaviors occur when conflict or the possibility of conflict is present (Greene and Ephross, 1991). In the context of sexual assault survivors, the prospect of confronting the failure of the cultural code is an occasion for conflict to arise. The length of time that these behaviors persist varies and can become a permanent part of the narrative.

Among the women of my study, attempts at avoidance include feeling emotionally numb, feeling that the events are unreal or dream-like, withdrawal from

others and/or activities, avoiding the geographical area of the assault, denial, and/or a combination of these strategies.

Carol relates she

went through a really long stage where I felt very very numb... like I wasn't sure I could feel much of anything.

She is still effected in this manner.

I very rarely reach any great emotional intensity. I mean, even when I get pissed off, its like, "Oh well, I'm pissed off." I don't know. It just seems like its so hard to reach emotional intensity. It takes a lot of energy or something for me to get really angry, or really sad, or really happy, so I don't. And the anger still can come without me having to work towards it. It just seemed like I used to be able to get a lot more invested in things emotionally, and people, and ideas. And when I do have those peaks, they scare the shit out of me and I usually run. Because they're rare. Either that or else I keep trying to repeat them.

Jean relates that the most frustrating aspect of her assault is the dream-like quality of her memories of the events.

I think it would make it easier for me if I knew exactly what date it was... but I've never been able to figure... it's somehow distorted in my mind... Just so I could finally bury it. So I could say, well, this day was the day I was raped. And, go from there. To me, that makes it seem like it never really happened... **and it's infuriating, to me, to not know if it was real or not, to not know, i-it all seems like a dream**, now, but it was very real at the time, and other people will... collaborate that I was... distressed at this time and that I told people about it, and a lot of people know about it but... it's a dream, it's ... not real (her voice is barely audible, long pause)

Lisa found herself reacting to the intense emotional content of her assault.

I don't know, it was a really hard thing, it was... it was **really** scary... (she speaks in a pained voice) I just... I don't know like when I think about it, it's almost like it was a dream, and it didn't happen to me... And... it-I kept it internalized for so long that, it really changed me a lot.

In an attempt to avoid having to confront her assailant and her assault, Carol, "kinda like withdrew from the people I had to see every day." Jean stated that the biggest change in her life was that

.. um, I don't trust people, as much, **men**, I don't trust men, **big men** especially... all men... don't trust them... at all... um, and that's something I've never really been able to shake.

Lisa commented that she no longer trusts men.

But, there's a part that hasn't changed and that's like, the love part's, I won't let any guy get close.

Additionally, Charlotte says

there have been other side affects, too. I'm not as trusting, as I said, of men. I'm very suspicious of men, even when they praise me. I have very little patience with male chauvinist pigs, and male chauvinists in general.

By losing their ability to trust others, Jean, Lisa, and Charlotte withdrew from close relationships with friends.

Isabella relates that about one year after her assault she began to date one man in order to withdraw from dating.

I kind of attached myself to him [in order to keep] me safe from going out with other people.

Similarly, Alice commented that she sought someone to protect her from her assailants. By marrying, she was able to withdraw from her family, the source of her assaults.

It was kind of impulsive. I think, you know, we were engaged for a week and then we eloped and got married. We stayed legally married for two years. We stayed in the relationship for nine months. In retrospect, I think beyond just the peer pressure to get married, knowing what I know now, that I was probably in a big hurry to get



married in order to be protected from possible return of my abusers, since I was living in the dorms and it was coming time for me to leave.

This was all unconscious, and an unconscious level, because I didn't know any of this stuff then. But I think that was in large part my reason for getting married. To have someone to protect me and to rescue me and keep me safe from abuse. The irony of it was that this person, the young man that I married, in addition to being an alcoholic, was also a batterer.

Lisa avoided the geographical area, college, of her assault as much as possible.

I wasn't around at all, then. I went like everywhere I could. I just- I **left** this area as much as I possibly could.

Lisa also tells that as she fought to remain in denial, she stopped sleeping and eating, and had unexplained fainting spells.

Similar to other women in my research, Charlotte's first reaction to her assault was to deny the memories of the assault.

When I got into bed was, "This is not true. This never happened to you. This is some sort of story that you're over-active imagination is playing on you." When I got underneath those covers, I shook and I cried, and I knew I was raped, because I was still in denial.

Lisa relates she was depressed and numb during much of the three years following her assault. When she was unable avoid the geographical area of the assault by transferring to another college, she said

it was just- it all got kinda weird and muddled. Like... I remember things, but... I don't. I feel like there's a point of my life that just kinda... went by, when all that happened. And, um... I think it was all really symptomatic, to that... (voice volume is louder in the next section) I really have to say I know... someone probably who hadn't gone through it or hasn't talked to people would say, "Well, y'know, I doubt it could just be a **rape** that made that happen." But I-I really think it was, I-I really... I really think it had to be because... I was so focused so goal oriented, so... I had convictions that I believed in (voice drops to end of sentence) and I lost them all.

### *Feelings About Self and Events*

The women in my study identified numerous, intense emotions they experienced after being sexually assaulted. These feelings centered on their feelings toward themselves (dirty, soiled, used, unworthy of love, cheap, sleazy, easy, slutty, and whorish), toward the assault and surrounding events (shame, guilt, pain, and embarrassment), and toward their assailants and others (anger, rage, and hate).

Carol related that after her assault, she felt "a lot of embarrassment and guilt" and resisted labeling the experience as rape because she, "felt like it was my fault, that I'd done something, that I'd made him mad by roller skating with this other guy... that it was something that I had caused." Carol said she felt, "Really dirty, really disgusting. (pause) Um... I was really guilty about the whole thing."

Jean was able to discuss her reactions and feelings after her sexual assault in great detail.

He... took something that felt good... um, because sexual feelings to me do feel good... did feel good, and he made me feel like... I had no... say in this, they weren't positive anymore, they were just... shameful, dirty, guilty, wrong, um... they were... um... cheap!... like I was an object, and that I think is what rape is, is, basically, to get to a woman... is to treat her like she is an object—an object. And the pain does not go away, immediately... the physical pain does not go away. The psychological pain takes a long time to go away, and, um... because it is such a... sexual crime, even though it's a violent crime, it's also a sexual crime. And they, it can re-occur, because your body keeps your memory of the sensations and dreams and things of that nature. So it's... it just... permeates your whole life.

Jean further identified a number of feelings and associated behaviors she had related to her assault. The most significant were: hate, denial, withdrawing from contact with

others, distrust, and the need for control. When speaking about her assailant, Jean indicated that

I hate him... there're certain people who were just terrible to me, and I just don't care about them, and I feel good about that. I feel good about being angry... anger is good...

Lisa relates that immediately following her assault, she felt as though she was, "really sleazy, I'm really easy" and she

was having a hard time believing that ... it actually happened and that it wasn't my fault, and that it wasn't like something that I could have stopped and it **was rape**.

At the time of her assault, Isabella related that she felt that

this is something that probably I deserved. I didn't even think of rape. It was just like, well, I'm here. He's here. He's on top of me, let him get it over with. And I felt dirty right afterwards.

After her assault, Isabella began to wonder if she "was like a whore, or a slut, or something," and she felt, "shameful [and] slutty."

I guess I felt... the word dirty just comes to me, but I just felt soiled; like used. Like all that I really was, was something for some guy to get off on, and I wasn't all that important, really. Until that moment, I probably felt... until all that happened, I think I felt like this guy really liked, you know, could like me, and that we'd like each other. But it wasn't that. I mean, what he was basically doing was looking for somebody to sleep with.

Due to the fact that Charlotte sublimated her sexual assaults for many years, when her memories came back she felt that she was "having the feelings that I should have had when I was much younger." She described sexual assault and the associated emotions as

it just rips away your self-esteem, your self-respect. It rips out the very fabric of you as a person. You feel very dirty, very used, you

don't feel good any more. You don't feel worthy of anybody's love, or who could love me now, or who would want to love me now?

Anger and pain are major emotional themes throughout Charlotte's narrative.

I was angry. I was more than angry. It was so violent. It was rage; it was pain. It was waking up hysterically, having flashbacks of your rapist standing over you; not trusting men; and angry at men; mouthing back to men, which is nothing new for me, but really, I mean, really giving them hell. I wanted the world to know just how angry I was, because it hurt and I was tired of believing that my rapist was in my closet at night and waking up and seeing him stand over me, or... I would turn around and see him and I'd start running and screaming. And then he'd disappear. The nurses explained that was a flashback. And I was tired of having him haunting me. I still have flashbacks, every now and then. When I least expect it, he just comes walking into my life. And I'm also very angry because I'm angry at people because people are so stupid sometimes [believing rape myths].

After her assault, Charlotte said that she was intolerant of sexual overtones and behaviors from men.

I just hated men, and any man who would give me a wink or make a wise crack, or tap my rear end without my permission, he'd get smacked.

Alice explained the reasons for her reactions, in that

I have a lot of feelings, shame based feelings and fear feelings about my femininity, and I don't think this was a conscious choice, but thinking back on it, I think I just did not want to appear feminine, or I had a fear of being... that somebody would want to go out with me, or have a relationship with me.

### *Sexuality*

Due to the sexual aspect of sexual assault, the women described changes in their sexuality. Lisa, Charlotte, and Alice describe becoming disinterested in sex and related intercourse to their assaults. As Lisa commented, because of her assault

all of the sudden, sex had become synonymous with violence, and there's no way to separate it, it's the same act. And like there's different ways of doing it, and—but it's still fundamentally the same act, and unless you can put the love into it, I couldn't separate it... at all, in my mind. And, ah, I really didn't have like sexual relations that much, when I did, I was **really** distant, like took myself away. And even now, even so much later, I haven't like had sex and been there. My mind's gone... so far away, I mean, in a way I haven't been in love since then.

Jean, Carol, and Isabella reacted in a different manner. Instead of avoiding their sexuality, these women became focused on it as a form of emotional expression of their assaults. Jean describes the process and rationale for this reaction in detail.

So, I think that... if anything appearance wise, it was really important that... people told me that I looked good... And, I didn't dress, but not slutty, couldn't be slutty, but I had to be... looking good. And, ahm, to some extent sexy, but not... too sexy. And it was this really weird categorization of clothing that I wore then, that I wanted people to recognize that I was a sexual person, but... that was it. Y'know, like "Oh, you look really good!"... but... that was it. (she pauses to remember, lets out a bitter sad laugh and shakes her head)

Right after the rape, I went the opposite way, like you hear sometimes of women who just get overly promiscuous. Well, I was never promiscuous, because that was just not... that wasn't what I wanted to do. But I would be... super-friendly. And, um... provocative... kinda thing. Um, in order to... be seen as... valued, or validated. I needed to be seen as sexual. I needed to be seen as sexy. So, it was very important to me what men thought. And that men thought that I was pretty. And that men wanted to have sex with me, that was very important to me, even though I was never... so I guess, some people would call it being a tease, but I don't think I ever lead them on, I just... I just was very... provocative. Very ah... and that lasted for a couple of years. And then it, and then I guess I evened out. (long pause)

I never really trusted any of those men that I was trying to get interested in me. (pause and short laugh) So I would never do anything with them, because I just didn't care. It was just like, "Ok, you think I'm attractive, you can go away now. You just validated me, you can go away." So... at the same time, always hated myself for doing that. (pause) It was almost like if somebody did notice... I would feel terrible, I would feel... cheap. I guess, like I was prostituting myself. It

was really not a very pleasant feeling... all things considered. (long pause)

Related to this sexualization, Jean stated that

I went through this whole phase where I would... shocking people, shocking people was a lot of fun. It was, it was like very good for me, y'know to be able to completely surprise people. So, I went through this whole phase where I would be um, which isn't so much a phase, because I am—I'm not a particularly modest person. Ok. But, it was like a challenge, at that point in my life, to see how many people I could be naked in front of and not be very upset about. Y'know so like I would change with other people in the room. And it wasn't that um, the purpose was to make those people be uncomfortable. The purpose was not because I am comfortable with my body, it was because... I'm trying to shock these people there. Which was all part of that whole... sexualization of it all.

When asked to relate these actions to her assault and her emotions, Jean said that

I was actually, a lot of it... had to do with other things as well, but to some extent it had ta'... do with alotta my trust issues... feeling good about my self respect and... respect and trust and honesty... control... control (this word was a barely audible whisper) Because I was defining myself as a sexual being. In a lot of ways, when Jon raped me he was saying to me that the only thing that I was good for was sex because he spent so much time building up my trust. And when he broke that trust, it was like saying, "Oh, see, the only reason why anybody ever wants to close to you is so that they can get at your body." So I said, "Okay, fine. Well, I'm just going to be a very sexually desirable person, since that's what people want anyways. I'm going to put forth what they want, and that way I can know exactly what I'm getting, what they're getting." And in some sense, when I started to come to terms with myself and my identity as a person, when I started to recover, then I stopped going for that sexual attitude. Stopped dressing constantly perfect. Stopped putting my chest out when I knew people were looking at me. Stopped swinging my hips when I was walking down the sidewalk. I stopped flirting so much, feeling like I had to be overly friendly, sit next to people, lead people on and stuff like that. I stopped thinking of my body as the first category and started thinking of other things like my job, my interests, my values, my intelligence. Things like that. I started to value things than "My, what perky breasts I have! What a nice wiggle I have. Oh, look, see, he's looking at me."

It is vague. Its very hard to describe, but a lot of it has to do with that whole sexual, sexual tone to it [sexual assault]. Even though it was a crime of control or power, its still got that sexual element to it.

Similarly, Carol related that she first translated her feelings about herself and the assault into promiscuous behaviors.

I think I felt more comfortable sleeping with guys I didn't know. I didn't have to deal with them afterwards, that they didn't know me that well. I guess I just didn't want to be considered trash.

Carol related her increased sexual behaviors as a form of emotional expression. She felt that

I was always out to prove something... prove that I could get this guy or that guy or the other guy interested in me. And they'd always ask me out, and I'd turn `em down (she laughed).

After her rape, Isabella became promiscuous for about a year, but then began dating one man.

### **Cultural Themes**

The cultural themes found in the narratives include defining the experience and culturally linked values. Each of these areas influenced the women's immediate emotions and emotional expressions.

#### ***Defining the Experience***

Every culture contains some information regarding sexual conduct. To begin to understand their experience, the survivors of sexual assault consult their culture's definitions of proper and improper sexual conduct. According to the women of my study, the American culture's definitions of proper and improper sexual conduct is

problematic when survivors attempt to internally mediate the assault experience, indicating that the experience of sexual assault is more than a definitional challenge.

Carol was able to label her experience as rape,

but there's always that, the wondering of how you were putting yourself in the same position again if you act that way again type of thing, like this little stuff.

Jean focused on the "taking" aspect and her value for remaining a virgin until marriage. She defined the events as

this taking, taking something that wasn't... given and that's a big part of rape. Um... and that's why I-I regret it, that's why it-it meant so much, was that he took something from me that I had a very clear value on. I did not want to have sex until I was married. And he took that choice away from me.

Charlotte defined rape as

rape is not an act of sex; it's an act of violence and power. And that's how they do it, by use of sex, but, that's not the whole thing. The thing is the power. They wanted me to cry, they wanted me to scream, they wanted me to plead.

Although Lisa defined her assault as

where he took my self respect, he took my, um, confidence, he took my self worth, and um, he took, y'know, he took away like my ability to trust men.

she is has not fully accepted the label of rape. Lisa attributes her resistance the label

so that, the full force of it doesn't hit me. Um... I think if it did hit me I'd feel a lot better about it. Because, in a part of my mind I still think, "Well, maybe I was like, the-a bad girl, or maybe I, did something wrong and..." I don't know. There's a part of me that doesn't want to believe that I'm that vulnerable. My-my personality's a very strong personality, I'm very in control, and part of me doesn't wanna believe that I could be that out of control. So maybe, I guess those things, I don't know. I-I think if I could consciously know... then, alotta things would change. Then I could, y'know... the full impact of it, would be right there.



Unlike Lisa, Isabella found that by labeling her experience as rape

it kind of, it helped to solidify what had happened to me. That I was able to label it and that I could stop blaming myself, and stop saying it was my fault.

### *Culturally Linked Values*

An individual's value system is linked to her/his culture. Cultural values provide the members of the culture with a framework of "right" and "wrong." Although values are transmitted in different manners, two of these routes, religion and family, are mentioned by the women in my study. Unfortunately, cultural values can conflict, creating a point of failure in the cultural code of emotional expression.

Carol and Jean related that they were raised in religious households. Both of these women held a strong value related to their religious upbringing of remaining virgins until they were married. Through sexual assault, Carol and Jean had this value violated and taken from them because losing one's virginity can only happen once. Both women describe feeling guilt for losing their virginity and anger at their assailants for forcibly taking it. Carol and Jean relate struggling with religious values that became contradictory after experiencing sexual assault: the value for remaining a virgin until marriage, and the value for forgiving the assailant to attain salvation. For these women, their dilemma was solved by renouncing their religious beliefs.

Isabella attributes her sexual values to her ethnic identity and family of origin. She relates the value for pleasing men to her hispanic upbringing.

To please a man ... makes me feel good. What it does, it validates my femininity. It validates my sexuality.

Isabella relates having contradictory feelings and expressions the morning after her assault. These contradictory feelings reflect dual cultural constructs or values of sex as positive (i.e. reproduction, enjoyable, intimate) and sex as negative (i.e. danger, prostitution, illegitimacy). Isabella relates that

he dropped off and I went home, and I remember there was a part of me that felt kind of elated in a sense that, "God, its been two years and this man found me attractive, and I had sex with this guy." God, you know, something kind of neat about it. But yet there was a part of me that felt dirty and felt... I mean, it was always two sides. Its always been, most of my life two sides fighting with me, the evil and the good. And I remember getting home and we had Max, our dog, and I ran to my dog. Ran and put my arms around his neck and started crying, both out of like, yes, finally, men find me attractive; but, God, this was sick. This felt really icky, but yet I liked knowing that I'm attractive again to men.

Charlotte chooses to hide her feelings, because she is afraid that she would not be able to control her emotional expressions, and because

I think I was afraid of crying. I was raised that crying was a weakness. It's only in the past, I would say six or seven years, I have been able to cry. My biggest fear is that I will start crying and I'll never stop. And I know that's not true because I have cried, and I have cried for a long time and that it does stop. But that's my one big fear. But the biggest fear is [not controlling] the anger.

After examining the information she has gathered from her experience and the experiences of others, Charlotte maintains that, "No one wants to admit that they were raped."

### **Idiosyncratic Themes**

Without the assistance of the cultural code of emotional expression, the women found their own means of expression. These idiosyncratic themes are shown to vary

with each individual. In addition to the idiosyncratic expressions, the women's narratives describe two areas of expression, physical expression and revenge, that are common among the women but manifest themselves in different manners.

### *Carol*

Carol indicated that because of her relationship with her brother who had been physically abusive to her, she had been "always, like, really self conscious about my body." Carol admitted her experiences with her brother influenced her relationship with Jon. For example, Carol related she altered her appearance to please Jon, but after her assault and break-up with Jon, Carol changed her cosmetic style and colors of clothing "back to normal."

Carol also admits that after her assault, she began "using" men and sex to "get what I wanted."

I remember using a lot of guys, as far as like making them pay for stuff I wanted, taking me where I wanted. I can honestly say most of the time I was not without a boyfriend. I became more sexually active than I think I would have been. And, I admit I used sex... a lot, instead of just... having sex with someone who was a partner, for love reasons, no, I used it. I could probably get away with saying that I was looking for something... and thinking 'cause that was, because that was what Jon wanted in the relationship, that was what all guys wanted, and to keep the guy I'd have sex with him...

Once a good student, Carol's grades dropped in college as she became more involved in trying to understand and attribute meaning to her experience. As Carol became more aware of sexual assault issues and prevalence and said she reacted by becoming protective of her friends.

I think I became really protective of my friends, wanted to make sure they weren't hurt. So it [sexual assault] seemed to be a common trend around people I knew... and I kept wanting to protect them and make them better. I think I still am protective of my friends to a certain extent. I don't want any of them really to get hurt. I don't want anything bad to happen to anybody.

### *Jean*

Like Carol, Jean also became protective of her friends after her assault. During the following summer and fall, after her assailant had graduated, Jean said

I basically killed him off, in my mind, I went through this whole elaborate psychological process where he was **dead, he was just dead, gone, buried, erased from memory.**

When her assailant visited their high school the following fall, Jean reported that she, "basically had a mini-nervous break-down" and was forced to cope with the fact that her assailant was still alive. To avoid giving her assailant further "power" over her, Jean related that she refused to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

I just didn't, I didn't want anything to do with him. So I figured if I found out, I'd have to tell him, so he'd get checked. I just don't want to tell him. I wouldn't go because it had to do with him. I don't think it would have bothered me, except that it had to do with **him. HIM.** I don't want to know if I got it from **him**, and he was the only person I could've gotten it from. So... it was very upsetting. (pause) Twisted stuff. I was just so bent at just getting him out of my life completely, that to actually acknowledge that it could've happened, to go and get tested specifically because this happened, would be giving him too much damn power! And I wasn't gonna do it. I was not gonna do it, even if it meant... hurting myself in the process. I just wasn't going to give him anymore power.

When she began attending college, Jean said she was "super-vigilant, wouldn't-go-anywhere-alone-at-night-without-an-escort." Jean also began to re-examine her concepts regarding sexually related topics.

I started to think about... sex a lot more and what sex meant, and sexuality, and sexual orientation, and sexually transmitted diseases, and, ah, sex leading to reproduction, and--and things of, just lots of sex things and, um... I've always been obsessed with since I was about twelve, thirteen or so... whenever puberty hit. So, but I started to think about values and morals and things of that nature and decided that... (she sighs) since I had renounced religion... I didn't really understand what the big pull was to wait for marriage anymore.

Issues of control and trust moved to the forefront of Jean's experience during her first year of college. She expressed these emotions through several avenues: using "mind games," "testing" individuals, pretending to be brave, disclosing information to avoid being hurt by it later, seeking physical attention, endangering her safety in social situations that "could be misunderstood and something could happen," and attempting to "out-run" depression by eating sugary foods. All of these behaviors left Jean feeling ashamed, depressed, and/or cheap. Jean also coped with concentration difficulties and panic attacks related to her assault throughout her early college attendance. Jean admits that these issues are still important to her, as indicated by her comment

I still keep tabs on him [her assailant]... to this day, it's been seven years.

In retrospect, Jean realizes she

made this distinction in my mind between my ah, my psychological self and my physical self. And I didn't really care much about what happened to my physical self. I just... so long as nobody figured out what my psychological self was doing. And I had to integrate those two, eventually. (she laughs) No small feat.

Jean related that she considers herself "lucky" that her assault had not been "worse," though she is surprised that she never wrote about her assault in her journal.

For all intensive purposes, I, was, gone. I, write, everything in my journal there is no mention of this, in my journal at all, until, [years later]. There's no mention of... the rape, there's no mention of... any feelings I had about, losing my virginity, there's no mention of, um, who I told. I told my cousin, there's no mention of it... um, I just retreated into myself and, [as far as] the rest of the world is concerned, I'm functioning and acting normally, but I just... stopped... thinkin' about it...

Um, I think that... having... not written about it, indicated to me that it was very... distressing to me... [it] change in my, the way I view the world.

### *Lisa*

As a woman who best expresses herself in writing, Lisa said she turned to physical expressions of her emotions. She notes that her physical expressions were important, "Even more so, [because] at that time I couldn't write."

### *Isabella*

Isabella related that she has fought with her weight all her life and was "slender and attractive" at the time of her assault. Following her assault, Isabella reported that she had her "first depression episode" and began counseling. She relates that at the time she, "would do anything to be overweight again, because at least I was happy."

### *Charlotte*

For Charlotte, the most frustrating aspect of her assault is

that they never found the guy, because I hurt him, and I hurt him bad. If I killed him, that would bother me, I think. If I knew that I did it,

that I think that would bother me knowing I killed somebody. But... he had no right to me what he did.

To this day a man with a "certain body build" that reminds Charlotte of her assailant will cause her to panic and run.

### *Alice*

In Alice's case, her memories of incest and ritual abuse did not resurface until her late thirties. When I inquired about how she expressed her emotions, she was direct in her reply.

I had difficulty sleeping, I cried a lot, I had nightmares, I was very withdrawn, inside myself, I stopped, because of betrayal of trust and, I stopped, I more or less stopped seeing friends, or if they contacted me, I would respond but I wouldn't initiate things. My eating habits, yes. I lost quite a bit of weight. I didn't eat. I was very depressed, and so I didn't eat regularly. I would mostly forget to eat, which is very different from my normal habits. I tend mostly to overeat, and sweets in particular. And I think I lost about, probably close to 30 pounds within a period of about maybe six months. So, I don't know if I have anything further on that.

Oh, as to how I dressed, I think in general, I cared less about my appearance. It actually felt threatening to me to pay much attention to my appearance. Like, I don't use make-up, and I stopped dressing attractively. I was very much into dressing up and looking my best when I was dating this person. But after the memories started coming and I had lost him, I felt it was bad to look attractive, or it was somehow, I would be exploited or something like that. People would read me the wrong way. My entire life, I have been uncomfortable, like I wear pajamas instead of nightgowns, unless they're really long nightgowns. I wasn't like this when I was dating that particular person. But afterwards, I would often sleep with my clothes on if I had to be around the family, or I would, like getting up on Christmas morning, I would make sure I was fully dressed before I came downstairs. Or I would feel very upset if I had to be in my bathrobe and somebody came to the door. And so, y'know, I especially felt a lot of shame about my body and about having to be covered up and stuff.

I had stopped drinking in 1979. I had been in AA before that. I'm a recovering alcoholic. And so I had stopped drinking years ago.

The significant thing I think is that I did not start drinking again. That I did not return to drinking when things were happening.

I had an actual episode where I lost time, and I was confused [that was] pretty much at the crisis point.

Alice also found herself indulging in the purchase of numerous purses, stuffed animals, and sunglasses. I asked her why she thought she had done this.

I'm not really sure, except that now that I've been in therapy I know that I was often put in very unfamiliar circumstances. I was kidnapped, I was tricked, I was taken places where I didn't have familiar things around me and maybe these things were a security symbol for me. A sense of having this is what I have that belongs to my safe world, or the reality that I just was whisked out of.

### *Physical Expressions*

Without the cultural code to guide their emotional expressions, the women of my study began to seek physical expressions of their emotions. For Carol, she noted that she began to physically manifest her feelings by gaining weight during college. Jean said she was "obsessed with my stomach" for ten months following her assault, because she was concerned about possible pregnancy despite the fact that she, "had my periods every month, regularly." After the ninth month, Jean related that, "it took me a month to come to terms with the fact" that she was not pregnant.

Lisa's physical expressions (mentioned above) began as she sought to express her emotions about her assault.

When this happened [her assault] I was really preppie really naive really trusting really open would tell anyone anything, like wore my heart on my sleeve like I still, to a point do, but I was just really... really, really trusting. And um,... I started like, going to parties where, everyone wore like black and like had everything pierced and just y'know there was like a nitrous tank in the corner and everyone was in their own little corner, like (nitrous oxide, ah...laughing gas.)



In one room of the house someone would be like, doing heroine or doing coke and new people were like really really like screwed up at these parties. And like I dyed my hair purple and I got my nose pierced and that's why I said, oh, and my hair was down here (showed me with her hand that it was about waist length) and I cut it off (sounds "wicked")...like really short, y'know pierced my nose, I got a tattoo... Um... dressed completely **different**, totally different.

She goes on to say

and, um, I started doing a lot of drugs, like, I started smoking pot, **a lot**. I never really drank that much... but I drank **more**, I guess than um... but, like the marijuana pretty much takes, anything away, any kind of feeling, it totally numbs you, and I did that, like, my entire Spring term.

Through this change in her lifestyle, Lisa sought "assistance" in expressing her emotions.

Y'know, I went and I **found** a guy like that who was **going** to do that to me. I don't think the fact that he was a man matters so much as the fact that **someone** was pushing me to be different, t-to ah, take myself and, make me pretty worthless, make me feel pretty worthless. I enjoyed that feeling. I really did. I didn't- I didn't **want** alotta self worth and, now I'll tell people about this guy and they'll be like, "Where's your self respect? Where's your self worth? How could you- how could you do that?" I mean it was just gone. And I was like, "I want that."

During this time, she continued to change her appearance.

***Did you have any make-up changes?***

I stopped wearing `em. Stopped wearing make-up completely. Stopped wearing make-up.

***How about jewelry?***

Um, wore more. More jewelry, less make-up. Part of the reason I wore less make-up is `cause the make-up I used was like, pinks and I used like, real-like-I was, like I said, I had like the persona. I wore gold. Gold all came off. I started wearing all silver. Um... I wore it like, the only changes I could have made with make-up would be in like making my eyes darker or something, but... I think I wore like-like by my taking off the make-up might have been the same as someone else who didn't wear the make-up wearing more. Like, in a way that was kind of, a change, (rest of sentence is whispered) like a mask. Oh, the hair comes down in front of my eyes, a lot. I'll do that

on, like I'll hide, behind my hair. And I did that a lot more, like now as you'll notice it's behind my ears more, but at the time I hid behind my hair... all the time. You'd see me just looking out of my bangs. And it was awful, it was... got to the point where I was just incredibly, hideous like I'd always be like if my bangs weren't long enough, I'd like tilt my head so my hair could kinda cover my face.

*It sounds like you didn't want to be seen.*

Right! Mmm-hmm. Like I didn't want anyone, to look at my face.

Lisa's most remarkable insight into her bodily expressions of her emotions came when she mentioned that she got a tattoo. This decision occurred at the same time she stopped eating.

Like when I thought about getting a tattoo [and] I talked to a couple other people, and it was just like, "Oh, y'know, that sounds like a good way to scar my body." Like, it was like I was inflicting this pain on myself. Y'know, I don't—I don't know. It's like I had to—I had to permanently scar myself just to like, prove something.

That's kinda like how I saw myself too. Even—even at the time, like I consciously said, "I have to scar my—my body so that I can remember this pain." Which is really odd, I—I, it's really weird that I said that, and oh! and it didn't hurt. (she shakes her head to emphasize the fact) I sat there, in the chair getting it done, and he's like, "I'm gonna do a—do a little spot first."

I'm like, "It doesn't hurt." Then he did it and it didn't hurt. But, it's weird, like now I think about it, it shoulda hurt. It really should of, but I think, mentally, I wasn't gonna...since I wanted, the pain, since it was like to symbolize this pain, it was like a mental pain that I was trying to erase...so the physical pain wasn't there, 'cause that wasn't part of it. So, I don't know.

I was talking to one of my friends about this the other day, and um, there's something about like hurting yourself, like physically, to like—so that, um, so you won't be mentally hurt. And I sat there and thought about it, and I remember, last year, um, well—not-like-right—at— shortly after, I came, to deal with the fact that I was raped, for a very long time I was numb, and that's why the changes took place so much later, 's I didn't admit to myself, for almost a year later, that's what happened. I took these um, I had these like, blades (she spat out the word), like [Exacto knife blades] But it was really dull, and so it wouldn't cut— it wouldn't like cut all the way down. And I remember like, trying to cut my hands, just to like feel that kind of pain. I don't—I don't know why, like I don't know why I would sit there in my room

and just like, take this blade and like, **dig** it into my skin. It never like made me bleed, but, for some reason or another I think I just wanted to feel that pain. So I an--and that was along the same time that I got my tattoo.

I never would've, hurt myself. Like I never would've actually, slit my wrists or I wouldn't have done anything suicidal, but there was something about just, y'know, inflicting a pain. I think it was a--a remembrance. Just, 'cause, when you have--when like, something hurts you mentally, you tend to forget about it. You tend to like heal it, but you don't remember that you--your mind blocks a lot out, it has the tendency to do that. But I can, like now I can look at my tattoo or I can look at, y'know if I would've hurt my, hand and I could remember the feelings and the emotions that I went through at that particular time.

In addition to Isabella's desire to gain weight, she tells of the morning after her assault and that

I remembered going and taking a shower, getting dressed up again and going to see a movie. But yet feeling, I don't know, if there's another word... sleazy is the perfect word. Sleazy, that's what I kind of felt. I just remember getting cleaned up, getting dressed up, putting on my make-up just to go see a movie by myself. Its a very strange feeling. I can remember distinctively what I was doing. It was sort of like, "Why am I doing all this?" But I felt I needed to feel attractive again; needed to get myself all prettied up just for a movie.

I can remember taking a shower and didn't feel, I felt like I was cleansing something from my body, but not cleansing all of it. It was like cleansing a part that I didn't like, and then having to dress up and make myself all over again to say, "Oh no. I'm okay."

Isabella explains her behavior as

what I was trying to do was make myself look okay by really doing up the show. But inside, there was something wrong there. Because that was very strange. I usually always... I'd go to movies, but I'd never make myself up to go. Like, why? But I had a need to do that then. [I tried to] regain control of what had happened. Because again, you know, its like I blamed myself for it. So of course, I was the one who didn't have control.

Charlotte was hospitalized when she began to recall her memories. During this period, she expressed her emotions in a physical manner.

I felt so ugly that I refused to put make-up on. I remember one morning going into the shower and looking at myself in the mirror and I saw a witch, and I felt I was that witch because I was raped. I was dealing with the incest, but on a very low level because I couldn't handle it at the same time. And I felt so dirty and so ugly, I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror. For a long time I would not wear my wig and not wear make-up. All of my friends would encourage me to wear my wig and my make-up... because I couldn't look in the mirror. [Charlotte wears a wig as part of her religious beliefs that specify proper attire for women including covering their hair.]

[Later] I told the doctors that I would put my wig on, but I wouldn't do anything to it. And I certainly didn't put any make-up on. I didn't walk straight, I didn't walk tall, just sort of like... Everybody kept saying speak up. And I said to [my doctor], "What are you, deaf?" And he says, "No, that's the consequences coming out of your rape and you're afraid to talk up."

[When] I felt a little better about myself. I got my friend to bring me a different wig, and I fixed it up. I had her bring me all my make-up, and I looked at myself in the mirror and the witch was gone.

And that was when I knew that I had past a certain point. Because [before] I felt so ugly that I didn't care about myself. I didn't care how I dressed, I didn't care if I put my make-up on.

But really, I can't explain it, but when I looked in that mirror a witch was looking back at me. She was so ugly that I couldn't face her. And that witch was me, and it was a horrible thing to realize that I, who always patted myself on being highly attractive, was a witch, an ugly old crone, and a vicious face, like a mask. And there was no amount of make-up and no amount of hair do's, or no amount of anything that was going to change it. And as I got better, that one day I looked in the mirror and she was gone.

And I think that was because I was angry with myself, I was angry at the world, I was angry at my husband, my ex-husband, I was angry at my rapist, I was angry at my cousins. I was angry, period. And I took it out on myself rather than taking it out on the right people.

### *Revenge*

One important theme in the expression of anger is the desire for revenge on the perpetrators of the sexual assault. Revenge can be performed in legal, illegal, or fantasy forms, but the main goal for the survivor is to regain power. Jean and Carol

relate their opinions regarding prosecution as a form of revenge, as well as vengeful actions.

### Legal

**Carol:** [Referring to prosecution] I never even thought about it because of the whole family issue, then I would have to tell my parents. Then after I finally did tell them, there was a point there when I was really worried about him doing it to somebody else. 'Cause I honestly think that the only reason why women would ever go through the trouble of prosecuting... is revenge. Nobody would do that just because it's the right thing to do... or because they're overly worried, and yeah some of it might come in that they're really worried that they might do it to someone else. But the major reason is revenge. And the minute you take that revenge away, you take a lotta personal power away.

**Jean:** If it ever happens again, I'm nailing him to the wall! Going through the whole nine yards, prosecution, hospital, everything! I didn't even know those things existed, when I was raped (first half of the sentence is loud, the second half is barely audible)... that there was such a thing as a rape kit, that there was a... I knew you could... go to court... but it—that didn't occur to me that it was a crime until a few weeks after it happened...

### Illegal

**Carol:** That was one thing that was kinda empowering for me too, was when Betty... was trying to confront her rapist, we were trying to think of different ways ta—to do that, so he could get fucked but not majorly... so we dumped sugar in his gas tank (she laughed, my jaw dropped open). Well, he was, the job interview was for teaching... and that was the last thing we thought he should be in. 'Cause basically, the way we narrowed it down was the reason he picked Betty was because she was young, she was a virgin, she was really really really naive... and (she sighed) he only ever looked at really really young looking women... this guy, a—he was just... a pig (she giggled) he deserved it.

### Fantasy

**Jean:** But when I go home, I have to pass his house... (her speaking becomes choppy) and it's a habit to look to see if he is... there. I've never seen him once, I don't know what I'm actually going to do if I do see him... out. Um, how I would react. I've thought about... something inside me says that I need to tell him... what he did to me. Something inside me says he doesn't understand what he did to me, and that's probably true because of the way that he is and how manipulative he is. He probably doesn't realize that he raped me, and... something is unfinished until I can actually let him know that, but I do not know how to do that. So, for the moment I just... keep

tabs on him and... every once in awhile, if I'm in a particularly bad mood... I'll throw fake grenades at his house, imaginary ones (she demonstrates a throwing/exploding motion while saying this, then laughs)... just because it makes me feel better! (she laughs and blushes slightly)

But... every once in awhile, in my first couple of years of college, I'd get in a really black mood and it was...during those times that I would write these wonderful soliloquies to Jon about how much I hated him and... what I would do if I ever got a hold of him.

But I wouldn't walk up to him and say, "You've ruined my life. You've done this..." Because that would just give him too much satisfaction to say something like that. Waste my time. Wasting all this time and worrying about you.

It's not worth my time. I would still... I still think that someday if I ever run across him, not on purpose, not like go to his door and say we need to talk about this. But if I ever ran across him I would say something to him. I would like to think that I would. I would probably just freeze... Because everything's perfect in my head. Like that first time I ran across him, after I had already killed him off. I wish I could be just nice and calm like I am right now and say, "Well, when I was a junior in high school, you raped me. I wonder how many other women you did this to. I just want you to know that I don't care about you any more. You have no power over me." But that's... so why bother saying anything if I just know that he's going to go, "Huh, huh, huh. Dumb girl. Heh, she's so dumb. Hah, I ruined your life all these years. I've kept her under my thumb." Right. It probably would be better if... now I'm on this train of thought here, if I come across him and he says, "Hey, Jean." I'm like, "Who are you? Oh, yeah. Did you ever go to prison? Okay, I'm sorry that you ruined your life."

### Summary

Universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes interact during the period following the sexual assault. The universal themes noted by the women in my study are avoidance, feelings about self and others, and sexuality. Although each woman reacted to these universal themes, the exact expression of the theme varied. Cultural themes influenced the women's definitions of sexual assault and the values (and feelings) associated with their values and experiences. These cultural influences on definition and values seem to be subject to variations depending on the cultural background of the sexual assault survivor. Idiosyncratic themes demonstrate the wide

variety of expressions developed by the women in my study. Despite two common areas of emotional expression, physical expression and revenge, the individual forms these expressions took varied notably among the women and remain idiosyncratic responses.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

As with any event in the course of human life, sexual assault does not occur in a vacuum. Often, the women returned to previous life events to provide them with a rationale for their role in the sexual assault (Gilliland and James, 1993). These prior life events are laden with cultural meaning. Cultural meanings are often overlooked or unseen messages that are not examined until after an abrupt, culturally ambiguous event occurs. When such an event occurs, cultural messages become more easily seen and understood. Furthermore, these messages are sorted, adopted, rejected, reinterpreted, and/or replaced. Each woman in my study became aware of and attributed certain cultural messages to her sexual assault.

As a result of each woman's sexual assault experience, a process of culturally based re-definition, or re-construction, of the sexual assault experience takes place. In changing cultural systems, the accompanying change in the cultural code of emotional expression creates an atmosphere of indecision "between traditional [codes] ... and change confirming behavior" (Middleton, 1989:196). As the "criteria for interpreting behavior ... shift[s]" with the change in code, the "conditions where emotions are redefined, linkages [are] reconfirmed, and the emotional idiom [is] recast" develop (Middleton, 1989:196). This causes "... distress and emotions [are



used] ... to relieve traumatic pressures, [while] individuals appropriate available cultural models and, under patterned social stresses, create, each individually, significant new patterns" (Obeyesekere, as quoted in Marcus and Fischer, 1986:53). As each woman passes through the aftermath of her sexual assault, she seeks to give her experience meaning. During this period, the woman's concept of self and culture interact to create a viable ordering and definition of events that provides each woman with a new, culturally based definition of herself and the events of her sexual assault.

The survivor and her family exist within and are inseparable from the cultural context. Both operate under and reflect many of the values, norms, and other cultural messages that exist within the host culture. The family experiences provides an individual with ways to define the present, future, and sometimes the past. Individuals become aware of sexual assault through the incorporation of a certain set of cultural messages.

### **The Influence of Childhood and Family**

Carol re-examined her physically abusive experiences growing up with her brother, Philip, as a significant influence on her reactions to her rape.

Leading up to this is my brother. He physically abused me all of my life (she laughs uncomfortably). I was used to being abused, to being a victim. I always got blamed equally whenever he'd beat the shit out of me. And... so it wasn't like people saw a big difference in me. (Pause) Um... right away, there wasn't any change, no.

***You commented that you've always been body conscious and that image is a big thing. For an example, it took you two hours to get ready for school every morning. Why?***

I can tie that back to my brother again, and him calling me fat for all those years. But, he says I'm blaming everything on him. I don't want to, some of this has to be me.

While Carol acknowledges that she is responsible for her own actions, she notes that the relationship she had with her brother provided her with three significant cultural messages. First, men are abusive and women are victims of their abuse. Second, to define male abuse as unjust, or wrong, would bring about punishment. Finally, Carol developed a body consciousness that stated she was "fat" and therefore physically inadequate, thus she compensated by elevating the importance of her physical appearance.

Jean, as a social outcast among her grade school peers, attributed her lack of trust toward others and subsequent "acceptance" by Jon as significant factors in her sexual assault.

Um, because all during grade school and stuff, um, I didn't trust anybody at all. Because I was basically a social outcast. And so whenever I would do something or say something, popular kids would use this as a--as a springboard for making fun of me, to the extent that they would ask me like, where I would get my jeans and then they would turn around and say, "Well we'll have to remember not to buy things there."

So--so I became very good at not letting anybody know anything about me. Um, and... when I met Jon, he would just accept whatever I'd said and he was very emotional, he was a very emotional person. He would be very, ahm... very open with his feelings. He cried a couple of times and that just blew me away that men could do something like that. I was like, "Wow! Ohmygod! He must really love me!" (she laughs a little)

So I trusted him a lot and would let him do just about anything he wanted even though he did this whole emotional trip, push-pull push-pull.

Jean's lack of experience in prior friendships gave her little information to build upon to determine the appropriateness of Jon's behavior. She had received the cultural message that she was unlikable and must be secretive about her life and experiences or risk being harassed by others. When she was confronted by an individual who did not

fit the cultural role of "other-as-harasser," Jean placed Jon in the cultural role of "other-as-beloved" and was unable to label his behaviors as inappropriate, unhealthy, or dangerous.

Lisa was influenced by her mother's attitudes toward sexual assault through her provision of basic, though sterile, information about the topic.

Well, rape used to be just something on the headlines. Something my mom gave me (she exhales a giggle) to read or to watch on TV, something I just didn't want to read about. Acquaintance rape, date rape, and it was just like, "penetration with a woman where woman says 'No'." Period. End of, the thing.

Through the cultural messages Lisa received, she formed the opinion that sexual assault was a simple, easily defined event that happened to other women.

Isabella identified her family life, her mother's attitudes surrounding sex and rape, her contact with her father, and her culture as the main contributing factors in her sexual assault.

I've been brought up in my family, I've been brought up by my mom that you never tease a man. If you tease a man and he gets angry, he's going to have his way with you and there's not much you can do. So I was always taught never to give a little bit without realizing that I might have to give everything. Because it's sort of like this is something I know they like and I want to please them. Yes, I've been brought up to please men. That's been in my upbringing, very much. But that our, you know--the ultimate goal, to get married and have kids, and please your man. And I think that's very Hispanic oriented.

Because pretty much it's the part of wanting to please him, and I think that's probably something that's been with me all my life. I need to please men. No matter what I need to do, that's what I need. No matter what it is, how much. If it's impossible, I still have to do it. So--the story with my father. And I think a lot of it has to connect, and my father, and the problems that I deal with men is because of my father. [Isabella narrated an occasion when she and her father, who had been absent from the family due to divorce, had sexual contact, an incestuous relationship, when Isabella was seventeen. Isabella stated that because she had never had a father growing up, she was unable to

distinguish between the relationship between father-child and man-woman.]

Isabella also defines her body image, due to her long-term struggle to keep her weight down, as a contributing factor.

...because I go for so long, let's say 3 or 4 years without anybody in my life and then suddenly I lose weight and I'm automatically this new person, this new woman that everybody, all these men find attractive. I mean, yes, I can say no to a man that I don't find attractive, but a man that I found attractive, and this person, Jeff, I found very attractive. And it's almost as if... it's not that I can't, it's like I won't say no.

Isabella views of her own culture messages as emphasizing the woman's role to please a man. In this role, she receives the cultural messages that she is without recourse if displeased with the treatment she receives from a man, particularly if she is romantically involved with this man. Isabella's body image was culturally defined as inadequate, leaving Isabella with few experiences with attractive men. Isabella identified her body image, her experiences with her father (which initially created a schism in her definition of the cultural roles of men and women), and her upbringing combined as important factors in her sexual assault by Jeff. Thus by her failing to please one man (her father) and her view of her body image as being inadequate, she was left questioning her ability to fulfill her cultural role as a woman.

Charlotte explains that she was

...from a family of strong women. They might have been behind the scenes strong, but they were strong. I was raised with a very strong father who was very loving, and very caring, and a very gentle man.

When he died, they broke the mold. And he encouraged me to be strong. He encouraged me to be independent. He was very protective of me, yes. But at the same time, it was like, "Don't look to me or for your future husband to do everything for you. Learn to do things for yourself."

For Charlotte, her cultural messages were clearer, that she should be strong and independent. However, she also received the cultural message that she should not and cannot rely on others.

Alice's experiences of sexual assault stemmed from her father.

*When your father left the family unit [due to divorce], that's when the assaults ended?*

No, they really didn't end until... I'm fuzzy on this, I guess. I think until he... at least for a year after the divorce, he had been still seeing me. My mother put out a restraining order for him not to see my sister, but because I was over 18, she didn't seem to be concerned about whether he should see me or not. And so he was still seeing me after they divorced.

As a child, Alice had no experience to draw upon to determine the appropriateness of her assailants (and father's) behaviors or whether she could report it to others. In this case, Alice lacked any cultural messages regarding her assailant's actions. (It is unclear whether Alice's assailants ever threatened retribution if she reported the abuse to others and how these threats may have been transmitted, therefore I am working under the premise that this did not occur.) Her mother's failure to obtain a restraining order for Alice delivered a double cultural message. First, Alice is responsible for what was happening to her. Second, it is inappropriate to report her experiences to others.

### **Original Construction**

The cultural messages received by each woman (discussed above) influenced her original construction, or definition, of her experience.

Carol stated that, "I don't think I realized that at that point [soon after her rape] that I could label it rape. I didn't know what rape was." For Carol, her prior

experiences with her brother prevented her from defining her sexual assault as rape due to her lack of knowledge of appropriate behaviors in male/female relationships.

Jean was uncertain in her original construction of her sexual assault.

Um... but it's hard to say, um... it's, my definition has changed over time and for a long time I didn't, I wasn't sure I wasn't raped because he didn't finish, and... to some extent that always makes me feel like... **maybe** that's... not... as bad as, say somebody who was... raped with a knife.

And... I never really believed that it made me less of a person, but, I couldn't stop my feelings from... feeling like something wrong had happened, and I knew that I couldn't tell my parents, because, they would make too much of a deal—big deal out of it. And I didn't want publicity, I just wanted it to go away (she exhales a pained laugh) because, he says, he told me he loved me, so obviously it wasn't rape it was sex, but to him...and I wanted to believe that, but...(she is agitated and angry – there is a pause before we continue)

I think it was kind of, I think in a way it was worse than if it had been... ah... forcible rape. Because then I think, I would have told somebody. I wouldn't have kept it a secret, would have told my mom, or my parents, or something, and something would have been done about it. But I was so ashamed of the way that things had happened, and he covered it up so smoothly, that it was just like this one big mind game. And I always felt like, "Oh, well, I can't say anything now. It's been too long. I can't.... This is.... (she sighs in frustration) Nobody would believe me! Nobody would do" y'know all this other stuff that just went through my head, just saying.

Well, when I was first raped, I think the reaction was for me to equate sex, and love, and marriage synonymously because I had to be very intimate, and I think its that emotional aspect which was that, if I was very intimate with someone, then penetration would be. Because I quickly gathered from having been raped that when I chose to do this on my own, it would probably hurt. I'm not a big woman, and I quickly gathered this. So, I couldn't really put the pain with rape, and I was trying to reconcile that in my mind.

So the whole penetration, vagina/penis, sex. That is sex, I don't view that as now, but that's how I was viewing it then because that was my conception. Society sort of pushes you toward that, especially in my town.

***That sex, and love, and marriage are all synonymous?***

Right. And not so much that, even that just the sex is a man penetrates a woman, he orgasms, that's the end of sex. And she

orgasms, too, but its not as important as when he orgasms. So, that was then.

For Jean, a number of factors interplayed to produce her original construction of her sexual assault experience. The most pronounced factor was the cultural influences and messages that composed her definition of male/female relationships and sex.

Lisa said she had difficulty constructing her sexual assault.

I was like... (she sighs) for a very long time I didn't believe I was raped. I um, because, I hate that his words meant so much, but when he said, y'know, "You were on top," just stuck in my head forever and ever and ever and it was just like, "That couldn't have been rape. It couldn't have been."

And um, when I went and spoke to a woman, she made it, she made it really hard for me to even think that I was raped. Even though she kept saying, "You were, you were." But she'd say things like, "As long as you said 'No.'"

"Well, I didn't. Y'know I-I kinda showed him and I kinda, did alotta other things, but I never said, 'No'."

She's like, "Well, as long as you're really forceful about it."

"Well, I wasn't. I wasn't—I didn't physically hurt him."

Y'know, a—and there's alotta things she kept saying, "Well," and it kept minimizing... and it kept going down and down and down, and I'm just like, "Well, if you have to justify it **this much**," y'know, and I don't think that's what she meant, but it just, y'know all those things kept sticking in my head, and—and his saying, "Don't you have any self respect?" (short pause)

No! `Cause he took it. (short pause) You know and—and it was just all these things in my head and, I couldn't, I couldn't admit to myself that I was raped. And then, when my friend was raped, she was **so sure** about it, so sure that's what happened, like there was no doubt in her mind, no question. He was like her boyfriend, y'know, she knew that's what it was. But I still didn't (when she talks of her friend, she speaks in a strong voice. The last sentence about herself is spoken quietly).

And even when I told her that, she's like, "No, you were." Dismissal. Y'know, "You were," that's it. But I still wasn't sure, like I—I still couldn't admit it to myself.

In Lisa's case, she was strongly influenced by the cultural messages embedded in other's opinions. She received the cultural messages that stated she was at fault.

When opposing cultural messages were sent (she was not at fault), her pre-existing cultural messages (she was at fault) prevented her from being able to receive the intended message.

Isabella's previous cultural messages regarding male/female relationships provided her with her original construction of her sexual assault.

This is something that probably I deserved. That was... I didn't even think of rape. It was just like, well, I'm here. He's here. He's on top of me, let him get it over with. And I felt dirty right afterwards. I just, for the longest time, I think I just felt that there was something wrong in what happened, but I didn't know what it was because I didn't feel good about it.

And I think a lot of this had to do with just before I was going out with a lot of people, I had lost a lot of weight. And when I get thinner, I'm much more attractive to men, and I have a hard time saying no. And I didn't realize that until that night, because I literally could have, if I had wanted to, pushed him off. But I couldn't say no. I didn't know how to say no.

It was my fault; it was me to blame. And so the next day when I woke up and he woke up and he treated me like shit, I thought well I deserve it. I'm a slut. I let him have his way with me.

And that was probably... because I think, when I think of a woman getting raped, I think she fights for her life, and there's a knife at your neck, you have no choice. But I had a choice. I could have flipped over and punched him in the face. But I didn't do any of those things. I said no, but at the time, I didn't think that was enough.

I mean, saying just "no" back in that period of time, I didn't feel like that was like really fighting a rape. Because you have to realize, when you don't know that you're being raped, you really don't have a choice. You see what I mean? It's like, you don't have the decision-making capacity to say this is wrong. I didn't know it was wrong. I didn't know what this man was doing to me was wrong. I just knew that I didn't want to do it. But that doesn't mean that it was wrong at that period of time.

Isabella was working with two main of cultural messages. First, as a woman, and due to her previous schism, she felt she had to please this man. Secondly, Isabella took



responsibility for her sexual assault based on the cultural message that she "couldn't give a little without realizing [she] may have to give it all."

Alice and Charlotte did not indicate that they changed their original construction of their sexual assault experiences. Since these two women remained with the their original constructions, I have placed their vignettes in the following section to indicate their current constructions of their experiences.

### **Revised Construction**

In the revision of cultural messages, influences to change and to remain static originate from internal and external sources. Sometimes these revisions are radical changes in cultural messages, other times the women revised part of or a single message to create the new construction.

As Carol worked through her experience, she changed the way she viewed herself as an individual at the time of her rape.

Why did Jon treat me the way he did? Because I was totally in a victim role. I let him. I'm not saying it's my fault, but that was just who I was then. So that might be easier for me.

By altering her construction of her role in her sexual assault to that of participation in the victim role, Carol was able to gain insight into herself and her sexual assault experience.

Jean reconstructed her sexual assault after actively seeking cultural messages from others to replace and incorporate into her cultural construction.

I didn't call it rape until after [several months] that's mainly his doing, because a couple weeks later he, told me he was breaking up with me and... that's when I realized that the whole thing had just been,

to get me, in, bed. And when I did, it was sort of tentative, ta just check things out, and see if... other people thought it was, rape, too, 'cause I didn't want to run around calling this rape, unless I knew... what to call it (her voice dropped to an almost inaudible level. It returned to normal with the next sentence). And I got mixed, responses, from people.

*What does rape mean to you?*

That's hard to separate personal from political standpoint. Because they're... different. (she exhales an uncomfortable laugh) But, I know it to-da-it, there are certain characteristics that are the same across that, there is this, um... this taking, taking something that wasn't... given and that's a big part of rape.

Um... and that's why I-I regret it, that's why it-it meant so much, was that he took something from me that I had a very clear value on. I did not want to have sex until I was married. And he took that choice away from me. Like I was an object, and that I think is what rape is, is, basically, to get to a woman... is to treat her like she is an object... an object.

And the pain does not go away, immediately... because it is such a... sexual crime, even though it's a violent crime, it's also a sexual crime.

I don't know, I don't know where that turning point was where I finally just realized that... I didn't have to forgive him for what he'd done. But somewhere, it was just ingrained in me that... probably about the same time that I gave up the whole Christian concept.

*That makes sense.*

Yeah... it seems logical to me. (pause) Not that any of this is very logical. (she laughs)

So, in some ways that was worse because it took me a year and a half to come to terms with it, then if it had just been an out-and-out violent attack. And, ah... I don't even know how I would of reacted to that. That seems like something that you can get over... seems like something I could get over a lot easier than ah, infiltration of trust.

And now, I view sex more as a process... the whole sexual activity is usually what I refer to it as, and penetration is one of those things that you can do, and for the most part, usually ends up happening because of dating men, and it happening. But doesn't have to.

And there's a whole bunch of things that encompass that, whereas before I wouldn't be likely to, say, categorize oral sex as being sex so much as something that goes along with sex. Whereas now, I'd be much more likely to categorize it as being sex. The same thing as a back massage, or an all over body massage could be considered sex now, but then I would have just considered it foreplay.

So, a lot of it has to do with awareness that there is more to life than just male mounts female, place his seed inside her. It goes away, falls asleep. I kind of like my definitions better.

Lisa has had a number of experiences since the time of her assault that have given her new cultural messages that she has incorporated into her construction of her rape experience.

But, like, now I know, that... the rape was what happened then, it was the penetration... that I didn't want to happen. It's not the like, how long it lasts or anything.

It's unfortunate that it had to happen, because of someone else's experiences, but... without that, I still think today... I wouldn't realize that's what it was. Um... I don't know, I'll talk about it like I'll talk about it to people now... but it's not something that I'll say, like I'll find myself coming out and saying now, "Oh yeah, y'know, three years ago when..." or four years ago now, I think, that's what it is, but, y'know, "when this happened" and I'll kinda say it thinking they should know, and they're like, "What?" And that's really hard.

But, like I don't feel uncomfortable talking about it. Y'know, if it's going to help someone, I'll tell them because it's nothing I did. And that's just like when you were like talking before about the privacy issue, it's nothing I did. So even if my name was used, that's fine, I'm a victim. It's nothing that I did to myself.

And then, that was still stuck in my head where a woman has to say, "No." Like that was in my head and it—just to fight it. And um, then it just kinda became, when a woman doesn't want it and it's kind of, y'know, forced upon her, whether, no mat—wheth—whether she has—she has to make some motion, show that it's not wanted. Y'know, you can't—you can't always say, "Yes! This is what I want! Please!" y'know, but, you have to say, y'know you have to say something or do something or show that, that's not what you want, that you—that your uncomfortable.

And that um, actually something, whether, it doesn't exactly even have to be like, penetration, it could be **anything**, where alotta people call that, like sexual harassment but, y'know when, when it's, like more intimate it's—I think it's kind of a degree of rape.

And I think, I think this has changed because of my own, personal, experiences even outside of the fact that, y'know it happened to me. I think from just learning more and just, being more interested in it.

***What does the word and the concept of rape mean to you?***

(she sighs) Um, I personalize it. Um, it means... one night, a couple years ago, where a man took a lot away from me. Where he took my self respect, he took my, um, confidence, he took my self worth, and um, he took, y'know, he took away like my ability to trust men.

And then, when I think of it in a broader sense, I apply that to all the women who've been raped, and to the word rape. It's when those things have been taken away.

For Isabella, she has changed her construction of her sexual assault, yet her reconstruction of her experience is still continuing.

And I didn't really realize this was rape until [later] because the way we traditionally look at rape as a man in a dark corner coming out at you and attacking you. Not where you're the woman. You've pretty much done everything with this person, but yet you don't allow one act.

And until what, 4-5 years later did I realize, "Hell, I was raped!"

***When you got it labeled, it released the guilt. It sounds as though it just kind of sort of made sense.***

Right. It kind of... it helped to solidify what had happened to me. That I was able to label it and that I could stop blaming myself, and stop saying it was my fault. [To label the experience rape] it takes the fault away on my side and puts it on him, which makes it more... Because I don't have a problem blaming somebody for something. If I think its wrong, I can say it. But I thought it was my fault.

***How has your concept of rape changed?***

Its changed a lot. Its not a dark corner anymore. Its not a stranger. Its a man who wants to take control. And I would dare say that I don't think even rape is just physical any more. I think rape comes in all different shapes and forms. Its a rape of the soul. Its a rape of emotion. Its a rape of your identity.

I see what's happening here when there's these parties and the women are at these parties and they get drunk. And they end up maybe in somebody's bedroom. And the guy goes in there and he thinks he can have his way with her because she's drunk. And I realize that when you're drunk, your defenses are down and you may not fight as much as you would normally fight if you would have been sober. But, if two people don't have an agreement amongst each other prior to having sex, and the man just takes you over, and you may either be too drunk or too tired, or something or another, but you don't want this, but what the hell.

We've been taught in society to give in. I can't say that I've completely made a whole turn around. Because deep inside, I still have that need to please a man. [There's] a part of me that's changing.

Pleasing is very important to me at this point in my life, but they also have to please me. And so I think I'm beginning to realize that it's necessary that you have a balance. Without the balance, then one person's out, and I'm usually the one who's out.

Although Isabella has incorporated new cultural messages into her construction, she has not discarded her original cultural messages. Instead, Isabella stated she is searching for a combination of the two sets of messages.

Charlotte's construction of her rape experience is influenced by the cultural messages she incorporated as a young woman. The most pronounced cultural message in Charlotte's construction is the message of strength.

I very rarely cry about my rape. I can talk about it and like my therapist always said, I always sound like I'm just reciting a grocery list: A happened, B happened, C happened. But there's a lot of feelings that lie underneath it.

It just rips away your self-esteem, your self-respect. It rips out the very fabric of you as a person. You feel very dirty, very used, you don't feel good any more. You don't feel worthy of anybody's love, or who could love me now, or who would want to love me now. Because it's not... rape is not an act of sex, it's an act of violence and power. And that's how they do it, by use of sex, but, that's not the whole thing. The thing is the power. They wanted me to cry, they wanted me to scream, they wanted me to plead.

And gradually, I began talking more and more about the rape. And I continued going to Sarah's group and that's where I became the survivor rather than the victim. I took a long time. It's like I can say it happened, that it was wrong, I almost died, it was very painful, it was horrible and horrendous, but I'm here, I lived through it, and therefore, I'm a survivor.

And has it affected my life? Yes. I don't trust men very much. Whatever I did feel about men before, I always feel that men are nothing more than little boys running around in a big body looking for their mommy to take of them. Sometimes I feel they're downright stupid, and they're very vicious.

I don't want anybody's pity. I want to be understood, about women suffer... and they suffer many years later. I said this happened when I was 29. It didn't get out until I was 44.

Alice's construction of her sexual assaults has been influenced mainly by her adult understanding of the cultural messages she has received since beginning therapy. Due to the nature of her coping strategies as a child, she is still working on a more comprehensive construction of her experiences.

I think that as a child in particular, I felt that my blindness was deliberately a means of exploiting me, of deceiving me about where I was or maybe identifying who was assaulting me and things like that. I think that I was misled and deceived a lot, and that has probably I have some... that's an area I could explore further, in terms of where I am today with that.

### **Summary**

Idiosyncratic family and childhood experiences equip individuals with cultural messages that provide a means of interpreting life events. By receiving and incorporating cultural messages about life and self, an original construction of one's "world" is created. When this construction is confronted with a universally traumatic events that violate this construction, change must occur. This change involves a process of reconstruction of one's "world view" by incorporating and/or rejecting old and new cultural messages to create a revised construction.

### SECTION III

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **RESPONSES OF OTHER SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS**

During the interviews, each of the women described comparing herself to other sexual assault survivors she met. The women in my study gained insight into their own sexual assault through speaking with and observing other sexual assault survivors. In the pursuit of this line of conversation, I found that these other sexual assault survivors reacted in similar ways to the women involved in my study.

Through communication with other sexual assault survivors, the women developed a sense of community, rather than remaining isolated in their experiences. Though no two individuals had the same experience, through the exchange of both explicit (for example "So we're sisters" and "I've been raped, too") and implicit (such as "She didn't want me to say 'I told you so'" and rape "made her much more aware") messages, each woman was able to incorporate information about other survivors' constructions into their own construction of their experiences and their emerging redefinition of the cultural code of emotional expression.



### *Information Gained from Other Survivors*

Each of the women in my study directly acknowledged they had gained perspective about their own experiences through discussions with and observations of other sexual assault survivors.

Carol found that sexual assault was more prevalent than she had thought and she was not alone in her experience. Carol also noted a trend among survivors to remain silent about their experiences.

See the same friend that I told about it the day after, Jill, ended up that when she was sixteen, was actually on her sixteenth birthday, her boyfriend raped her... and she didn't tell me about it until after we graduated from high school... because she didn't want me to say "I told you so." 'Cause I'd been telling her before that... I finally got to the point with her that you know, it isn't all good (she laughed shortly) it can be kinda bad (she laughed short again) I mean I wasn't really telling... a lotta bad stuff, but... I think even before that I told her... it wasn't by choice that I had sex with him.

Turns out, my other best friend at the time, Samantha, also lost her virginity the same way, when she was seventeen, sixteen, someplace in there.

When I got to college... ah, my next door neighbor my sophomore year, she was a freshman... she was raped... and I got really involved with her talking about that. Another friend, named Betty, she was raped... same year, but I didn't find out about it 'till the next year, but...

Carol also relates that female sexual assault survivors often attempt to find the answer to the question, "Why?" They seek to understand their experience by uncovering the assailant's motive in an attempt to fit their experience within the cultural code of emotional expression they had been operating under prior to the assault.

The one that really hit me hardest was this new person I'm seeing. She was 16, single white female. And she asked me, "Why do men rape?" Straight out, just like that. I don't know where. And it's so hard to get her talking about anything. She just suddenly out of the

blue... I just kind of like, "Huh?" I think the wondering all the time, "Why?" is pretty common. It's the biggest general thing I see.

And I can give all the reasons, it's a power thing, it's a control issue, it's violent, it's dah, dah, dah. And the reason they pick certain people are because of their victim status, either opportunity because they're in a certain spot, or because of the way they're standing, the way they're... you know. That's victim blaming, so I don't do that. It might be a lot easier for me because it wasn't just a one time thing to answer those type of questions, you know.

But there's always that, the wondering of how you were putting yourself in the same position again if you act that way again type of thing, like this little stuff.

Jean noted through interactions with other sexual assault survivors, both she and the other survivors gained insight into their own experiences.

...`cause to be working with sexual assault survivors, it gives you a different perspective on, your own sexual assault.

I interviewed somebody recently who said that ah, they had been assaulted, and now they were volunteering. And she said that it was a real eye-opener for her when she was assaulted by her friend. She didn't think that it could happen. Made her much more aware.

After speaking with other sexual assault survivors, Isabella felt her experience was not as traumatic as others' experiences. Like Carol, Isabella also noted a silence among survivors.

I've spoken to other women who have gotten raped. I've spoken to people to me that seems like they've had so much more of a devastating experience than mine. And particularly when this happened to me that day, I spoke to a friend of mine that I've known for a while and she mentioned... I told her that I was raped. I never really told her. And she said, "You know, I've been raped, too." And I couldn't believe it. I mean, it just blew my mind away that she was raped.

Charlotte also emphasized the prevalence of sexual assault among women and the silence among survivors.

And I was sitting, talking to a very, very dear friend of mine... I had just gotten off work and was sitting and it slipped out and she put

her arms around me and she said, "So we're sisters." The more you talk about it, the more you find women who have been raped. Some went for help, and the majority did not. Some of them were able to get through it themselves. Some women still live this.

We had a group set up for Orthodox women who were victims of incest and rape, and I was really afraid to go because I figured, "Who was going to be there?" And who walked in were some of my very, very best friends and I sort of sat there and thought, "Oh my God."

Because it's kept such a secret, and it's like we could discuss it because we understand each other. The more I talk about it, the more women I find have been through similar experiences.

Lisa, confused about her sexual assault, noted that survivors vary in their responses to their experiences.

I met, this girl, and her name's Jenny. And, I like I knew her, she played soccer with me, but um, it wasn't until we both had similar instances [had been raped] that we really got to be friends.

And then, when my [other] friend was raped, she was **so sure** about it, so sure that's what happened, like there was no doubt in her mind, no question. He was like her boyfriend, y'know, she knew that's what it was. But I still didn't. [When she talks of her friend, she speaks in a strong voice. The last sentence about herself is spoken quietly.]

Alice related in her narrative that she has met a number of women who have been sexually assaulted by an acquaintance and have suppressed their memories of abuse. When these memories can no longer be contained, or are triggered, these women often seek help through counseling agencies.

I think that the trends are that the clients [that] have been raped, either have many perpetrators or one perpetrator, but it's always been in the case of my clients, someone who the clients knew personally and trusted. Not stranger rape, it's been clients either whose families or friends abuse them. And so there was always that betrayal of trust.

They tell me why it couldn't have happened the way I think it happened. Or else someone who says, "I've never gone anywhere, I've never told anybody for years, and years, and years." And often what they present, which might be a sexual assault or an attack in adult life,

reminds them of previous child sexual abuse that they aren't aware of until they start to talk about it.

Or other times, people come in and it's not a specific emergency, immediate rape situation. They'll come in and they'll say, "I'm just remembering this for the first time. It's just been going on, it's something vague, I can't describe it, but I'm having nightmares, I'm having flashbacks, I'm remembering for the first time that as a child I was repeatedly sexually abused."

### **Strategies to Regain Control**

By accessing the cultural code of emotional expression in the past, the survivors have been able to behave appropriately and make sense of traumatic events. The women in my research identified control seeking behaviors as the main strategy survivors utilize in an attempt to fit their experiences into their original cultural code of emotional expression.

The women involved in my research noted several control seeking behaviors they had witnessed in other sexual assault survivors that parallel their own responses (Chapter 6 – Being Alone and the Internal Experience). These behaviors included denial, bathing, self blame, "irrational" cognition, changing clothing style, withdrawal from physical contact with others, and weight issues. Through these various behaviors, the survivors attempted to maintain their original cultural codes by altering their appearance or understanding of the events.

According to the women in my study, by employing the denial strategy, sexual assault survivors seek to avoid having to manage conflicting messages within American culture; "rape is a crime" versus "women who are raped are asking for it."

Denial also allows the women to avoid contending with the failure of the cultural code to guide them in understanding the events of their assault and behaving accordingly.

**Carol:** All the same stuff. The denial, the "I can get over this without any help." "I don't have to worry about it." "I don't have to deal with it." Or even just plain, "It didn't happen." And that's what I see so many other people going through, too. You see a lot of the same stuff. I mean, it's just human emotion. That's what the human does.

**Alice:** The reality is that these were awful people, and especially when you have to admit that people you trusted, and depended on, and relied on are awful and did this for no reason other than for power, and evil, and whatever. But sometimes a person would rather believe "I must be making it up," "I must be crazy," "I must be imagining it," "I must be embellishing it somehow."

A common, immediate response of women who have been sexually assaulted is to bathe in an attempt to "wash off" the assault and to feel "clean" again.

**Charlotte:** I have a very good friend ... well, she did what many women do... she took a shower immediately because she felt so dirty.

Sexual assault is both violent and sexual by its nature. In this culture, the violent aspects of the crime are condemned. The cultural reaction to the sexual aspect of the crime is less clearly defined and open to dual meanings; good/clean versus bad/dirty.

The act of self blame provides the survivor with a sense of control over the events surrounding her assault. By taking responsibility for the sexual assault, the woman can avoid confronting her helplessness in the situation. In American culture, self control and freedom of choice are highly prized values. When a sexual assault occurs, these values are completely eliminated without a corresponding cultural code for responding and coping with this phenomenon.

**Jean:** Yeah. 98% percent of them, including myself, blame themselves. Women blame themselves, and that goes for the lesbian clients that I have had, which that doesn't make any logical sense whatsoever,

because they don't deal with men, so how can they be the blame. But there is still that degree that says that, "I've done something," and I think that's the biggest trend... is the trend to blame themselves.

**Alice:** Well, I think in terms of child sexual abuse the myths are there because the child is told that at some level. The child is told, "You wanted this to happen," or "Try to stop me," and then if you can't stop the adult, "It's your fault, or something you did, or said, or didn't do is why I'm doing this. You're evil, you're bad, you're seducing me." All the messages that when children are too young to know the difference, this stuff gets internalized with children.

And I think in some ways women, too. Women will say, "I shouldn't have dressed that way, I shouldn't have been in a certain place when I knew no one else would be around, I shouldn't have made this or that decision."

The underlying thing is, "I was asking for it." And I think, I'd like to think that it's getting better, but part of self-blame I think is a way of control. It's a way of saying, "I had some control over what happened to me." "If I hadn't gone to this place, if I hadn't dressed this way, or if I hadn't done or said this thing, then maybe it wouldn't have happened."

I think it's too scary for survivors in the beginning to accept that they were, at least at the point of their assaults, they were victims. They were helpless. They could not have prevented it. They did not cause it. They did not deserve it, that this was something unpredictable and out of their control, and I think that's why the myths go on in that sense, is that after a person's been totally violated, at least in my case, I want to come up with some rationalization for it. "If I had told someone, then it wouldn't have happened." Or, "if I had done this or that," when in fact, the reality is that, "I was victimized." I'm saying "I," but in general.

An "irrational" cognition is produced in the chaotic vacuum left by the cultural code of emotional expression. When the survivors seek understanding and explanations for events not encompassed by the cultural code, they are left without assistance and guidance. This can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, lost, and/or out of control. Under these conditions, the survivors were reported to often find an idea and cling to it unfailingly until they have developed coping strategies through a

redefinition of the code or they have been forced by some event to directly confront the "irrationality."

**Jean:** But I never question it, because I understand the irrational process that goes on in your mind, the little things that you do. Um... One woman thought her daughter was being molested, but she wouldn't confront the father, because she just did not want to know. And ah, I understood that. And people just do irrational things to keep control over whatever sanity they happen to have.

"If I don't go back to this particular place, I'm safe." "If I just go away for the summer, I'll be over it." "It was my fault, it was my fault, it was my fault." "If I had just left five minutes later, none of this would have happened." You getting the feel?

Just cognitive things that make absolutely no sense. They're an attempt to understand, but they're irrational. I mean, there's no basis for it, and if you confront someone on them, they're like, "I don't know why." But they'll stick to them, very adamantly.

Clothing can be described as ordinary, revealing, plain, sexy, drab, fancy, or any of a myriad of descriptions. The expression, "the clothes make the person," indicates the proclivity American culture has for basing judgements about individuals on physical appearance (Winkler, McMullen and Wininger, 1994). By controlling clothing, survivors are able to control their image. In this manner, they are able to non-verbally communicate to others their feelings and self image while controlling to a large degree others' perceptions of them. Additionally, clothing can offer a measure of protection against a repeat assault by covering and concealing the woman's body, the site of the violation of the cultural code.

**Jean:** The majority of them wear bulky clothes; they won't take their coat off; wear lots of sweaters, baggy pants, or skirts with tights, not stockings, tights, boots. Just like layers of clothes. A couple of them have come right out and say, "I do this." Some of them don't even realize their doing it. They've got all these clothes on. I don't think I've ever seen a client who was dressed in shorts, or tank top, or something like that, short skirt. They like to wear bulky clothes. Those are the big things.

Similarly, physical distance protects and conceals the body.

**Jean:** None of them [sexual assault survivors who she has counseled] will get close to you. I mean, it's very rare. I've had a couple of clients who are like, "Can I give you a hug?"

Weight issues are not new to the American woman. Popular culture emphasizes that to be desirable, a woman must be fit and slender. With the importance placed on this topic, sexual assault survivors often find weight to be subject to control. By adding or losing weight, a woman can express her "desire" to be "unattractive" and "safe" from sexual assault. By accessing and combining parts of the cultural code, fit and slender means sexually desirable, the women can mold the cultural code to support a focus on weight as an acceptable means of protection, expression, and control over events. This use of the cultural code ignores the fact that sexual assault is a crime of violence perpetrated in a sexual manner, and attractiveness is irrelevant to victimization. By maintaining, gaining, or losing weight, the woman can gain control over her body in the wake of having that control taken from her by her assailant. In this manner, the woman is able to gain control over the sexual assault as well.

**Carol:** Like my friend Samantha, I don't even think we could carry on an intelligent conversation about the topic [of sexual assault]. I mean, Samantha is a very, very strong person, but ... places so much emphasis on being prim, and being pretty, ... she's a size 5 and talks constantly about weight.

I just don't think she's... I don't want to tell somebody else they're not dealing with their rape... but she isn't. I think she's dealing with it in her own way, but. Not that I see anything wrong with remaining a size 5 after being raped, but because she talks about it so much. I mean, I don't think I've had a conversation with her in three years that does not involve weight at one time or another. Usually mine [Carol admits to being about twenty pounds above her ideal weight],



and then talk about how she's trying to stay fit, and how she's gotten flabby legs. And you look at her and you're like, "Where?"

### **Summary**

Many women who have survived sexual assault find they gain from sharing the experience with others. By relating their experiences to others (idiosyncratic), the survivors simultaneously re-define and re-structure the cultural code of emotional expression by building on shared experiences (universal), receive support from others who are empathetic to their situation, and develop and express resistance to the failure of the cultural code by disallowing their experiences to be ignored or forgotten (cultural).

**Alice:** To me, they [sexual assault survivors] have an integrity about them. I can say to these clients, "You survived the events, and therefore, you can survive remembering them." They may not always be able to accept that, but they have a survival mechanism that's kept them going for so long that I think the overall outlook is much better than a lot of people who come in for mental health types of therapy. You know these people are survivors. They may not know it, but you know from the outset, or I know, when they come to see me that these people survived. There's no word strong enough to describe the horrible, horrible experiences and are at least at some level saying, "I want to share this with another human being. I want to face this."

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **VICTIM BLAMING AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CULTURAL CODE OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION**

Through the cultural code of emotional expression, emotions are tied to cultural values and can become a source of resistance (Middleton, 1989; Scheper-Hughes 1982, 1992). Individuals learn that "... emotion-emotion regulation or the power of one emotion to control another emotion" is essential in order to function in their culture (Izard, 1983:307). Emotional dissonance, which arises when personal emotional needs conflict with the cultural expectations, may tell us about underlying tensions and conflicts that drive behavior (Middleton, 1989).

Theorists have indicated the cultural and political implications of emotions (Lock, 1993). When the dominant group in a culture gives feedback, "subordinate groups ... do not always accept reflected images of themselves, and may choose to adhere to [a different] emotional style, identity, and [set of] values ... [that] may be sufficient to sustain ongoing efforts to defend against outside forces" (Middleton, 1989:198-199).

During the last interview with each woman, I asked her to share with me her own personal analysis of culture, often stated, "What is it, in your opinion, about this culture (society) that caused you (and/or others) to react the way you (they) did?" The responses were direct and insightful. Each woman articulated her views regarding

cultural victim blaming tendencies and the reconstruction of the cultural code of emotional expression by themselves and by those who are "aware" of sexual assault issues.

### **Victim Blaming**

The women of my study identified resistance to cultural blame of the sexual assault survivor, or victim blaming, as the foundation of their redefinition of the cultural code of emotional expression (Brownmiller, 1975; Margolis, 1982; Walker, 1979). This reaction is typified by Lisa's refusal to seek an understanding of sexual assault within the individual's internalized cultural code.

I'm really good at psychoanalysis I understand the whole concept, but when you're talking about something like **this** you don't go inside the person. Psychoanalysis is to go inside the person to get the answers, and rape is **definitely** not something within you.

When I asked the women what aspect or aspects of culture create the internalized cultural code of blaming the sexual assault survivor, they identified two areas of contribution: a "patriarchal culture" and the portrayal of sexual assault and sexual assault survivors in the mass media. These areas combine to create a victim blaming that influences survivors' reactions to their assaults.

The women of my study described the "patriarchal culture" as historically defining women as a "form of property." According to the women, this concept of women as property has a strong unconscious and unrecognized influence on modern American culture.

**Charlotte:** And at one time the Church of England regulated the size of a stick that a man could beat his wife with... "rule of thumb." And so

even though we're living in modern times, these things still get handed down. And society sort of looks the other way.

As property to be owned, women are expected to be "protected" by their "owner."

**Carol:** And why date rape is seen so insignificant, basically, I think it ties into the property thing. Where if you aren't presently being owned by a man and with that man, what's wrong with you that you were in this situation? And you're obviously not owned by your father anymore, and you don't have a husband there. Where was your protector?

When a woman is not seen to have an "owner," such as the case of single women or women who are unescorted, she is viewed as a commodity to be procured.

**Lisa:** [A man saw Lisa at work and then called there] And this happens like, I don't know, too much. And I get so angry. And I was like, "No!" y'know, "I don't want to go out with you, you don't know me!" Alotta people would've been flattered by that, but I can't be flattered by it, I get really angry, really upset, 'cause to me... I was no different than the clothes he's in there shopping for. Y'know, I was just this person that he saw, and was like, "Oh, that's really nice. Maybe I'll buy it." And—and that's kinda the way I felt with that guy. He didn't care. He didn't care at all. Men, feel that they have every right to talk to you because, you're a woman, in a city.

The theme of women as property is influential in the creation an application of victim blaming. Culture, when defining the role for women, does not allow for modern American lifestyles in which women are independent.

**Carol:** It seems that women are still looked at as being possessions, something that needs to be protected and taken care of. When for some reason we step outside of our chosen designated role and are sexually active, and for some reason that backfires on us and we just happen to be raped along the way, that's because we were stepping outside of our role.

**Jean:** There's a big push in America for individualism, self-determination. We are what we make. You know, the Heratio Alger stories. He did not become rich because he was given rich, or

something happened to him. There was no fate. It was because he worked hard. So there's this belief in America that people get what they deserve, and that means that you get a lot, or you get raped, because you deserve it.

**Lisa:** But the way it happened, things like that also make me wonder, y'know, it's—it's not supposed to, you're supposed to be strong and say, "No, that's wrong!" but, y'know, when you hear things like that... y'know, if the stranger did it... I could prove to myself that I wasn't bad at all, that I was **completely** a victim. In a way, I was, consented to being this man's friend.

Thus, women are placed in a double-bind, fulfilling two separate roles as independent (valued by modern American culture) and dependent (on men, the expected female role). Jean argues that women are often caught between these roles.

She's following a cultural script which put her in a perfect position [vulnerable to assault]. That women say no, but they mean yes, and women need to be convinced that they want to have sex. The fact of the matter is, if you ask a woman if she wants to have sex, she'll tell you!

The view of women as property, requiring men as owners and protectors is further accentuated by the culturally stereotyped mass media portrayals of sexual assault and sexual assault survivors.

With modern communication technology, the mass media has become a major source of information regarding sexual assault and sexual assault survivors. The women in my study defined mass media portrayals as being often erroneous and misleading, despite the body of information about these issues generated by sources such as feminist authors and sexual assault crisis and counseling agencies.

**Jean:** Well, I think that's true of any minority group, where there's a myth, a stereotype. Society as a larger group, media plays into it, needs some way of reaching out to the people so they pick a stereotype, and that way it's easy. Everybody knows what your talking about. When they're talking about a rape, they can be talking about this person. And

if they don't fall into that category, which they never do, then they become deserving of it, or that's such a pity that it happened to you, but somehow you brought it on yourself.

In their analysis, the women repeatedly commented that sexual assault is often portrayed by the mass media in a dramatic and sensationalized manner. These portrayals create an atmosphere of dissonance that devalues the traumatic content and validity of most sexual assaults.

**Charlotte:** It's made into sensationalized movies, or sensationalized books, but the real story is never told. The real pain is never told. It was like all these women that went through it. You know, like a woman is raped by 40 men and cut up and dismembered, and then everybody goes wild and crazy.

There was an incident not so long ago in Baltimore where a woman in a nursing home who was something like 82, was raped. That's not sex; that's rape.

**Isabella:** Because the way we traditionally look at rape as a man in a dark corner coming out at you and attacking you. Not where you're the woman. You've pretty much done everything with this person, but yet you don't allow one act.

The women contend that the unbalanced, negative portrayals of sexual assault survivors in the mass media serves to misinform the members of modern American culture through

**Carol:** Their lack in knowledge in it [sexual assault]. The fact that the media could be so stupid [angered and disgusted her].

Modern American culture holds the stereotype that women who are sexually assaulted are lacking in intellect and good judgement.

**Jean:** They always warn you about these dumb country-hick people who go to colleges and end up getting raped 'cause they are just too trusting.

Based on the mass media, sexual assault survivors fall into several erroneously stereotyped roles. Often these define the survivor as being incapable of coping with the events or personally deficient in some manner.

**Carol:** I think, some of this you might know from me, the victim, leaving them in victim status for longer than they're wanting to be called victims. That we're little women that need to be taken care of and victims constantly thereafter. We're always going to be looking our [our] shoulder. We're always going to be worrying another guy is going to do this to us. We're always going to be in that fluttery state of not being able to handle it. I see that a lot, whenever somebody in the movies is portrayed as being raped. Then they totally go into denial right then and doesn't show up again for the rest of the movie. Or like "The Accused" with Jody Foster. I thought that was pretty realistic, where when she was gang raped the lawyer, her own lawyer who was a woman, didn't believe that she could even stand trial. That she wouldn't be able to handle it. When she wanted to. I see a lot of victim blaming and then leaving the person in the victim role, to sum that up.

**Charlotte:** There was a woman that was raped, she was on the Oprah show and she was raped in Chicago in broad day light in a train station, and everybody saw it, but nobody helped her. And when she went to go to court, she was so locked up within herself that she was very calm and very quiet, and they said, "Well, she's too calm and too quiet, and that she should raving hysterically." Well, there's a period there where you just become numb, and I think it's a very judgmental thing. Men, unless they are raped in prison or for whatever, of a case like incest, don't realize what it does to a woman. Women don't even realize what it does to other women.

Due to these erroneous stereotypes, the failure of the cultural code is demonstrated through the miscommunication between the dominant culture and the sexual assault survivors.

The failure of the cultural code to define sexual assault and sexual assault survivors, the erroneous stereotypes, and the misunderstandings and insensitivity of other cultural participants often combines to create a silence among survivors stemming from the fear of exposure.

**Jean:** The statistics from the National Crime Center say that 70% of rape victims in 1991–92, 70% of rape victims did not want their family or friends to find out they had been raped. 69% were afraid that they would be viewed as the person to blame. And 50, 60% were afraid that their names would be made public in the media. Now, that says something to me about women's beliefs and perceptions.

A fear of exposure as a sexual assault survivor and the resulting reactions of others contribute to the silence among survivors.

**Carol:** Prosecution was always a weird topic for me. Just because knowing how the laws worked at the time. I've never even bothered to find out if laws are retroactive, where if like I was to go back and talk about what was going to happen to me when I was 14, would the rape shield laws still apply? Will they have been able to bring up my history since then, or anything like that? There is absolutely no physical evidence, obviously, absolutely nothing to go on besides my word against his. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be put through that. I mean, it was just, you always hear the horror stories, what happens to a woman on a stand. To blame her for it and all the other stuff.

As Jean explains, the fear of public exposure is only a part of the reason sexual assault survivors are compelled to maintain their silence.

I don't really blame women for wanting to just forget about the whole thing. And I don't think it would be so hard to come forward and say, to fight against, it's one thing fight against people you don't know who say that it's your fault. It's another thing to fight against your family and friends who say that it's your fault.

I knew that I couldn't tell my parents, because, they would make too much of a big deal out of it. And I didn't want publicity, I just wanted it to go away. I think that if it had been a stranger jumping out of the bush I'd probably tell my parents right away and I wouldn't have to worry about all those rape myths.

After a listening to a conversation among her male friends, the threat of disbelief and discredit was brought into stark relief for Lisa.

The one guy's going to be a lawyer and I told him about that [a Pennsylvania court case regarding rape] ... how they overturned [a rape conviction], and um, he looks at me and goes, "Yeah." He like, "but it was," he goes, "he had a misdemeanor on abuse." And he's like, "No



he wasn't tried for rape, but he got a misdemeanor for sexual abuse. So, y'know, in effect, it was good enough."

And I sat there, and then he starts going on, about how he doesn't think that it's right, that women can cry these things, and that, y'know the court systems are like, "Ohhh" [indicating sympathy]. He's like, "Rape is the only thing in the world where the man is guilty until proven innocent." And um, he's going on about how that's so unfair, how it's so wrong, how, y'know, any woman who's a good enough actress can get away with it. How the only thing that proves it is if you go to the, hospital right away, and get like um, semen taken, **but** even then, who's to say that it wasn't consensual? And he's just going on and on and on.

And then the other guy, who knew that I was raped, he was talking about sexual harassment. And he starts talking about how, y'know, "You can't even work with a woman, and the glass ceiling's there because, it's always gonna be there because, there afraid to let women in high positions because, immediately it changes, immediately men have to start-start tip-toeing around them."

And this guy, he's talking about the glass ceiling said, **this** is what hurt me, he said um, he goes, "Y'know," he like, "I had a friend in high school, that, got, um, stranger raped." He's like, "She had fifteen stitches in her face." And he was talking about all the bruises she had, he goes, "I don't want anyone who is ever acquaintance raped, to ever think that they've gone through what she did." I just sat there. And I almost wish, that I had sixteen stitches on my face, 'cause I could justify it. And they were just talking about this **forever**, and I was getting really mad, and I just got up and left the room.

If I could go back, I'd handle it all differently. I never would've gone back to his place. I did. And a lot of people say **that** was the crime, that I went back to his place. I've been told that.

Additionally, there are many cultural messages communicated to an individual during her/his upbringing that influence the manner in which sexual assault is viewed.

**Isabella:** I've been brought up in my family that you never tease a man. If you tease a man and he gets angry, he's going to have his way with you and there's not much you can do. So I was always taught never to give a little bit without realizing that I might have to give everything. We've been taught in society to give in.

According to the women of my study, the erroneous portrayals and acceptance of the stereotypes of sexual assault and sexual assault survivors through the mass

media is a reflection of the victim blaming that occurs within modern American culture. The view of women as property, requiring men as owners and protectors combined with erroneous portrayals of sexual assault and sexual assault survivors creates shame, guilt, and cultural, individual, and self blame of the survivor. Due to these effects, survivors may refuse to define their experiences as sexual assault and will seek to redefine the events, thereby avoiding the tensions and victim blaming created by the failure of the cultural code.

**Lisa:** I started like going into this... the whole greek thing, the whole like, women as submissive thing. Because I thought, maybe if I bought into that, that a rape wouldn't have occurred. And I just would have been... a dumb girl. I'm just got... in a dumb situation. And I thought, y'know, I could just pretend it's like a situation like that, I could just pawn it off.

Shame, as associated with sexual assault, is a common result of cultural expectations of the erroneously portrayed sexual assault stereotypes and cultural expectations of a woman's sexual behavior. The combination of these factors is apparent in Jean's analysis of her own rape experience.

I was ashamed that I could be raped in the manner that I was raped, which was not being taken by force. It was a very innocuous setting. So, in some respects I was just so ashamed of it, I had spent all this time saying, "Oh, I always know what I want from this." And I always put forth clear limits and then turn around and... [was raped]. Clear proof that anybody can be raped. So that's where a lot of it came from, and then the rest of it came from societal reactions.

In Carol's view, the basis of shame permeates the culture.

Because we live in a stupid... patriarchal society where we aren't even allowed to talk about sex openly, let alone bad sexual behaviors. Our stupid society doesn't even let us say the word masturbation in public. How can we say rape without having to feel shame along with it?

Feelings of guilt are closely associated with shame, and can be attributed to the culture's victim blaming and stereotyped views of women and sexual assault.

**Jean:** I mean you can't come home and say, if you came home and said, "I was robbed"... you wouldn't feel guilty about it. But the way society is set up, you feel guilty, because somebody **took** your virginity from you. Somehow, that made me less of a person. And... I never really believed that it made me less of a person, but, I couldn't stop my feelings from... feeling like something wrong had happened.

The women of my study indicated that cultural, individual, and self blame stem from modern American culture's tendency to blame the sexual assault survivor. The women linked these victim blaming tendencies to contradictory role expectations of women and the failure of the cultural code.

**Jean:** *With self-blame, you said 99% of sexual assault survivors go through the self-blame. Why is this so?*

Society I think, that there is the belief that if women are having sex is because they want to. So even if she had a knife held to her throat, that she must have done something to provoke it.

And I don't think that paranoid women are the only ones that get raped. So, I think that there's a lot of self-blame because there's a real push for it. In fact, I think women are encouraged to blame themselves.

**Charlotte:** There's a lot of blame put on women. "If you wouldn't have been walking that time of night; if you wouldn't have been dressed the way you were; if you wouldn't have maybe looked at him in a certain way; if you wouldn't be working that type of a job; you put yourself in that situation." That's just the way men look at it. They don't look at it that maybe this woman is a single mother and has to have two or three jobs, and has to be a waitress late at night, or a nurse and working night shift and come home, and take a bus. Maybe she doesn't have enough money for a car, because she wants her kids to have good day care, so she gets raped. "Well, why were you out that late at night? Why were you walking alone? Why are you working that late? Why don't you work a regular day shift?" Because she wants to be home with her children, okay, during the day, get them off to school and then be there when they come home. I will gather that no matter however its played, the woman is always at fault. Society somehow always blames the woman for something.

After listening to the women's explanations of how the erroneous portrayal of women and the stereotypical opinions regarding sexual assault combined in the wake of the cultural code of emotional expression to create cultural victim blaming, I asked each woman *why* she thought this was the cultural construction. The reply to my inquiry was consistent among each woman, cultural avoidance.

**Lisa:** Women [as compared to men], they know **exactly** what it [sexual assault] is, they know exactly... m—most every woman I know knows all the statistics on it, knows everything, fears it. And pretty much everyone I know has a friend who's gone through it.

**Jean:** So there's this belief in America that people get what they deserve, and that means that you get a lot, or you get raped, because you deserve it. And it's held onto very strongly, and it's not just by men, although a lot of men will say, "Well, she went along."

And I think that there's two things going on. In men's minds, if they admit that some guy could rape this woman, then what's to stop themselves from doing the same kind of thing. And I think that women are thinking, "Well if some guy raped this woman, then what's to stop him from raping me, too."

And I think that's very hard to deal with, because nobody likes to live in fear. I mean, there's a lot of it was the power of control and the vulnerableness. And the fact that there is so much emphasis placed on that penis in the vagina, when that isn't really what rape is all about anyways. It's about the psychological things that happen, the control and the emotional aspects. No matter how it happened, no matter what it was that happened, there's always that element, and I think that's what characterizes it. There's always that focus on the physical act. Not what really counts.

They never focus on what really counts. They always focus on the peripheral stuff.

***Who's they?***

Men, women, society, hospitals, police. So there's a dog barking in the background. Who cares? Who cares if there's a— and why is that women will focus in on that? Why was that I focused in on the fact the dashboard was green? Because it was such an emotionally traumatic experience that that is what I remember, everything about that experience. The dashboard was green, because that's when it hit me what happened.

And it's not the fact that rape victims remember stupid trivial details. It's the fact that that's the emotional trauma. And I think that happens in a lot of trauma cases.

*So, its the emotional and psychological things that are the important things in your opinion, yet society just ignores that?*

Mm-mm. Because that's too painful. That's too painful to deal with if you deal with the actual... what's going on. Because its vulnerability, and people... I don't like it... people don't like to feel vulnerable. Denial. "I don't want to deal with that. If she's vulnerable, that means I could be, too."

So, instead you are saying, "How many knife wounds did you have?" Besides, it doesn't make good news. Vulnerability doesn't make good news. Blood and guts makes good news. "And this is the scene where she was tied for seven days." Who cares? I mean, it's important because it's eye opening, but the reason why it makes people feel so terrible to watch that, and they cannot draw themselves away from it, in my opinion, why I can't draw myself away from it is because of the emotional trauma link there. They never talk about that. Hard Copy doesn't ever pick up on that.

**Charlotte:** In 1972-73, there were no rape crisis centers, and rape was not a thing that you can say to your best friend, "Oh, guess what. Can I sit down and talk to you about my rape?" That was every woman's worst fear. So, I just sublimated it. Incest is always swept under the rug, and now people are beginning to talk about it. Rape is something that's talked about. But we don't teach, I don't think we can teach our daughter's properly. And I don't think we teach the police person, whether it be male or female.

Because it's an ugly subject to deal with, and it's frightening. Women don't... I think rape is the woman's number one fear, and it's also a husband's fear about his wife, and you don't talk about it. It's too dangerous to talk about it.

*Is it a kind of societal protective defense mechanism or something like that?*

Yeah, and by doing that, it makes the society allow it more. And the more people I talked to, the more people I found out... and I sat down with a group of Jewish women, and four out of those five Jewish women either went through incest or rape. But it's never talked about. So, it just has to be this great big old, ugly, dirty secret that nobody talks about unless something really wild happens.

Rape and sex are two different things. Sex is okay to talk about, because it's part of life, it's for love, it's for procreation. Rape is danger.

Alice described the blame, disbelief, and discrediting incest survivors as part of the cultural avoidance.

Basically, its the denial that there could be child sexual abuse. That children have over-active imaginations, that children are very suggestible, and that parents, or therapists, either way, put this in a person's mind and that it isn't really from the child.

The insensitivity of cultural members and their tendency to discredit and disbelieve the survivor's experience stems from the failure of the cultural code of emotional expression to provide cultural members with a means of negotiating the events surrounding a sexual assault and from the cultural avoidance phenomenon.

**Charlotte:** And you hear the horror stories. I remember being, when I was in the rape crisis group, this one young woman, her family said she was a liar. She was just kind of making this story up because she wanted attention, and how dare she, because she knew her rapist and they knew him. And he was from a nice family, and he was a nice guy, and they wouldn't buy it.

But the majority of women, if family bought it but the husband didn't buy it. Maybe the husband bought it, but the family didn't buy it. Maybe nobody bought it, or "Well, you asked for it."

I have a very good friend, she took a shower immediately because she felt so dirty, and then she called the police. And then the police looked at her and said, "Did you have an orgasm?" There was a judge that was quoted in Time Magazine in the rape of an eleven year old girl, "Well, if the rape is inevitable, she should lay back and enjoy it." I have lots of friends who went through this with police, with judges, even with doctors. And you hear the horror stories.

I've seen that on TV where men say, "Well, the way women dress, they're just asking for it." And then you have the story about the gal up in... I forgot what state it was, where she was raped on the pool table for hours before somebody called the police, and then everybody thought it was a joke. And she eventually killed herself. So the horror stories, they're also on Sally Jessie Raphael and Oprah. Some women have good experiences, but they are far and few between.

I had another friend who had a worse experience with a female officer than the male officer, because she said, "Well, you could have kicked him." She's 5'2" and this guy was 6'4". She could have kicked him? Kicked him where? I mean, there's no sensitivity. There's a lack of sensitivity there.

**Alice:** I think as a cultural thing, the whole basis, I think part of it is disbelief, and part of it is that people just weren't educated or informed as to how to deal with it. Like we as sexual assault counselors have been trained how to respond, how to listen, how to get people to talk about their memories, and I think that at least this was in the late 1980's.

### **Reconstructing the Cultural Code of Emotional Expression**

My inquiries into the women's perceptions and analysis of culture revealed the reconstruction of the cultural code. The women expressed their anger toward the cultural tendencies of victim blaming and the occasional victim pity.

**Jean:** "Poor thing." I hate being pitied. I hate it, hate it, hate it! Oh! They either blame you or they pity you. There's no middle ground.

**Charlotte:** I don't want anybody's pity. I want to be understood, about women suffer... and they suffer many years later. I think a lot of people, when they found out, was "Oh, you poor thing." I'm not a thing. Pity and sympathy sort of go together. And it's sort of, when you sympathize with someone, you're looking down on them as sort of "better you than me." "I feel sorry for you, but better you than me." Whereas empathy is, "Gosh, that was horrible. You really must have gone through hell. I don't know how you really feel, but if you want to talk to me about it, I'll listen." Sympathy is more, "I feel bad it happened, but I just don't want to hear about it." Or, "Well, gee, how did you live through that? Poor baby." That gets me so mad. I lived through it because I was strong, and God helped me, and I decided that this man was not going to kill me. So, I don't want any pity. I think women have to learn they have to be survivors.

In the aftermath of the emotional turmoil brought about by the trauma of sexual assault, the women in my research found themselves questioning and rejecting cultural "norms."

**Jean:** But the current trend in America is to say that women shouldn't go out alone at night because they could get raped. So why don't we just keep men locked up at night instead of telling women to stay locked up at night? If men are so incapable of controlling these urges

to rape women, why don't we just keep them locked up at night? But that's absurd, so therefore, women have to protect themselves, because if they're not, they're asking for it.

**Charlotte:** And Sarah's comment was, technically in 1990, a woman technically should be able, should be able, to walk down the street naked without being raped. Someone, of course, should call the police and throw a blanket around her. But that does not give people the right just to rape her." And of course, that's not true.

The reconstruction of the cultural code resisted the dominant culture's victim blaming.

**Carol:** I think [sexual assault survivors] we're viewed kind of as being stupid, for being where we were at the time, for whatever we were wearing that would have caused this. Whatever way we were acting that made the man act this way. Because of course, those hormones just don't kick into play without a woman doing something to cause it. I don't know. I see a lot of victim blaming and then leaving the person in the victim role.

The reconstructed code also provided a definition of sexual assault.

**Lisa:** [Defining sexual assault] (she sighs) Um, I personalize it. Um, it means...one night, a couple years ago, where a man took a lot away from me. Where he took my self respect, he took my, um, confidence, he took my self worth, and um, he took, y'know, he took away like my ability to trust men. And then, when I think of it in a broader sense, I apply that to all the women who've been [sexually assaulted], and to the words [sexual assault]. It's when those things have been taken away.

This process of reconstruction lead to what the women in my study described as a "sub-culture." The women explicitly defined and described this "sub-culture" as consisting of individuals who are aware of sexual assault issues. Carol includes individuals with awareness of sexual assault issues as part of the sub-culture.

I think it's more of a "we", as in people who are aware of it. Because there definitely is a community of women who are aware and there's some men in it to. I'm not going to totally rule men out. I could at times. But there is definitely a community of awareness. Then there's levels of awareness even in that community. And there are still



women who have been raped that don't fit in at all, but what I mean by somebody having awareness, but they just don't want to deal with it.

In response to my question of who she includes in the sub-culture and why, she replied

because there are certain people who are ready to be able to say the word rape, who are able to say it, not actually so much as publicly, but in a public type fashion. Like in a group of people, or who are able to talk about it as being something that does happen and not have to whisper about it. That are willing to look up in books, maybe, or newspaper articles, or follow a story in the news what's going on currently with rape and rape laws. Like the whole crime bill. People who might keep up on that. Or who might be following pornography and tying that into rape. Or, you know, people who generally keep aware.

A sexual assault survivor becomes part of the "sub-culture" after her/his assault. The "sub-culture" provides support (from other survivors) and the means to interpret the events surrounding the sexual assault by offering a redefined or reconstructed cultural code of emotional expression. This "sub-culture" is not highly visible due to the blame and stigma placed on sexual assault and sexual assault survivors by the dominant culture.

**Jean:** The sub-culture says things like "I didn't think it could happen to me." Basically saying, "Here are the rape myths and this is why they're myths." "I didn't think it could happen to me." "I didn't really want to do that, but he went ahead and did it anyway, so." And then society saying, "you deserved it", at the same time that she's saying "I didn't think it could happen to me."

So it becomes the sub-culture because the only thing that holds you altogether is the fact that you've been through a similar violating experience. But that's about where the similarity ends. There are so many different [forms of sexual assault]. But society likes to lump it all together. "You've been raped. Oh, someone jumped out of a bush with a knife, held it to your throat, held you down, raped you. No real physical damage, just a little bit, maybe some bruises, some tears, and left." Isn't that nice and neat? It's neat, put in a category. And that's not how it happens.

So, the reason why the sub-culture forms is because so many people have experienced the same thing. Just like blacks have traditionally formed a sub-culture of society because there is no place for them in the stereotype. So it becomes a sub-culture because society will label it that. This group of people, and they—they refuse to follow the norm. Well, the fact of the matter is nobody ever follows the norm. The norm is something that is just made up, and yes, it is an average, but, you know, its all compiled together, but its not real. There is no person who fits into that category. The culture basically isolates itself from rape victims and says, "We don't want anything to do with you. We don't want to believe that could happen to us. So, we'll make up all of these myths..."

Carol explained that one of the results of entering into this sub-culture over time was that she more aware of sexual assault issues and realized that

it wasn't just me anymore, it was other people... and I think that helped normalize it a lot for me.

By providing her with support of others with similar experiences and a reconstruction of the cultural code, Carol gained insight and understanding of her sexual assault.

This seems to be a common effect for members, as well as an goal of the members.

**Lisa:** But, like I don't feel uncomfortable talking about it. Y'know, if it's going to help someone, I'll tell them because it's nothing I did. And that's just like when you were like talking before about the privacy issue, it's nothing I did. So even if my name was used, that's fine, I'm a victim. It's nothing that I did to myself.

**Charlotte:** And I think that the more women talk about it, and I don't mean just talking in general. I mean keep repeating the story over and over again, even though I have repeated it like a thousand times, it can be talked about a thousand more times. Because each time I talk about it, something releases within me. And I found out through talking within the community that there are a lot women there, and it's wrong.

And I think there's a lot of pain and I just hope you continue doing your work and working with women and telling them that they're going to be okay. It's just going to take time.

**Alice:** I don't want to paint a whole bleak picture, because I think there are more and more survivors are coming out and telling. And I think there is a growing network of therapists, police, hospital people, crisis

intervention people who are banding together and educating each other, and knowing that this, as horrible as anything it is, it's real, it's believable, and you face that, and only then can you do something about it. If you close your eyes to it and say oh no, these things don't happen, then it just continues to go on. But I think there are a growing number of people.

I think in the next few years that more and more will come out to validate what's happening to incest and rape survivors and how to break that cycle.

### **Summary**

In their analysis of culture, the women of my study describe culture as being heavily influenced by "historical patriarchy" and sensationalized mass media portrayals of sexual assault and sexual assault survivors that leads to victim blaming. This victim blaming creates silence among survivors, discredit and disbelief of the survivor's experience, and places blame on the survivor. Despite information to the contrary, victim blaming persists due to the phenomenon of cultural avoidance.

In response to the influence of victim blaming, the women describe the reconstruction of the cultural code of emotional expression and the development of a "sub-culture" of individuals who are "aware" of sexual assault issues. This "sub-culture" attempts to provide support, insight, and understanding for its' members in order to bring about change in the erroneous stereotypes and portrayals of sexual assault survivors. In this manner, survivors are able to incorporate idiosyncratic experiences of sexual assault into universal themes of responses (i.e. support and providing a definition of sexual assault) and direct these themes into "sub-cultural" resistance of victim blaming and reconstruction of the cultural code of emotional expression.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

As can be seen from the proceeding chapters, there are similarities and differences in the reactions and emotional expressions of sexual assault survivors that occur in the wake of the failure in the cultural code of emotional expression. The forms of these reactions and expressions are examined using universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes.

Universal themes are demonstrated throughout this thesis as the various emotional reactions and the experience of sexual assault the women of my study expressed. These reactions first included avoidance behaviors such as feeling numb, viewing events as "dream-like" or "unreal," withdrawal from others and activities, denial, and avoiding the geographical location of the assault; second feelings about self and events such as guilt, shame, anger, unworthy of love, and dirty; and third issues of sexuality. These reactions are reflected by the responses of other rape survivors (Chapter 8) and by the rape trauma syndrome (Winkler, McMullen, and Wininger, 1994). Cultural themes in this study include how the experience is defined and the influence of family and cultural values on the woman's construction of her experience. The idiosyncratic themes of emotional expression varied among the women in my study.

These themes develop throughout this thesis as illustrative of culture as a creative process in which cultural members gain meaning and understanding of events (Geertz, 1973). This thesis demonstrates the complexity of finding meaning in traumatic events, particularly when the cultural code of emotional expression fails. In the absence of the cultural code, individuals seek meaning internally, within themselves and their own experiences, and externally, from others. This process of seeking and finding meaning is a continual process as indicated by the women's discussions of changes in their understandings and definitions of their experiences over time.

As shown in this thesis, the cultural code of emotional expression continues to fail for the survivors of sexual assault and their significant others despite the research, literature, and human and institutional resources that are available. This raises several questions. First, if the cultural code is failing for this group (survivors and significant others), what group does the cultural code support? Why does ambiguity exist in the definition of rape and incest? Why as a culture, are we unable or unwilling to develop a process or cultural code for dealing with sexual assault?

There are two main advantages to using a qualitative, narrative analysis method in this type of research. First, by presenting individual narratives of sexual assault experiences, the topic can be developed and understood on a personal and individual level. As a result, this type of research can bring a "human" element to the quantitative studies by enabling the reader to perceive the survivors of sexual assault as individuals rather than depersonalized statistics. Second, the use of a narrative analysis allows the survivors to mediate their expressions of their emotions in their

own ways. That is to say, the women in my study were able to insert their emotions where they needed and wanted in order to express their experiences in their own universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic ways with few or no external expectations imposed upon them. In this manner, the women were able to express their own definitions, meanings, and understandings of their personal experiences.

This thesis is limited in a number of ways and is presented as a introduction to this area of research. The main limiting factor of this study was the sample. The sample did not control for age, ethnicity, type of sexual assault, or post-assault experiences such as receiving counseling, medical attention, or legal recourse. This led me to make logical, but blind leaps in attributing responses and expressions to universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes. Future research of this nature conducted with a larger sample size and with greater controls of demographic characteristics of the sample could yield more definitive information on these themes. By accessing support groups and/or mental health agencies, these variables could be better controlled.

The approach taken in this thesis differs from other sexual assault literature by developing sexual assault as an example of a failure in the cultural code of emotional expression. In the examination of women's experiences and expressions of sexual assault, universal, cultural, and idiosyncratic themes are identified and developed. Based on this type of research, information can be gained that may aid mental health professionals to better apply interventions, health professionals may be able to improve care provision to survivors, and employees of the legal system may be better equipped to handle sexual assault cases. This information may also help to better educate the

public on the topic of sexual assault, and the survivors and their significant others may gain improved services and support for coping with their experiences.

Future research should consider not only increasing the sample size, but diversifying the population of the study to include different racial/ethnic groups, men as well as women, differing sexual preferences, and different demographic characteristics such as level of education, occupation, socioeconomic status, age, geographical region, and survivors in different countries. Additionally, future research may consider using the proposed framework of the cultural code of emotional expression to examine other areas of cultural ambiguity such as aging and dying, families of missing persons or homicide/suicide victims, menopause, mental illness, or traumatic injury.

## **APPENDIX A**



## AGENDA OF ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

### **A. Current Information:**

Age, education (yours/your parents), phone and address, date of interviews, ethnicity, religious commitment, occupation (current/goals), where from

### **B. Circumstances of the rape**

1. When were you raped? How old were you? Were you a virgin at the time?
2. What happened? (Once? Several times? Several men? Known Assailant? etc.)
3. Can you outline a quick chronology of what you did after being raped? (This can give real guidance to approach)

### **C. Contact with professionals**

1. Did you take any legal action? (Police report? Lawsuit? Restraint order? etc.)
2. How long after?
3. How were you treated? (Allowed breaks? Support? etc.)
4. Did the immediate treatment by these professionals have any effect on your self-esteem/-image?
5. Did you seek medical attention? (What kind? Rape kit? STD/AIDS testing? etc.)
6. How long after?
7. Did you tell the examiner that you were raped?
8. How were you treated? (Allowed breaks? Support? etc.)
9. Did the immediate treatment by these professionals have any effect on your self-esteem/-image?

### **D. Friends and Family**

1. Did you tell people you know? (Relatives? Friends? etc.)
2. Who did you tell?
3. How long after?
4. How did they react?
5. How did their reactions make you feel about yourself?
6. Prior to you rape, did you know anyone who had been raped?
7. What was your relationship to that individual? How did you feel about her/him? Did your feelings change?

8. Did you tell that person about your rape? When? Why? How did s/he react?
9. How did their reactions make you feel about yourself?

**E. Continued contact with professionals (counseling)**

1. Did you seek counseling?
2. How long after?
3. Why did you seek counseling? (Pressure from friends/family? Felt you were going crazy? etc.)
4. How long did you go?
5. How did counseling effect your view of the rape and of yourself?

**F. Self description and trauma**

Interactions with friends/family

1. Did you change your behavior toward others? How? Why?
2. During this period, did those you know change the way they treated/interacted with you? How? Why do you think they changed?

Attitudes (general)

1. How did your attitudes change during this period?

**G. Body ritual changes**

1. Did you change your clothing style? How? Why?
2. Did you change your sleeping habits? How? Why?
3. Did you change your hair style? How? Why?
4. Did you change your use of makeup? How? Why?
5. Did you change your eating habits? How? Why?
6. Did you change your bathing habits? How? Why?
7. Did you change (begin/increase/decrease) your smoking, drinking, and/or taking drugs? How? Why? Results?
8. Did you change your exercise habits? How? Why?
9. Did you change jobs? How? Why?
10. Did you change residence? How? Why?

**Final**

1. Would you like to add anything to the changes in your behaviors that I neglected to ask about?

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